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Martha Hamilton McCafferty  
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FABLE IN ACTION: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH TO THE LIFE OF AESOP

By  
Martha Hamilton McCafferty

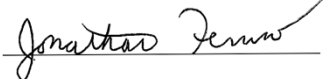
A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS  
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Approved By:



Advisor: Dr. Brad Cook



Reader: Dr. Jonathan Fenno



Reader: Dr. Andrew Pfrenger

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*To my family. To my teachers. To my friends.*

ABSTRACT  
MARTHA HAMILTON McCAFFERTY: *Fable in Action:*  
A Discourse Analysis Approach to the Life of Aesop  
(Under the direction of Brad Cook)

In this essay, I examine instances of fable-telling throughout the *Life of Aesop* in a new light by using linguistic theories from the subfield of Pragmatics in my analysis. I suggest that the author's purpose in composing the *Life of Aesop* is to instruct his audience on how to use fable effectively, and that Aesop serves as both the positive and negative example for this lesson. I begin by considering the nature of fable and demonstrate why it is necessary to define fable in reference to the social action which it performs. I then address the complex position of fable in antiquity and discuss how the author convinces his audience to release any negative perceptions regarding fable which they might have, thus ensuring that his audience is willing to heed his instruction on how to use fable. By beginning with Aesop's successful instances of fable-telling and then demonstrating his unsuccessful attempts, the author shows his audience that the key to a useful fable is the proper evaluation of one's social context, and that the value of the genre lies in the skillfulness of its application.

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## Introduction

A collection of *Aesop's Fables* may have rested on your childhood bookshelf. As little children—or perhaps still now—we might have seen the apostrophe in Aesop's name and, trusting what we had long been taught apostrophes are supposed to do, we believed that every story in that book belonged to Aesop. We imagined that the tales of the cunning fox, the steady tortoise, and all their friends were penned by him. And since one rarely chances upon fables bearing a name other than Aesop's, we may have also assumed (wrongly, yet reasonably) that the genre was his creation as well. But the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE sophist Aelius Theon corrects us in this idea, explaining, “Aesopic is applied as a general term not because Aesop was the first inventor of fables—Homer and Hesiod and Archilochus and some other, prior to Aesop, seem to have known them, ...—but because Aesop used fables to a greater extent and cleverly” (*Progymnasmata*. 3, p. 73 Spengel).<sup>1</sup> However, modern scholars have not always appreciated the full cleverness shown by Aesop with fable. Guided both by theories from the linguistic subfield of Pragmatics and by ancient texts reflecting various attitudes towards fable, we will develop a greater understanding of the genre as a social tool, and we will see that the author of the *Life of Aesop* carefully integrated instances of fable-telling into the text so as to instruct his audience on how to use the genre as skillfully as famed Aesop.

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<sup>1</sup> George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 24.

We will first discuss the nature of fable, beginning with the views of B. E. Perry, the most prominent twentieth-century expert on Aesop. In his 1959 publication “Fable,” Perry defines the genre in terms of it being purely a rhetorical device, challenging the opinion of his contemporary Karl Meuli who believed the social application of fable to be central to its origin and purpose.<sup>2</sup> Later scholars tend to marry these views as we see demonstrated by Kenneth Rothwell in his article on the sociopolitics of fable, in which he maintains that fable served a largely social purpose but that it did not necessarily arise for such reasons.<sup>3</sup> However, our understanding of fable can be enriched further by borrowing theories from Pragmatics, the subfield of linguistics concerned with how context shapes the form and meaning of discourse, that is, language in use. Speech Act Theory, founded upon the ideas of prominent language philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Austin, and Searle, will prove to be a useful argument as to why it is necessary to view fable through the lens of its social action in antiquity, as well as provide us with a system to describe those social actions with greater accuracy and specificity.

In 1993 Niklas Holzberg published *The Ancient Fable*, and stated that many of the *Life of Aesop*’s themes and motifs fit nicely with social and moral satire; however, it was unclear “how deeply committed the anonymous author [of the *Life of Aesop*] was to the kind of issues satire might focus on” for, at the time, no such studies had been conducted.<sup>4</sup> Since then, various scholars have more thoroughly investigated the aspects of social criticism present in the life of Aesop, such as Jeremy Lefkowitz in his essay “Ugliness and Value in the Life of Aesop,”<sup>5</sup> and

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<sup>2</sup> B.E. Perry, “Fable,” *Studium Generale* 12, (1959): 23.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth S. Rothwell Jr., “Aristophanes’ “Wasps” and the Sociopolitics of Aesop’s Fables,” *The Classical Journal* 90, no. 3 (1995): 234-235.

<sup>4</sup> Niklas Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable: An Introduction*, trans. Christine Jackson-Holzberg. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy B. Lefkowitz, “Ugliness and Value in The Life of Aesop,” in *Kakos: Badness and Anti-value in Classical Antiquity* eds. Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 59-81.



most notably Leslie Kurke in *Aesopic Conversations*, in which she discusses how the *Life* parodies the high wisdom tradition of Greek antiquity.<sup>6</sup>

Our own analysis of the *Life of Aesop* will reveal that the author appears to have two goals, the first of which assists in achieving the second. As we will see from various ancient sources, fable held a complex position in ancient society, but was largely associated with slaves and the common folk, the *demos*. However, considering that the rates of illiteracy and the price of composing books were both high in antiquity, it is unlikely that our author wrote the *Life* for a popular audience.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps on account of this that the author devotes the beginning of the *Life of Aesop* to imparting the lesson that a thing's appearance is not indicative of its reality, thus dissuading his readers from any negative biases which they might have about fable as a genre. In doing this, the author makes his audience more willing to heed his advice when he later begins instructing them on proper fable-telling technique. We will examine both Aesop's successful and unsuccessful instances of fable-telling within the system of Politeness Theory, originally developed by linguists Brown and Levinson. With this tool assisting our analysis, we will—in a way which previous scholarship has been unable to do—identify and appreciate the meticulous detail with which the author crafts instances of fable in the *Life of Aesop*. It will become clear that the author was ardently committed to teaching his audience that the usefulness of fable lies in the skill of the fable-teller, and that, in order to tell fables well, it is necessary to evaluate one's social context and to wisely design the fable's form and purpose in response.

When it comes to the historical Aesop, there is very little which we know as fact. Herodotus briefly mentions the fabulist in his *Histories* as a part his account regarding Rhodopis, a 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE hetaera who married the poet Sappho's brother (2.135). Herodotus tells us,

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<sup>6</sup> Leslie Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 6.

[Rhodopis] was a Thracian by birth, and was the slave of Iadmon, son of Hephaestopolis, a Samian. Aesop, the fable-writer, was one of her fellow-slaves. That Aesop belonged to Iadmon is proved by many facts—among others, by this. When the Delphians, in obedience to the command of the oracle, made proclamation that if anyone claimed compensation for the murder of Aesop he should receive it, the person who came forward at last was Iadmon, grandson of the former Iadmon, and he received the compensation (2.134).<sup>8</sup>

From this we can glean that Aesop lived in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, that he spent some time as a slave in Samos, and, of course, that he was a teller of fables. We find conflicting ancient sources regarding Aesop's nationality; however, the consensus among classicists is that he was Thracian.<sup>9</sup> This belief is founded primarily upon the work of Perry who explains that fragments of Aristotle's 4<sup>th</sup> century work *Constitution of the Samians* contain statements about Aesop made by the 5<sup>th</sup> century chronicler Euagon of Samos which state that Aesop was a Thracian (Aristotle fr. 573, Rose).<sup>10</sup>

These facts, few as they are, are all we can say definitively of the historical Aesop. However, we do possess various versions of the *Life of Aesop*, an anonymous fictionalized account of the fabulist's life, which draws from the ancient popular tradition.<sup>11</sup> Our analysis of the *Life of Aesop* will primarily be based upon *Vita G*,<sup>12</sup> the fullest account of the *Life* which we have. It survives in only one manuscript, dated to the 10th century CE; however, the archetype upon which the *Life* is based is believed to have been composed between 100 BCE and 200 CE.<sup>13</sup> On occasion we shall also draw from the related but shorter *Vita W*,<sup>14</sup> for which the earliest

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<sup>8</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. George Rawlinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1910).

<sup>9</sup> B.E. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. B. E. Perry, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), xxxv.

<sup>10</sup> Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, xxxvii.

<sup>11</sup> For further details on the different versions, manuscripts, as well as some papyrus fragments, see Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 16–22.

<sup>12</sup> Named for the town of Grottaferrata, where the text was long housed at the Basilian Monastery.

<sup>13</sup> B. E. Perry, *Studies in the Text History of the Life and Fables of Aesop* (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster Press, 1936), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Named for Anton Westermann, who edited and published the text in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

manuscript dates to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The date for *Vita W*'s archetype is unclear; even so, the two texts are extremely similar, not merely in terms of content, but even with respect to phrasing, suggesting that *Vita W* was based on a text similar to *Vita G*.<sup>15</sup>

Although *Vita G*'s archetype is dated to the turn of the millennium, the popular Aesopic tradition is even older than that. As we have seen from Herodotus, there already appears to have been a tradition about Aesop's life and death in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. We also see stories about Aesop circulating in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. For example, in *Rhetoric* Aristotle tells a story about the fabulist during his time in Samos,

Aesop, when defending at Samos a demagogue who was being tried for his life, related the following anecdote. "A fox, while crossing a river, was driven into a ravine. Unable to get out, she was for a long time in great distress, and a number of dog fleas clung to her skin. A hedgehog, wandering about, saw her and, moved with compassion, asked her if he should remove the fleas. The fox refused and when the hedgehog asked the reason, she answered: 'They are already full of me and draw little blood; but if you take them away, others will come that are hungry and will drain what remains to me.' In the same fashion, Samians, you will suffer no more harm from this man, for he is wealthy; but if you put him to death, others will come who are poor, and they will steal and squander your public funds" (2.20.6).<sup>16</sup>

The *Life of Aesop*, however, is not simply an agglutination of the various stories which were shared orally about Aesop. While the author certainly draws from the Aesopic tradition, he also appears to have been influenced by the stories of figures such as Ahikar,<sup>17</sup> Socrates, and Diogenes of Sinope among others, resulting in what Holzberg calls, "a new literary work."<sup>18</sup> And indeed, as we analyze the *Life of Aesop* and witness the author use the fabulist to demonstrate the great skill necessary to craft a successful fable, we will see that this new literary work is guided by a carefully designed purpose.

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<sup>15</sup> Perry, *Studies*, 26. See *Studies*, 42-45 for a full list of corresponding phrases between *Vita G* and *Vita W*.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926).

<sup>17</sup> A figure from the Babylonian tradition, known for his wisdom.

<sup>18</sup> Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable*, 79.

## Chapter 1

### A Reintroduction to Fable

There are a few concepts which a reader will need to be familiar with prior to delving into our analysis. Chief among these, what is a fable? With respect to its form, many of us can quite easily answer this question so long as we have had some exposure to the genre. A fable is a short fictional story written in prose. The plots are simple, featuring common subject matter, often animals (though not always), and they impart some sort of lesson. Many fables recorded in collections will reiterate these lessons more explicitly in a phrase typically referred to as the “moral” of a fable. When these phrases come before the fable proper they are known as promythiums, and when after, epimythiums. With these few sentences, we have certainly described what a fable looks like, but for the sake of our analysis we must delve deeper and ask, in the context of the ancient world, what did fable do?

The 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE Roman fabulist Phaedrus—the main channel by which Latin readers in antiquity and even the Middle Ages knew Aesopic fables—offers up his own explanation of fable in the prologue to his third book of fable in verse. He says, “Now I will explain briefly why the type of thing called fable was invented. The slave, being liable to punishment for any offense, since he dared not say outright what he wished to say, projected his personal sentiments into fable and alluded censure under the guise of jesting with made-up stories” (Phaedrus 3, Prol.

33-37).<sup>19</sup> Phaedrus provides us with the purpose for fable in antiquity, as well as puts forth an origin. The folklorist Karl Meuli agrees with Phaedrus's position. Arising from a social need of the lower classes, Meuli claims, fables served "either as a weapon for the small and weak in opposing or complaining against their superiors, or as a diplomatic means of addressing one's self to a person who happens to be in a dominant position (regardless of social rank), and whose pride and sensibilities [...] would be offended by an admonition or a supplication put forth directly."<sup>20</sup>

However, B.E. Perry disagrees, and in his 1959 paper on fable, he argues against the concept of a social origin for the genre stating, "The fable in origin is not an independent literary form, created, like the novel or the drama, by a new kind of society with a new cultural outlook, but only a rhetorical device, a mere tool." And that fable is identical "with a certain kind of proverb, the kind that consists in the statement of a particular action or event in the past which pictures, metaphorically, a general truth or type of phenomena."<sup>21</sup> Perry believes fable can be implemented for social purposes, but that this is not the reason for its development. Instead, he posits that fable arose on account of its rhetorical usefulness, that is, its ability to represent a truth clearly and succinctly. Perry makes some interesting arguments in defense of his position which we will discuss at a later point; however, Perry also cites Babrius,<sup>22</sup> a 1st century CE "hellenized Italian living in Syria,"<sup>23</sup> as a source for his claim: "Fable, son of King Alexander, is the invention of the Syrians of old" (2. Prol., 1-2).<sup>24</sup> This accompanies an excellent argument by

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<sup>19</sup> Phaedrus in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry.

<sup>20</sup> Meuli as paraphrased by Perry in "Fable," 23.

<sup>21</sup> Perry, "Fable," 24-25.

<sup>22</sup> Perry, "Fable," 28.

<sup>23</sup> Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus*, xlvii.

<sup>24</sup> Babrius in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry.

Perry demonstrating that fable is not Greek in its origins, however a different geographical location does not remove the possibility of fable arising from the need of a social tool.

When Perry removes the social aspect from fable and reduces it to a mere tool for picturing a truth, he makes the same mistake which many of us are also guilty of in our own perception of discourse (i.e., language in use) in general. Ask yourself, what do we use language for? You might answer that we talk about things with one another. We tell each other about how we feel, about what is happening in the world, or about the content of that week's lesson. That is, we describe our reality to one another. But in fact, discourse is far more than a descriptive process, it is an active one. As Ludwig Wittgenstein writes in his *Philosophical Investigations*,

“We name things and then we can talk about them: can refer to them in talk.”—as if what we did next were given with the mere act of naming. As if there were only one thing called “talking about a thing.” Whereas in fact we do the most various things with our sentences. Think just of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions. *Water! Away! Ow! Help! Splendid!* Are you still inclined to call these words “names of objects”?<sup>25</sup>

Wittgenstein explains that not only does the meaning of an utterance depend on its context, but that the utterance also serves a function. “Water!” is not merely the name of a liquid; it can function as a demand for a drink, an expression of joy in the desert, or even a threat to the Wicked Witch of the West.

Wittgenstein's concept of language is foundational to Pragmatics, the subfield of linguistics concerned with the relationship between the context of a discourse event (i.e., a moment in which language is used) and the shape and meaning of the discourse itself. The “functions” of language beyond “talking about a thing” which Wittgenstein mentions are known

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<sup>25</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) §1.27.

in the field as speech acts.<sup>26</sup> These are a class of utterances which do not merely describe a thing, but, through their utterance, perform an action. Speech acts come in a variety of forms, for example, performatives alter the social state of reality (e.g., “I baptize thee...”), commissives commit the speaker to a future course of action (e.g., “If you take one more step, I’ll shoot.”), and directives instruct the listener to behave in a certain manner (e.g., “Take out the trash.”). If we as linguists limited our description of language to “talking about a thing” and failed to consider language in the entirety of its function, our understanding of discourse would likewise be limited. Just as Wittgenstein calls us to extend the borders of “this narrowly circumscribed region” of language,<sup>27</sup> so too should we expand our perception of fable to include its social action alongside its descriptive purpose, because—as we will see—whether the first fable came from the mouth of the most vulnerable or from that of the mightiest of persons, our examples of fable in context show overwhelmingly that the genre was utilized for social purposes.

Phaedrus and Meuli have, in their description of fable’s origins, behaved much like discourse analysts, noting the significant relationship between a specific language pattern (fable) and a specific social context (notable power differentials). Phaedrus and Meuli astutely point out, that the liberty to shape language however one pleases is not a freedom afforded to everyone. Though informally, these men have addressed the idea of Politeness Theory. Developed by linguists Brown and Levinson<sup>28</sup>, this approach to analyzing discourse hinges on the concept of positive and negative face. Positive face refers to an individual's desire to be viewed favorably,

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<sup>26</sup> Speech Act Theory was formalized in the 1960s by philosophers Austin and Searle. For further discussion of the topic, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), and J.R. Searle, *Speech Act Theory*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §1.3 trans. G.E.M. Anscombe.

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of Politeness Theory, see Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *The Universals of Politeness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

and negative face refers to one's desire to be autonomous.<sup>29</sup> However, certain behaviors can harm the faces of the speaker or listener. Speech acts like directives, for example, can be especially threatening as they encroach on the listeners independence and may cause the speaker to be viewed unfavorably. Because of this, directives—in addition to any behavior with the potential to damage face—are considered face-threatening acts (FTAs).

When speakers hold the dominant position in a given context (e.g., a king toward his servant, or a mother to her child) they are able to deliver FTAs with less caution, as their status protects them from many of the negative consequences they might otherwise have suffered from their interlocutor. On the other hand, less powerful individuals in such situations do not possess the same privilege. If they utter an FTA, they are more likely to need to implement certain strategies to prevent or amend any damage done to face. These are called politeness strategies, of which there are two forms: positive and negative—each aimed towards appeasing their respective faces. Waring describes it best:

In short, positive politeness is approach based and involves the assurance that [the speaker] wants at least part of what [the hearer] wants. Negative politeness on the other hand, is avoidance based and entails practices such as self-effacement, formality, restraint, impersonalizing, and softening. The former features such practices as showing interest in [the hearer], seeking agreement, and giving sympathy, and the latter such practices as being conventionally indirect, giving reasons, begging forgiveness, and showing deference.<sup>30</sup>

When these strategies accompany an FTA, they can prevent or mend any harm caused to the speaker or listener's face. It is why a student might compliment a professor's teaching style in the same email that he asks for his grade to be bumped up. Or why, when asked if you would like to sign up for a store rewards card, you tell the cashier, "Not today," when you really mean, "No."

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<sup>29</sup> Hansun Zhang Waring, *Discourse Analysis: The Questions Discourse Analyst Ask and How They Answer Them*, (New York: Routledge, 2018) 133.

<sup>30</sup> Waring, *Discourse Analysis*, 134.



Fables are an excellent politeness strategy as they are capable of appealing towards both positive and negative face. Their metaphorical nature lends itself quite easily to impersonalization and softening which shows respect for the listener's autonomy; whereas their fictional plots and use of talking animals is charming and entertaining, thus increasing the speaker's likability. Moreover, fables are highly versatile and, depending on the speaker's intent, they can be moulded to favor one form of politeness over the other. Fables would have been an extremely common linguistic tool employed by slaves—as well as lower class members of the demos—since their social status casts them in a vulnerable position. The high use of fable among slaves would explain the common belief in antiquity, as relayed to us by Phaedrus, that the fable genre came from slaves in Greece. Although fables were marked as language of the lower class, anyone in a vulnerable social position in antiquity could potentially benefit from employing fable. For example, in Herodotus's *Histories*, we witness an unnamed advisor use fable to dissuade King Croesus from attacking the Greek islanders. The King is entertained by the story and follows his advisor's recommendation (1.27). This concept of fable as a politeness strategy continues even into the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, as we see in an epigram by Agathias, composed supposedly for a group of statues depicting Aesop and the Seven Sages. Agathias writes,

You did well, old man Lysippus, Sicyonian sculptor, when you set up a representation of Samian Aesop in front of the Seven Sages; since those men cast necessity, not persuasion, on their words. But Aesop, by speaking opportunely with wise fables and fabrications, playing in seriousness persuades to be sensible. And harsh advice is a thing to be avoided; but the Samian has the sweetness of fable as lovely bait" (*Palatine Anthology* 16.332).<sup>31</sup>

Elements of negative politeness are reflected here as Agathias states that the sweetness of fable softens harsh advice, more effectively persuading the listener. And as we continue to examine ancient sources, we will see additional evidence in support of fable as a social tool.

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<sup>31</sup> Trans. Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 131-32.

Perry puts forth an additional argument against Meuli's social origin for fable by likening fable to proverbs. He states that, "As no one supposes that proverbs as such owe their origin to the requirements of a particular kind of social situation, rather than to the natural urge to say a thing effectively on *any* occasion, so likewise there is no need of any such assumptions in accounting for the origin of fable."<sup>32</sup> Perry's premise is flawed however: proverbs and fables have quite different origins. A fable, upon its first time being uttered, is indisputably a fable; a proverb, on the other hand, is not a proverb the first time it is created. The phrase must hold social currency in order to be a proverb. It must appear in the written or oral practice of a society with some degree of frequency and the significance of the phrase must be acknowledged by the community.<sup>33</sup> As we see then, not only is proverb different in origin from fable, but its creation is in fact a sociological event. A proverb's ability to express a thing effectively depends on the interlocutors' shared deference to a piece of communal wisdom. One need but look at proverbs of foreign cultures to realize that they are not always so readily understood on their own, but require familiarity with the source culture in order to have meaning.

Perry makes an additional argument against fable as a social tool by putting forth ancient examples of individuals in strong social positions who utilize the genre: King Cyrus in Herodotus's *Histories* and King Jehoshaphat in 2 Kings. Perry argues that these examples are not representative of Meuli's social concept of fable since the speakers have no social vulnerability to overcome, and that the kings are using the genre as a pure rhetorical device instead. Therefore, Perry states, "If fables are to be likened to withered leaves when their function is rhetorical, instead of social in the special sense intended by Meuli [...] then we shall have to conclude that

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<sup>32</sup> Perry, "Fable," 25.

<sup>33</sup> Wolfgang Mieder, "Origin of Proverbs" in *Introduction to Paremiology: A Comprehensive Guide to Proverb Studies*, eds. Hrisztalina Hristova-Gotthardt and Melita Aleksa Varga, (Warsaw: De Gruyter Open, 2015), 44.

the fable was already dead in the earliest period to which we can trace it.”<sup>34</sup> The Herodotean instance of fable to which Perry refers is as follows:

... after the conquest of Lydia by the Persians, the Ionian and the Aeolian Greeks sent ambassadors to Cyrus at Sardis, and prayed to become his lieges on the footing which they had occupied under Croesus. Cyrus listened attentively to their proposals, and answered them by a fable. “There was a certain piper,” he said, “who was walking one day by the seaside, when he espied some fish; so he began to pipe to them, imagining that they would come out to him upon the land. But as he found at last that this hope was vain, he took a net, and enclosing a great draught of fishes, drew them ashore. The fish then began to leap and dance; but the piper said, ‘Cease your dancing now, as you did not choose to come and dance when I piped to you.’” Cyrus gave this answer to the Ionians and the Aeolians, because when he urged them by his messengers to revolt from Croesus, they refused; but now, when his work was done, they came to offer their allegiance. It was in anger, therefore, that he made them this reply (1.141).<sup>35</sup>

Perry is certainly correct that Cyrus is no “small or weak” character in need of a social weapon to protect himself.<sup>36</sup> However that is not to say that his use of fable is purely rhetorical and unrelated to a social purpose. We must remember that fables were marked as a low form of discourse. Therefore, the king’s use of fable would also be highly marked, as there would be a disconnect between his status and his language. Utilizing a low prestige variety of speech would serve as a way to strengthen his sentiments, thus emphasizing the anger with which he made his reply.<sup>37</sup> Additionally Cyrus mocks the emissaries by usurping a social tool traditionally believed to be used by those in a vulnerable position. His implementation of fable highlights the fact that his position of authority gives him the freedom to use any form from his linguistic repertoire that he desires, even low forms, whereas the Aeolian and Ionian emissaries, being suppliants, are bound to the submissive language of suppliants. Kurke, in her paraphrasing of Meuli agrees,

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<sup>34</sup> Perry, “Fable,” 24.

<sup>35</sup> Trans. George Rawlinson.

<sup>36</sup> Cyrus is, however, a Persian whose story is written in a history of the Persian Wars composed by Herodotus, a Greek. This may further complicate the king’s use of fable. This scene is certainly rich in material for future analysis.

<sup>37</sup> Speakers of high prestige dialects employing low prestige forms for the purpose of emphasis is a common phenomenon across languages, consider the marked use of double negatives by General American speakers.

stating that “the powerful could also employ this same genre of speaking against the weak, in which case it often assumed ‘an ironic, threatening tone.’”<sup>38</sup> It is this same threatening tone, founded upon the interlocutors' shared social understanding of fable, which both Cyrus and King Jehoash exhibit.

Perry's notion of pure rhetorical fable is not unfounded, however. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Aristotle advised orators in his *Rhetoric* to use fable in a manner akin to Perry's perception of the genre. Aristotle recommends that fable be used as a form of example in evidence of one's argument. He tells us the following, “Fables are suitable for public speaking, and they have this advantage that, while it is difficult to find similar things that have really happened in the past, it is easier to invent fables” (*Rhetoric* 2.20.7).<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, we have no surviving examples of the theory put to practice in antiquity. Rothwell, in his article on the sociopolitics of fable, puts forth some possible explanations for this. It could be because many of our surviving speeches were commissioned or written by the upper class, thus they would be less likely to utilize fable. Or, if they did, the fable might have been excised prior to the speech's publishing so as to maintain the air of an elite composition.<sup>40</sup>

Although we do not possess speeches that employ fable, we do see an interesting reference to courtroom use of fable in Aristophanes's 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE comedy *Wasps*. The character Philocleon describes the plaintiffs in court as follows, “Tell me, is there any brand of wheedling I don't hear in court? Some of them bewail their poverty and go on exaggerating their troubles until they somehow seem as bad as my own. Others tell us stories (μύθους), others something funny from Aesop (Αἰσώπου τι γέλοιοι). Others crack jokes to make me laugh and put

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<sup>38</sup> Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 402.

<sup>39</sup> Trans. J. H. Freese.

<sup>40</sup> Rothwell, “Aristophanes,” 246.

away my anger” (563-567).<sup>41</sup> However, as we see, Aristophanes’s description of plaintiffs using fable is not in keeping with Aristotle’s recommendation that fable be used to effectively demonstrate a logical argument. Instead, we see a representation of fable used as a positive politeness strategy to assist someone in a vulnerable social position avoid punishment. It is similar to how Phaedrus described that slaves relied on fable in antiquity. Philocleon states that plaintiffs use fable to give rise to affection on the part of jury, increasing the likelihood of a favorable vote. The fact that Aristophanes mocks this suggests that this kind of use occurred frequently enough that his audience would have the proper frame of reference to find Philocleon’s description humorous.

We see additional descriptions of fable as a politeness strategy in Aristophanes’s *Wasps*, this time, however, outside of court. In an exchange between Philocleon and his son Bdelycleon, we witness Bdelycleon attempt to instruct his father on how to behave like a gentleman at a symposium.

Philocleon: Oh no! Drinking’s bad. Wine gets you doors broken in, assault and battery, then paying money for the damage while you’re hung over.

Bdelycleon: No, not if you’re in the company of fine gentlemen (ἀνδράσι καλοῖς τε κἀγαθοῖς). They’ll beg the victim off, or else you yourself can tell him some witty story (ἀστεῖόν), something funny by Aesop or about Sybaris, one of the stories you learned at the party, and then you’ve turned the whole thing into a joke, so he lets you off and goes on his merry way (1258-61).<sup>42</sup>

This is once again a socially oriented use of fable. By using a witticism or an Aesopic fable the transgressor can amend the harm done to his positive face, thus increasing his chances of being forgiven. However, as Rothwell points out, Bdelycleon’s advice is somewhat paradoxical. Since fable was marked as a low form of speech it would have been “consciously un-aristocratic” for

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<sup>41</sup> Aristophanes, *Wasps*, trans. Jeffrey Henderson, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>42</sup> Trans. Jeffrey Henderson.

ἄνδρες καλοί τε κἀγαθοί (i.e., aristocrats, or gentlemen), to speak in fable, and yet Bdelycleon recommends fable as an appropriate way for aristocrats to speak to one another.<sup>43</sup> However, Rothwell goes on to explain that in this particular context a gentleman would have already violated social protocols through his drunken offenses, therefore the use of Aesopic witticisms (ἄστεϊα) to soothe hurt feelings would not be the primary marker of ungentlemanliness, his poor behavior would be.<sup>44</sup> Essentially, in a moment such as which Bdelycleon and Philocleon discuss, an aristocrat—having already damaged his image—would have nothing to lose by using a common way of speaking to amend his situation. In fact, putting oneself down by using less prestigious language might have also served as a negative politeness strategy, further assisting in the seeking of forgiveness.<sup>45</sup> In specific instances then, even the aristocracy could use fable in a way similar to that of slaves and the demos.

While fable can be employed as a pure rhetorical device as demonstrated by Aristotle, it seems from our source material that such a use would have been the exception in antiquity, not the rule. Perry's definition of fable, in an effort to include even these exceptions, excludes critical aspects of fable that are vital to our understanding of the genre's importance. For the purposes of our analysis of fable in antiquity and especially in the *Life of Aesop*, Perry's point of view is not sufficient. Our approach to fable must be founded on the belief that if we wish to understand the role of fable in discourse, we cannot separate the genre from its social functions. Fable is a politeness strategy marked as a low prestige variety of speech which "pictures, metaphorically, a general truth or type of phenomenon"<sup>46</sup> typically employed in the social

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<sup>43</sup> Rothwell, "Aristophanes," 251.

<sup>44</sup> Rothwell, "Aristophanes," 250.

<sup>45</sup> Consider the self-effacement that often accompanies apologies, "That was rude of me" or "I'm such an idiot," likewise, utilizing fable could have served as a way for the upper-class to humble themselves.

<sup>46</sup> Perry, "Fable," 25.

context of addressing “a person who happens to be in a dominant position”<sup>47</sup> so as to achieve the speaker’s purpose without harming face. Instances in which fable is used to insult, mock, or threaten (e.g., King Cyrus) deliberately flout social expectations in order to achieve such an affect.

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<sup>47</sup> Meuli as paraphrased by Perry in “Fable,” 23.

## Chapter 2

### Perceptions of Fable in Antiquity

Fable occupies a complex position in antiquity, and our sources on the topic reflect a wide range of opinions regarding the genre, for as much as the genre is espoused it is also put down. With regard to literature, we find that fable was typically restricted to comedy and iambos (a type of poetry often used to insult individuals), on account of its connection to the lower classes; however, the genre was generally excluded from epic and tragedy.<sup>48</sup> Even so, there are a few notable instances of fable occurring in high literature, but the application is done very carefully. For example, both Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and fragments of his *Myrmidons* contain an allusion to animal fable, but the fables are not told in their entirety, thus making them more appropriate for the refined genre of tragedy.<sup>49</sup> Additionally in *Ajax* by Sophocles, Teucer and Menelaus insult each other by trading fables (ll42-58). However, these fables do not involve animals and, as Rothwell points out, their purpose is to bring the discourse to a lower level of social prestige, thus demonstrating just how much their argument has degenerated.<sup>50</sup> Thus even the examples of fable in high literature further enforce the notion that fable was a low genre.

While fable may not have successfully permeated serious literary genres, it did appear occasionally in public and courtroom oratory. This seems a natural setting for fable, as an orator

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<sup>48</sup> Rothwell, "Aristophanes," 237.

<sup>49</sup> Rothwell, "Aristophanes," 237.

<sup>50</sup> Rothwell, "Aristophanes," 236-237.



(whether giving a public or private speech) would be in a vulnerable social position while attempting to sway a large audience. One would think then, that fable might be considered an excellent tool in the courtroom, and, as we recall from earlier, Aristophanes's reference to fable in *Wasps* suggest that it did occur with frequency. However, simply because fable was present in politics does not mean it was welcome, and Aristophanes mocks this phenomenon. Philocleon, the character who describes the use of fable in court, is himself a ridiculous old man, described as a lover of court trials (φιληλιαστής 88). He is obsessed with serving as a juror because it makes him feel powerful and important in his old age.<sup>51</sup> Thus, when Aristophanes has Philocleon describe why he enjoys the court system, we know that his reasons are not noble, but as deserving of ridicule as the man himself. Aristophanes labels the use of mythical stories and Aesopic anecdotes in court as “wheedling” which appeals to men like Philocleon. Furthermore, the playwright groups fable with emotionally manipulative tactics such as exaggerating one's poverty and parading one's children before the jury as we see in lines 568-70, “And if none of this persuades us, he starts dragging his kids up there by the hand, daughters and sons, and I listen while they cringe and bleat in chorus, and then their father implores me for their sake.”<sup>52</sup> It would seem then, that fable-telling in court was considered an inappropriate device, although many people found it entertaining to witness and to deride.

While some like Aristophanes may have found the use of fable in court trials to be comical, there are a few accounts of Athenian orators who seem to be genuinely frustrated with the use of fable in public speaking. Take for example the following story of the 4th-century orator Demades,

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<sup>51</sup> Philocleon states, “What living thing is there today more fortunate and felicitated than a juror, more coddled or commanding, oldster though he is?” (550-51), trans. Jeffrey Henderson.

<sup>52</sup> Trans. Jeffrey Henderson.

Once when Demades was addressing the Athenians on political matters and they were paying very little attention to what he said, he asked them their permission to tell them an Aesopic fable, and when they consented he spoke as follows, “Demeter, a Swallow, and an Eel where once making a journey together. When they came to a certain river the swallow took flight into the air and the eel dove into the water.” After saying this much he remained silent, and they asked him, “What about Demeter?” “She is angry with you,” he replied, “for neglecting the city’s business while being willing to listen to Aesopic fables” (Aesop 63, Perry).<sup>53</sup>

There is a similar story which features Demosthenes, who ceases in the middle of a fable about a Donkey’s shadow. When the Athenians beg him to continue, he replies, “You are willing to listen when I speak about the shadow of an ass, but when I speak about serious matters, you refuse” (Ps.-Plut. *Mor.* 848a-b).<sup>54</sup> These stories do not appear in the written record until about 400 years after the lives of Demades and Demosthenes, so their historical validity cannot be verified; however, we can consider these stories to be true in the sense that they express a view of fable as a thing unworthy of an audiences’ attention in a political setting.<sup>55</sup>

There may be some historical merit to the stories of Demosthenes and Demades, however, as we witness Demosthenes air a similar grievance in one of his own speeches. “You, Athenians,” Demosthenes states, “acquit men who have done the greatest injustices and who have been clearly proven guilty if a few advocates picked from their tribe ask you to or if they tell you one or two witticisms (ἄστεϊα)” (23.206).<sup>56</sup> As Rothwell explains, Demosthenes use of ἄστεϊα is not to mean “cultivated” or “urbane” as the word can sometimes be interpreted, but it is the same ἄστεϊόν of which Bdelycleon mentions in *Wasps*—witty stories, like Aesopic tales.<sup>57</sup> However, unlike Aristophanes, Demosthenes does not find fable and other witticisms to be comical in the courtroom. His chastisement of the Athenians is serious, and we see that perhaps

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<sup>53</sup> Appendix to *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Harold North Fowler, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1936).

<sup>55</sup> Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 157.

<sup>56</sup> Trans. Rothwell in “Aristophanes,” 247.

<sup>57</sup> Rothwell, “Aristophanes,” 247.

with some degree of frequency, fable assisted guilty men in escaping justice. Such an event would certainly reflect poorly on the fable genre.

We continue to see the notion of fable as inappropriate for the political realm even in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (around the same time that the *Life of Aesop* archetype on which *Vita G* is based is believed to have been composed).<sup>58</sup> For example in the *Life of Solon*, Plutarch presents a conversation between Aesop and Solon, the Athenian sage and lawgiver whose reforms laid the foundation for Athenian democracy. Plutarch writes,

The fable-maker Aesop, for he happened to have been summoned to Sardis by Croesus and honored, was grieved at Solon's happening upon no generosity. And advising him, he said, 'O Solon, one must keep company with kings either as little as possible or a sweetly as possible.' And Solon said, 'No, by Zeus, but as little as possible or as virtuously as possible' (Plut., *Sol.* 28).<sup>59</sup>

Plutarch's implication (voiced by Solon) is that Aesop's "sweet" fabular way of speaking is dishonest and improper for political matters. In this exchange we witness the tension that existed between fable and law in antiquity made manifest in the confrontation of their gift givers.

Although it may seem that Plutarch's story condemns fable, his story still considers Aesop influential enough to be compared to Solon. Furthermore, we see that Aesop's welcome from Croesus is greater than that given to the sage. In this way, Plutarch acknowledges fable's real and powerful presence in the world of politics, whether it is ethical or not. Likewise, we see similar recognition in the anecdotes of Demades and Demosthenes. Both orators in the moments of their very criticism of fable show themselves more than capable of employing the genre. They are keenly aware of fable's potential to capture an audience's attention, but they find it improper and mock the jurors who permit themselves to be swayed. Similarly, Demosthenes' comments

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<sup>58</sup> Perry, *Studies*, 26.

<sup>59</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Solon* 28, trans. Kurke in *Aesopic Conversations*, 131.

regarding ἄστεϊα, though critical, paint witticisms in a powerful light if they can lead to the acquittal of men who were clearly guilty. These instances reflect the complex issue of fable's standing in antiquity. It seems that even those who criticized the use of fable in politics recognized its utility, however it is unclear whether they believed fable was effective in and of itself, or due to the gullible nature of the jury. Quintilian, a Roman orator and contemporary of Plutarch, attributes fable's success in court to this second reason, stating that fables "often attract the mind, particularly that of uneducated rustics, who listen to fiction in a simpler spirit and, in their delight, readily assent to things that they enjoy hearing,"<sup>60</sup> though his opinions are not necessarily indicative of 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athenians.

Even Aristotle's recommendation of fable is not as straightforward as we would like. One may think that a fable used for a purely rhetorical purpose as Aristotle describes would be an application above criticism. However, Aristotle's recommendation of fable is no endorsement for it in all cases, and he states shortly after,

Thus, while the lessons conveyed by fables are easier to provide, those derived from facts are more useful for deliberative oratory, because as a rule the future resembles the past. If we have no enthymemes,<sup>61</sup> we must employ examples<sup>62</sup> as demonstrative proofs, for conviction is produced by these; but if we have them, examples must be used as evidence and as a kind of epilogue to the enthymemes. For if they stand first, they resemble induction, and induction is not suitable to rhetorical speeches except in very few cases; if they stand last they resemble evidence, and a witness is in every case likely to induce belief (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20.8-9).<sup>63</sup>

What we see here is Aristotle establishing a hierarchy of rhetorical techniques. Examples are ideally used as evidence for enthymemes, rather than on their own; and real examples are preferred to fable. This places fable-telling at the lowest position in the hierarchical system. It is

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<sup>60</sup> *The Orator's Education*, trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>61</sup> An enthymeme is an argument with an implied premise. For example, in the syllogism, "Ditty has nine lives because she is a cat," the premise "All cats have nine lives," has been omitted.

<sup>62</sup> That is, fable or historical facts (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20.2).

<sup>63</sup> Trans. J. H. Freese.

the secondary form of the secondary option, on account of the fact that it is fiction rather than fact. However, while Aristotle does not believe fable to be as useful as historical examples, he maintains that fable is suitable, and has nothing ill to say of its use.

Other sources, however, highly praise the fable genre. In the first century Phaedrus tells us that the Athenians supposedly set up a statue of Aesop, “that all men might know that the path of honor lies open and that glory is awarded not according to birth, but by merit” (Phaedrus 2.9.1-4),<sup>64</sup> suggesting that popular opinion held Aesop in high regard. In addition, we find evidence that prominent philosophers like Socrates also admired fable. In his final moments in prison, as we read in *Phaedo*, Socrates ponders the meaning of a recurring dream:

‘Socrates,’ [the dream] said, ‘cultivate the arts and work at them.’ And in the past I used to take this to mean it was urging and encouraging me to persist with what I’d been doing; like people encouraging runners, so too the dream was urging me to carry on doing the very thing that I was doing, cultivating the arts on the grounds that philosophy is the greatest of the arts, and this was what I was doing. But now, [...] it seemed that if indeed the dream was repeatedly telling me to pursue this side of the arts in the popular sense, I should not disobey it, but get on with it: it would be safer not to leave before clearing my conscience by composing poetry in obedience to the dream. So I first composed a poem to [Apollo] in whose honor the current festival was held. Then after this poem to the god, thinking that if one were to be a poet one should compose stories, not factual accounts, and I myself was not a creator of stories, then for this reason I worked up the first of the fables of Aesop I came across that I had available and that I knew (60e-61b).<sup>65</sup>

Soon to face his death, Socrates is especially concerned about properly interpreting the dream sent to him by Apollo. Due to the importance he places on properly fulfilling his dream, we can trust that he likewise approaches the subjects of his poetry with care. His first poem honors Apollo, which is fitting, for it is Apollo who has sent the dream and whose festival has delayed Socrates’s execution, thus giving him time to compose poetry. And then, that he may truly be a

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<sup>64</sup> Phaedrus in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry.

<sup>65</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

poet, Socrates turns to the fables of Aesop, believing that these are the best stories for him to turn into poetry. We see from this that Socrates values fable highly, for if fable is a worthy means for him to cultivate the arts and to fulfill his divine purpose before his death, then he must genuinely believe that it is good and beautiful.

Several centuries later we hear the praise of fable from the mouth of another prominent philosopher, Apollonius. Apollonius lived during the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, but our source about him, the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, was composed by Philostratus a little more than a century after Apollonius's life. Although Apollonius may serve sometimes as a mouthpiece for Philostratus, there is still valuable insight to be gained from how Apollonius describes fable, especially when we recall that *Vita G* was written between 100 BCE and 200 CE. Being adjacent in time, we can assume the texts are influenced by similar societal notions regarding fable. In Book V of the *Life* Apollonius is discussing the arts with Menippus, one of his followers. Menippus claims that poets and their works are superior to Aesop and his fables; however, Apollonius disagrees.

“They are frogs,” said Menippus, “donkeys, and nonsense for old women and children to chew on.” “And yet in my opinion,” said Apollonius, “Aesop’s [fables] seem more conducive to philosophy. Stories about heroes, to which all poetry is devoted, corrupt their listeners. The poets relate unnatural loves, marriages between siblings, slander of the gods, children being devoured, base trickery and unjust judgments, and their semblance of fact leads those who feel love, jealousy, or desire of wealth or tyranny, in the direction of the stories. Aesop [...] uses humble subjects to teach great lessons, and after setting out his tale rounds it off with a ‘Do this’ or a ‘Don’t do that.’ He also was more devoted to truth than the poets. They give their own stories a forced appearance of plausibility, while he, by promising a story that everyone knows to be untrue, tells the truth precisely in not undertaking to tell the truth” (5.14).<sup>66</sup>

In this exchange, Menippus insults fable on account of its common subject matter and the fact that they are found among the lowly (in this instance, women and children, rather than slaves and the demos). The words of Menippus are likely informed by real opinions of fable in the late

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<sup>66</sup>Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. Christopher P. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

second and early third century. While Apollonius fully recognizes the “humble subjects” and the lowly demographic of fable (later in their discussion, he fondly recalls a story about Aesop which his mother told him as a child (5.15)) he does not believe that these things detract from the value of the genre. In fact, Apollonius even maintains that the subject matter of fable is what makes it more honest and moral than high poetry.

Both Apollonius and Socrates cherished fable. They refrained from rash judgements based on fable’s low social status or its questionable application in politics, and instead formed their own opinions regarding the value of the genre. The *Life of Aesop* attempts to have its readers do the same. It challenges low opinions of fable by highlighting fable’s usefulness and even framing instances of fable-telling in serious situations. Additionally, the life seeks to instruct its audience on the proper application of fable. However, the author of the *Life of Aesop* seems very aware that many members of his audience may be resistant to this idea, and so before teaching the audience how to take up fable for themselves, the *Life* first sets out to neutralize any negative preconceived notions regarding fable which the audience may have. We see this achieved through a major theme in the *Life of Aesop*, that appearances are deceptive, and we owe people and things more than a superficial glance if we are to understand the true nature of a thing or person. Through this message, the *Life* confronts those who might have considered fable to be inappropriate or beneath them, and it asks that they extend their reconsideration to the genre.

## Chapter 3

### The Life in Defense of Ugly Things

A fox, after looking by chance at a tragic actor's mask, remarked: "O what a majestic face is here, but it has no brains!"

—Phaedrus 1.7<sup>67</sup>

The *Life of Aesop* wastes no time in imparting the story's central message; its first passage introduces us to our protagonist saying,

Aesop the fabulist, the man most useful for all things in life (βιωφέλεστατος), was a slave by chance but a Phrygian of Phrygia by birth, loathsome to behold (κακοπινής το ἰδέσθαι), rotten as a servant, potbellied, misshapen of head, snub-nosed, deaf, swarthy, dwarfish, bow-legged, weasel-armed, wrinkled, mustached—an explicit mistake. And he had a deficiency greater than his unsightliness in being speechless, indeed, he was mute and unable to speak (*Vita G.* 1).<sup>68</sup>

Like a promythium to a fable, the introduction tells us the meaning of our tale before the action truly begins: value cannot be judged from appearances. Aesop is described in a manner entirely opposed to the ancient Greek notions of “the good and the beautiful” or *kalos kagathos*. As a Phrygian he would have been considered βάρβαρος, a non-Greek, and his social status declines even further on account of his being a slave—and as we are told, “a worthless servant” at that. Moreover, regarding his physical appearance, we find that he is not merely not beautiful, but

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<sup>67</sup> Phaedrus in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry.

<sup>68</sup> Translations from *Vita G.*, unless otherwise indicated, are that of the author.



loathsome to look at (κακοπινής τὸ ιδέσθαι). And—should we not believe our narrator—we are generously provided with a dozen more adjectives in support of this claim. Aesop may seem to be κακός<sup>69</sup> in every respect, and yet, this very man is considered “the most useful for all things in life” (βιωφελέστατος).

Even this “catalogue of types of badness,”<sup>70</sup> as Lefkowitz calls it, is more than it appears to be. At first glance it may seem to be a negative appraisal of our hero, or perhaps a comical description. Within this catalogue, however, we find a hidden compliment, reliant on Aesop’s many flaws in order to be recognized as something positive, “he had a deficiency greater than his unsightliness in being speechless. Indeed, he was mute and unable to speak” (*Vita G.* 1). Despite having described Aesop as a monstrosity, the narrator believes that it is Aesop’s inability to speak which is the worst thing about him. However, as the *Life* will later point out, the ability to speak is not inherently a thing of value, rather it is the quality of the words which the mouth produces (*Vita G.* 53-55); furthermore, there are often times when silence is the most valuable option (*Vita G.* 88). The only way Aesop’s muteness could be so bad as to be worse than the description of his appearance, would be if the things which his muteness prevents him from speaking are things of immense value. We find in this description then, a great compliment to Aesop’s wisdom and a secret exaltation of fable.

Aesop does not remain mute for long, however. Shortly after our introduction to the fabulist, we are told that Aesop was working one day when a priestess of Isis came wondering into the fields where he was digging. She was lost, and unaware of Aesop’s muteness, she asked him for directions to the main road. Recognizing that she was a priestess of Isis, Aesop led her

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<sup>69</sup> A loaded word in Ancient Greek. Its short definition is bad or evil, but it can also mean ugly, ill-born, worthless, wretched, and a whole host of other negative adjectives.

<sup>70</sup> Lefkowitz, “Ugliness and Value,” 59.

by the hand to a grove where he gathered a meal of bread, olives, and wild greens for her to eat. And, after they ate together, he escorted her to the main road. The priestess resumed her journey and prayed that Isis would reward Aesop's piety. Aesop became tired from the heat of the day, and laying down to rest, he fell asleep.

Thereupon the goddess, our lady Isis, appeared along with the nine Muses and said, "My daughters, you see here a man who may be ill-favored in appearance but who rises above all criticism in his piety (νικῶντα εἰς εὐσέβειας πάντα ψόγον). It was he who guided my servant on her way when she was lost, and I am here with you to recompense him. I restore his voice, and do you bestow upon his voice most excellent speech." So saying, Isis herself removed from his tongue the impediment which prevented his speaking and persuaded the Muses as well to confer on him each something of her own endowment. They conferred on him the power to devise stories and the ability to conceive and elaborate tales in Greek. With a prayer that he might achieve fame, the goddess went her way, and the Muses, when each had conferred her own gift, ascended to Mount Helicon (*Vita G.* 4-7).<sup>71</sup>

Isis does not repay Aesop with good looks, but with a voice, and in this way upholds the idea that appearance and value are not one and the same. Additionally, she states that though Aesop may be ugly, he triumphs over πάντα ψόγον due to his piety. Daly's translation takes this to mean "all criticism." However, ψόγος can also refer to the cause for criticism, that is, a flaw or blemish. Due to the frequent references to Aesop's appearance, it may be that this meaning of ψόγος is also being used to refer Aesop's physical form. Aesop then, is not only victorious in the face of the criticism he receives, but because of his piety (an internal goodness) his physical blemishes are deemed inconsequential. The *Life's* story of Aesop's investiture as well as Aesop's introductory description seem to be part of a deliberate effort on behalf of the author to impart to the audience that appearances are not valid foundations for value judgments.

Of course, one may wonder, if Aesop was in fact a historical figure, then how can we be certain that the author is purposefully using Aesop's ugliness for the sake of imparting a lesson,

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<sup>71</sup> "The Aesop Romance," trans. Lloyd W. Daly in *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*, ed. William Hansen, 106-61. (Bloomington: IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

rather than simply narrating a historical fact? We should recall, however, that the *Life* is not a historical text. Many of its anecdotes are invented or drawn from the traditions of other historical figures, and the text is unreliable in the simplest of facts as well. Aesop, for example, was not a Phrygian but was in fact a Thracian, according to our earliest 5<sup>th</sup> century sources. The *Life*, on its own, is not sufficient for gleaning information about the historical Aesop's appearance. There is, however, a cup from 450 BCE which depicts a deformed man engaged in conversation with a fox (fig. 1). Many scholars believe that this is a representation of Aesop, as the talking fox seems to be a clear allusion to fable; however, the cup was not crafted with the intent of being a portrait and there is no way to be sure of the extent to which the image is caricature.<sup>72</sup>



Fig. 1 *Aesop (?) and a Fox*.  
Attributed to the Painter of Bologna 417 BCE,  
Museo Gregoriano Etrusco, Vatican.  
Photo credit Alinari Archives, New York.

It certainly seems that Aesop's ugliness has some kernel of truth. However, this would not imply that the author is not consciously using Aesop's ugliness in the *Life* to teach the audience; rather the author has taken an aspect of the tradition and emphasized it for his own purpose. In fact, as we continue to read the *Life*, we find several more examples of this theme, many of which overtly explain the need to examine things beneath their surface.

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<sup>72</sup> Francois Lissarrague. "Aesop, Between Man and Beast: Ancient Portraits and Illustrations," in *Not the Classical Ideal: Athens and the Construction of the other in Greek Art*. (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 138.

After Aesop is cured of his muteness, for example, the overseer Zenas becomes fearful that Aesop might alert their master to Zenas's poor treatment of the other slaves. Zenas persuades their master to let him sell Aesop and, if no one will purchase him, to kill him (*Vita G.* 9-11). When Zenas and Aesop meet the slave dealer, we read,

As the slave dealer turned to Aesop and saw what a piece of human garbage he appeared to be, he 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 for food or a goose egg. Zenas, I think you've treated me pretty shabbily. I could have been home already. But no, you had to drag me off as though you had something worthwhile to sell instead of this refuse." So saying, he started away. As he went, Aesop caught him by the tail of his cloak and said, "Listen." [...] The Merchant said, "Don't bother me. I don't want to buy you." Aesop: "Buy me, sir, and by Isis, I'll be very useful to you" (*Vita G.* 14-15).

Aesop goes on to explain his utility to the doubtful slave dealer, saying that he would be the perfect person to keep the other slaves from becoming unruly, as he can easily frighten them with his appearance. "A fine idea, by your swarthy face!" exclaims the slave trader, and he purchases Aesop from Zenas (*Vita G.* 15). Though it is a crude sort of utility, Aesop has nonetheless proven that his appearance does not accurately display his potential.

We see further incorrect assumptions made about Aesop when the slave dealer brings him to Samos. Aesop is placed between two slaves, a teacher and a musician, who are both described as *καλός*. We are told that "many [of the Samians] noticed them and said, 'Bah, these fellows look fine enough, but where did this awful thing come from? He spoils (*ἀφανίζει*) their appearance, too. Take him away.' Though many made cutting remarks, Aesop stood fast and didn't turn a hair" (*Vita G.* 21).<sup>73</sup> In this moment we see not only an assumption of Aesop drawn from his physical appearance, but an accusation that his physical *κακός* destroys what is *καλός* in the other slaves, and therefore Aesop has no place among them. This parallels the ancient

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<sup>73</sup> Trans. Daly.

perception that fable, on account of its low form and origins, is not fitting for the aristocracy or the political realm.

Xanthus, a philosopher, then arrives to the market with his students, having been sent by his wife to purchase a slave. Seeing Aesop among the two “καλός” slaves, he offers up his own interpretation of the scene, “[The merchant] put the ugly one between the handsome ones in order that his ugliness should make their beauty noticeable, for if the ugliness were not set in contrast to which is superior to it, the appearance of the handsome ones would not have been put to the test” (*Vita G.* 23).<sup>74</sup> Although Xanthus does not accuse Aesop’s ugliness of being a marring force, he still assumes that, because Aesop is not physically καλός, he must be inferior to the two slaves in all other aspects as well. This mindset is further made evident when Xanthus speaks to the “καλός” slaves. He approaches the first one, whose name is Liguris, and asks him, “What do you know how to do?” to which Liguris replies, “I know how to do everything.” Aesop then bursts into laughter which confuses the students (*Vita G.* 23). Xanthus inquires as to the price for Liguris but finds the price (1,000 denarii) to be too expensive; Xanthus then speaks to the second καλός slave, Philokalus, and we see a repeat of the same events. Philokalus knows everything. Aesop laughs. The students are confused. Xanthus learns the price and loses interest (*Vita W.* 24).<sup>75</sup>

Xanthus’ is ready to return home, when one of his students recommends that Xanthus buy “the ugly guy” (τὸ σωματίον) if the philosopher wants a cheap slave. The student even offers to pitch in with the other students to buy Aesop for Xanthus (*Vita W.* 24). Xanthus agrees but

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<sup>74</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>75</sup> This information is from *Vita W.* *Vita G.* is missing a portion of the text between the students first being perplexed by Aesop’s laughter and Xanthus announcing that he will see what Aesop knows. *Vita W.* however, preserves the account in full. Translations from *Vita W.* are that of the author.

says, “I will find out if he knows anything then, lest you give your share of the cost for the sake of nothing” (*Vita G.* 25). Xanthus then begins his interview of Aesop,

Xanthus asked him, “Where are you from?” And Aesop said, “From the flesh.” Xanthus said, “I don’t mean that, rather, where were you born (ἐγεννήσθης)?” Aesop answered, “In my mother’s womb.” Xanthus said, “Curse you, I am not asking you that, rather in what place where you born?” Aesop said, “My mother didn’t tell me whether it was in the bedroom or the dining room.” Xanthus asked, “What is your nationality?” Aesop replied, “Phrygian.” Xanthus asked, “What do you know how to do?” Aesop answered, “Absolutely nothing.” Xanthus said, “Why nothing?” Aesop responded, “Because these guys on each side of me know absolutely everything.” The students spoke, “How wonderful, these guys answered poorly, for no man knows everything! That’s why he said he didn’t know anything, that’s why he laughed [...] Nicely done by Hera, Aesop has outspoken (ἀπεστομάτισεν) the teacher” (*Vita G.* 25-26).

Xanthus may be the teacher in name but—as Xanthus’s own students point out—Aesop is the one who assumes the role of teacher in their conversation. This scene calls into question Xanthus’s abilities as a philosopher and highlights Aesop’s wisdom. Xanthus (and his students as well) seemed content with Liguris’s and Philokalus’s claims that they knew everything; Xanthus’s refusal to buy them was on account of their price, not on account of what they said. However, Aesop, a slave lacking Xanthus’s formal education, recognized and pointed out the impossibility of their statement. Additionally, Aesop’s assertion that he knows nothing parallels Socrates’s own famous claim recorded in Plato’s *Apology*, “this man thinks he knows something without knowing it, whereas I, just as I don’t know, I don’t think I do either. At least it seems I’m wiser than this man in just this one minor respect, that I don’t even think I know what I don’t know” (21d).<sup>76</sup> By equating Aesop to Socrates<sup>77</sup> in this way, Aesop is shown to be the true philosopher rather than Xanthus.

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<sup>76</sup> Plato, *Apology*, trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, Socrates shares another similarity to Aesop in that he also is reported to have not been physically beautiful. In Plato’s *Symposium* he is likened to the satyr Silenus. “It is an outward casing he wears, similarly to the sculptured Silenus. But if you opened his inside, you cannot imagine how full he is,

Xanthus and Aesop continue their conversation, “Xanthus said, ‘All that you say is natural, you, however, are rotten.’ Aesop said, ‘Do not look at my appearance (εἶδος) but examine, rather, my soul.’ Xanthus asked, ‘What is appearance?’ Aesop answered, ‘It is something that often happens when we are at wine shops to buy wine; we see that the jars are ugly, but its usefulness (χρησιμότης) is in its taste’” (*Vita G.* 26). In Aesop’s instruction of Xanthus (and by extension, the readers of the *Life*), it is overtly expressed that a thing’s true value is not in its appearance but in its usefulness.

Xanthus compliments Aesop’s “readiness of speech” and buys him (*Vita G.* 27). Aesop’s time as a slave in Xanthus’s household makes up approximately a third of the *Life of Aesop*. This section is made up of numerous anecdotes in which Aesop shows his superiority to Xanthus, either by solving the problems which Xanthus cannot solve himself, or by tricking his master. Although the stories are typically humorous in nature, they are not purely for entertainment. They serve as evidence for the author’s lesson and upset any preconceived notions that high wisdom like Xanthus’s is inherently better than Aesop’s. Xanthus even comments on the reversal of their expected roles, albeit sarcastically, saying, “I didn’t know I bought myself a master” and on another occasion, “I find that I didn’t buy a slave, rather I purchased myself a teacher” (*Vita G.* 26, 40).

Aesop’s time as a slave comes to an end however when the Samians receive an omen which no one can interpret. The Samians, believing Xanthus to be the wisest among them, ask the philosopher to tell them its meaning, but he finds himself entirely at a loss. Aesop offers to interpret the omen in exchange for his freedom (*Vita G.* 81-86, 89). However,

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good cup-companions, of sobriety. [...] Whether anyone else has caught him in a serious moment and opened him, and seen the images inside, I know not; but I saw them one day, and thought them so divine and golden, so perfectly fair and wondrous, that I absolutely had to do as Socrates bade me” (216d, 217a). Trans W.R.M Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

When the Samians saw Aesop, they burst out laughing and shouted, “Bring us another interpreter to interpret this portent. What a monstrosity he is to look at! Is he a frog, or a hedgehog, or a potbellied jar, or a captain of monkeys, or a moulded jug, or a cook’s gear, or a dog in a basket?”

Aesop heard all this without turning a hair, and when he had gotten silence, he began to speak as follows: “Men of Samos, why do you joke and gape at me? You shouldn’t consider my appearance but examine my wits. It’s ridiculous to find fault with a man’s intelligence because of the way he looks. Many men of the worst appearance have a sound mind. No one, then, should criticize the mind, which he hasn’t seen, of a man whose stature he observes to be inferior. A doctor doesn’t give up a sick man as soon as he see him, but he feels his pulse and then judges his condition. When did anyone ever decide on a jar of wine by looking at it rather than taking a taste? The Muse is judged in the theater and Aphrodite in bed. Just so, wit is judged in words” (*Vita G.* 87-88).<sup>78</sup>

The Samians permit Aesop to speak, and when Aesop interprets their omen, the audience of the *Life* realizes just how vital it is not to dismiss what appears to be κακὸς without proper examination. If the Samians had refused Aesop’s help on account of his ugliness, they never would have learned that a king is coming to take their freedom (*Vita G.* 91). Everything Aesop has said about appearance (εἶδος)—both leading up to and at this moment—becomes enriched by the severity of the situation. The narrative experiences a shift in tone, and from here forward the *Life of Aesop* becomes less comical. References to Aesop’s appearance also become less common, and when they do occur, they are no longer the same comical comparisons to hedgehogs and goose eggs which we have come across. The author of the *Life* seems confident that the audience properly understands the nature of εἶδος, and the remainder of the *Life* focuses primarily on displaying the usefulness and application of fable. The author will bring fable into more serious contexts, and any member of the audience who might have first objected to this, is perhaps now more willing to permit it.

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<sup>78</sup> Trans. Daly.



## Chapter 4

### The Life as a Didactic Text

A nightingale (in a cage) was singing at night at a man's door. A bat asked her why it was that she kept silent during the day and sang only at night. She replied that she was wary of singing in the daytime because she had been captured when so doing. "But," said the bat, "you ought to have exercised this caution before you were caught; it's no use now."

—Aesop 48, Perry<sup>79</sup>

As we analyze the many instances of fable-telling which the author of the *Life of Aesop* incorporates into his work, we find that the act of fable-telling is a delicate undertaking, and the fable-teller must measure and take into account a variety of factors to best present his wisdom. The fable-telling process can be broken down into different but connected parts which we will describe with assistance from the figure below.

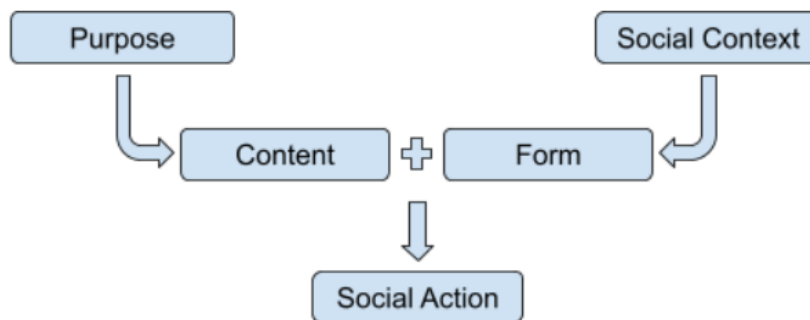


Fig. 2

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<sup>79</sup> Appendix to *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry, 48.

The purpose of the fable is the reason that the fable-teller begins speaking in the first place; what is he trying to accomplish through his tale? The purpose of a fable informs its content, that is, the moral truth expressed in the fable. It must be relevant to the fable-teller's purpose. For example, if Aesop's purpose was to convince a man to speak honestly, he would not tell a fable about the dangers of pride. The content is then dressed in certain features which give it the form of a fable, and we will discuss these features shortly.

The social context refers to the nature of the social situation in which the fable is being told. A variety of factors with regard to the relationship between the speaker and the audience are at play here, such as degree of familiarity, power differential, the willingness of the audience to listen, and degree of imposition. Proper evaluation of social context will inform the fable-teller as to how he should dress his fable (i.e., whether certain features be added or withheld in order to obtain the best result) or if a fable is even appropriate at all. The form consists of those features typical of a fable: talking animals, mythic beings, metaphor, meta-language, epimythium, promythium, etc. Although these features mark a fable, a fable does not need to possess all of these features; their presence is determined by the needs of the social context. The fable's form may also include additional moves which, while not marked as a part of the fable genre, will still contribute to the fable's politeness (e.g., flattery). The social action is what the fable does, is it a directive, a threat, something else? In an instance of successful fable-telling, the outcome of the social action will align with the fable-teller's purpose. Through our analysis, we will see that the *Life of Aesop* seems to be especially concerned with teaching its audience that a good application of fable arises from a wise purpose and the proper evaluation of social context.

Aesop's very first instance of fable-telling in *Vita G* effectively reflects the delicate task which the fable-teller undertakes in evaluating his audience. Shortly after Aesop has been freed,

an emissary arrives on the scene, delivering a letter to the Samians from King Croesus of Lydia. Croesus demands that the Samians pay tribute to him. The Samian officers advise the people to submit to the king's demands, but instead the Samian people turn to Aesop for advice on what to do. We witness the following interaction,

...the crowd shouted, 'Give us your opinion.' Aesop said, 'I will not give you advice but will speak in a fable. Once, at the command of Zeus, Prometheus described to men two ways, one the way of freedom, and the other that of slavery. The way of freedom he pictured as rough at the beginning, narrow, steep, and waterless, full of brambles, and beset with perils everywhere, but finally a level plain amid parks, groves of fruit trees, and water courses where the struggle reaches its end in rest. The way of slavery he pictured as a level plain at the beginning, flowery, and pleasant to look upon with much to delight but at its end narrow, hard, and like a cliff.'" The Samians recognized from what Aesop said where their interest lay and shouted with one accord to the emissary that they would take the rough road (*Vita G.* 93-94).<sup>80</sup>

The moral truth displayed here is quite clear: while slavery may be the easier choice, it is a path that will lead to evil and hardship, whereas freedom, though difficult to obtain, is a path that ends in sweetness.<sup>81</sup> However, far more important than simply expressing this truth, Aesop has persuaded the Samians to act in accordance with it, and they decide to oppose Croesus. The motivation for Aesop's purpose in advising them to do this is unclear, perhaps he simply wishes to maintain his own newfound freedom, or perhaps he truly does desire Samos's liberty. Either way his directive is successful, and they follow his advice.

What is it about this fable that makes it so effective, and why did it need to be told in this way? Interestingly, if we examine the Samians and Aesop's relationship, we find that there is actually very little social need for Aesop to use fable as a tool in his advising of them. First of all, the audience's willingness to listen to Aesop is extremely high. We know this because the

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<sup>80</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>81</sup> In yet another interesting parallel to Socrates, the philosopher is reported to have told a similar story as he heard it told to him by Prodicus, in which Heracles must choose whether to follow Vice or Virtue. (*Xen. Mem.* 2.1.21-34).

Samians explicitly requested that he be the one to instruct them on how to respond to Croesus. In addition to this, although there is a power differential based on the numbers of the Samian crowd against the single Aesop, it is unlikely that they hold any real threat to him as we are told, “they honored Aesop as a true prophet of the portent” (*Vita G.* 93). Additionally, while advising the Samians to bring war to their city is an extremely imposing request, the fact that the Samians ignored the original advice of their officers and sought the council of Aesop to begin with, suggests that it was something they were somewhat willing to do if a man they trusted told them to do it. Knowing these things then, and if the social context truly determines the form of speech, then why does the principle not seem to be at play here? We should expect to hear straightforward advice from Aesop, but instead Aesop is refusing to speak directly. The reason there seems to be such a disconnect between our form and the social context, is that we have neglected to consider perhaps the most important member of the audience: Croesus.

When we speak of an audience, we often refer to those whom we are directly addressing. By this understanding, the intended audience for Aesop’s fable of the two roads would only be the Samians. However, as Allan Bell explains in his audience design approach to stylistic variation in language, an audience can also include non-addressed individuals.<sup>82</sup> Croesus is such a participant in this episode of fable-telling. Although Croesus is not present himself, he does have a messenger at Samos, thus making Croesus himself an “overhearer” of the conversation. Aesop has knowledge of his presence, but the Lydian King is not a participant in the exchange of the fable. Aesop’s acute awareness of this fact, and its potential consequences, is demonstrated when he initially refuses to advise the Samians, saying, “Men of Samos, when your first citizens have given you the opinion that you should pay the tax to the king, do you ask me whether you

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<sup>82</sup> Allan Bell, “Language Style as Audience Design” *Language in Society* 13, (1984): 145-204.

should give it or not? If I say: ‘Don’t give it,’ I’ll mark myself as an enemy to King Croesus” (*Vita G.* 93).

When we account for Croesus as a member of the fable’s audience, we can see more clearly the driving forces behind the fable’s form. The power differential between a newly-made freedman and the king of Lydia is immense, and there is no familiarity between the two that can make up for that vertical distance. Furthermore, by telling the Samians to resist Lydian rule, Aesop is challenging Croesus’s authority and interfering with his goals, thus encroaching on the king’s negative face. When we take these factors into account, it makes sense that we would see negative politeness strategies in this fable’s form. Aesop impersonalizes his advice by placing the choice between freedom and slavery in the context of a fable. Additionally, by providing no epimythium to draw the story to the present, interpretation is placed entirely in the hands of the Samians. Thus, Aesop’s role as the one impinging on Croesus is greatly reduced, especially when paired with the fact that Aesop took great care at the start of his tale to state that it was simply a story and nothing more. Aesop demonstrates foxlike agility as he weaves through the tangle of social briars that get in the way of achieving his purpose, and he is very successful. King Croesus does not realize Aesop’s role in Samos’s resistance until the wisest of the Lydian ambassadors points out to the King that as long as Aesop lives, the Samians will never be captured (*Vita G.* 95).

Naturally then, the Lydian ambassador goes to Samos and persuades the Samians that if they hand over Aesop, Croesus will cease antagonizing them. As a result of this, Aesop’s relationship with the Samians shifts and he is now in a weak position to issue directives. Now that the freedom of a people is pitted against the life of a freedman, asking to be spared will be an extremely imposing request. Furthermore, the Samians are already very much committed to

surrendering Aesop, shouting to the ambassador, “Take him. Let the king take Aesop” (*Vita G.* 97). Aesop uses the fable of “The Wolves and the Sheep” to persuade them otherwise. Its cast of talking animals entertains his audience and captures their attention, while also providing a fictional framework to present his directive: “you should not surrender useful men.” But it is how Aesop readies his audience to be receptive to this message that is most important to consider.

After the Lydian ambassador “persuaded the Samians to surrender Aesop rather than lose the king’s friendship, [...] Aesop came forward and said, ‘Men of Samos, I agree and would gladly be content to die at the feet of the king, but I want to tell you a story that I wish you would have engraved on my tombstone when I’m dead’” (*Vita G.* 97).<sup>83</sup> By introducing his fable in such a way, Aesop implements both positive and negative politeness strategies which make his advice easier for the Samians to take on. First by assuring them that he agrees with them and is happy to do whatever they wish, he greatly increases his positive face. This is an excellent way to relieve any tension which may have arisen between the Samians and Aesop when their fates were pitted against one another by the Lydian ambassador. Next Aesop asks their permission to tell a story, but, not wanting them to realize he is offering advice, he provides his own justification for his fable, that it is the inscription he wants on his tombstone. In doing this, Aesop does not initially appear to be challenging the Samians at all. Furthermore, by linking the story to a funerary request, he garners sympathy and places the Samians in a position in which they may feel obligated to hear the final requests of a doomed man. Having made the Samians a willing audience once more, he is able to deliver his fable and be confident that its instruction will be followed.

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<sup>83</sup> Trans. Daly.

Despite having just defended himself from being offered up to Croesus, Aesop decides that he must speak with the Lydian king so as to convince him to leave Samos unaccosted. As Aesop enters into this conversation, there are numerous aspects of the social context which both Aesop and readers of the *Life* can anticipate will present a challenge. First, the power differential between Croesus and Aesop is so great, that it has deadly potential for the fabulist. Second, Aesop's purpose (to ask a conquering king to cease his conquering) is a request of extreme imposition. And lastly, there is absolutely no degree of familiarity or affection that Aesop can rely on for assistance.

Our knowledge of the social context is enhanced however, when Croesus speaks upon seeing Aesop for the first time. We are told, "When the king saw Aesop, he was angry and said, 'Look who prevented my subjugating a city and wouldn't let me collect taxes. It wouldn't be so bad if he were a man instead of this riddle (αἴνιγμα), this monstrosity (τέρας) among men'" (Vita G. 98).<sup>84</sup> It seems that the social context has changed to make Aesop's task all the more difficult. Familiarity is not merely non-existent, rather Croesus holds Aesop in contempt. He is offended, not so much by Aesop's interference, but because he finds Aesop to be an unworthy adversary; like many who have seen Aesop before him, Croesus thinks Aesop's hideous physical appearance must be demonstrative of his ability. The king is enraged, because he thinks he has been bested by something less than human. However, Aesop, ever the astute discourse analyst, identifies this an opportunity for his own success. He recognizes that Croesus would be willing to engage with Aesop, so long as Aesop can prove he is neither a riddle nor a monstrosity, but an intelligent human worth listening to.

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<sup>84</sup> Trans. Daly.

Because he needs to elevate his status in Croesus's eyes and assert his identity as a worthy adversary, Aesop undergoes a stylistic shift in his address to the King.

And Aesop said, "Sire, I was not brought to you by force but came of my own accord to your feet. You're like a man who has been suddenly wounded; he cried out on the spur of the moment at the suddenness of what has happened. Wounds are the business of physicians, but what I have to say will cure your temper. If I die at your feet, I will disgrace your regime, for you will always have your friends giving advice against your interest. When they figure out that those who give good counsel die, they will certainly speak contrary to the interest of your regime" (*Vita G.* 98).<sup>85</sup>

This advice, being an instructional metaphor, certainly possesses a distinct Aesopic flavor, but it lacks those elements which cause readers to quickly identify a story as fabular in its form, and for good reason. Aesop has done this with the intention of presenting himself as a rational human and a serious political advisor. Note that Aesop is still implementing positive politeness strategies to express his solidarity with Croesus, and he is still using metaphor to softly present his opinion. However, the metaphor is now brief and quickly clarified, rather than Aesop's typical "you figure it out" fable style which he has utilized up to this point. All of this is done in direct response to Croesus's lament. An unexplained, indirect fable in a fanciful setting would do Aesop no good here, as Croesus<sup>86</sup> would merely see it as another undesirable riddle to unwind, thus affirming his belief that Aesop is an *ἀνίγμια* and *τέρας*. By utilizing a straightforward, rational style of discourse, Aesop proves to Croesus that he is indeed human. More than that, Aesop shows he is cunning and skilled, with a strong grasp of political strategy. As a result, Croesus no longer feels shame at his defeat, for it becomes plain to him that Aesop is a wise man.

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<sup>85</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>86</sup> Croesus, as portrayed in Herodotus's *Histories*, is not skilled at interpretation. The Lydian fails to comprehend the wisdom of Solon (1.33), nor does he grasp the full meaning of his prophetic dream (1.38-40), and he misinterprets the Delphic oracle (1.53). With our perspective informed by this aspect of the historical tradition, we see that Aesop's decision to speak plainly is especially wise.



This demonstration causes Croesus to realize Aesop's humanity and to reevaluate him. "The king was astonished at him and smiled and said, 'Can you do me another favor and tell me stories of the ways of fortunes with men?'" (*Vita G.* 99).<sup>87</sup> As we see, Croesus now recognizes Aesop as a source of wisdom. Aesop has altered the social context to his benefit. He has eliminated all hostility, found favor with the king, and has prepared a situation in which his fables will be listened to with willingness. Only then does Aesop share, what one can indisputably call a fable, with Croesus:

Aesop said, "[... a man was about to kill an insect, when she] said to him: 'Don't just idly kill me. I don't hurt the grain or the fruit or the flowers, and I don't harm the branches, but by moving wings and feet together in harmony, I make a pleasant sound, I am a solace to the wayfarer.' The man was moved by what she said and let her go back to her native haunts. Just so I fall at your knees. Have pity on me, for I have no power to injure an army, nor am I so handsome that I might give false evidence against someone and get away with it. Poor as my body is, I utter words of commonsense and thereby benefit the life of mortals." The king liked his story and said, "I grant you your life. Ask for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." Aesop said, "Make peace with the Samians." The king said, "I make peace." Aesop fell at his knees and thanked him. (*Vita G.* 99 - 100).<sup>88</sup>

Although Aesop has now reverted significantly to his usual style, the reader might notice how the fable is once more followed by a clear explanation of its meaning. This indicates that Aesop is still bearing Croesus's original complaint in mind and maintaining his identity of a rational political advisor. Additionally, because Aesop is forced to make the meanings of his fable explicit, he wisely directs Croesus to have pity on him rather than directing him to leave the Samians alone. The later directive may have angered Croesus when heard directly. By asking instead for pity, Aesop exalts Croesus and gains favor in the eyes of the king. It is only once he has built enough rapport through his flattery and once Croesus offers him whatever he wishes, that Aesop dares to make the request for peace which he came to make in the first place.

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<sup>87</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>88</sup> Trans. Daly.

Having examined these first four examples of fable performed well, we have learned a great deal about the ways in which social context can affect fable-telling. There is one instruction, however, which the *Life of Aesop* seems especially anxious to impart about fable-telling, a piece of advice not unfamiliar to even us modern writers: know your audience. So far, Aesop has faced increasingly more difficult challenges regarding the nature of his interlocutors. When delivering the fable of “The Two Roads,” Aesop must properly assess who truly makes up his audience aside from just the Samians present. When telling the fable of “The Wolves and The Sheep” he is faced with the challenge of making the Samians a more willing audience. And lastly, when he comes to the court of Croesus, not only must he craft an identity for himself which pleases the King, but he is forced to display great patience as he waits for the ideal time to express his true purpose to his listener.

Through Aesop’s example, we see that the fabulist must thoroughly examine the social context and ask himself, is now the right time to speak? If not, how can I make it the right time? We even see this message reflected in the way in which the author has gone about his construction of the *Life of Aesop*. Perceiving the challenges of his own social context, he devoted a considerable portion of his narrative to shape his readers into willing recipients of his message. It is evident the author considers social context a major aspect to be taken into consideration when undertaking an instance of fable-telling. Aesop himself verbally confirms the importance of evaluating social context moments before he is freed by Xanthus, saying, “For just as I know how to speak, thus also I know how to be silent again. For the boundary of wisdom is to consider the opportune moment” (*Vita G.* 88). Unfortunately, we shall see Aesop abandon his wisdom in Delphi.

## Delphi: A Cautionary Tale

In previous examples of Aesop as a fable-teller, we witnessed the great care with which Aesop tailored his wisdom to his audience, and this leads him to great things. Croesus requests that Aesop writes a copy of his fables for the royal library, and the Samians honor Aesop highly for saving their people. After living in Samos for several years as a celebrated hero, Aesop decides to travel the world (*Vita G.* 100-101). He goes to Babylon where he becomes a chamberlain for King Lycurgus and, on the Babylonians' behalf, he engages in a battle of riddles against King Nectanebo of Egypt. Aesop is victorious, of course, and returns to Babylon having won three years' worth of tribute for Lycurgus. In their gratitude, the Babylonians erect a golden statue of Aesop along with statues of the Muses (*Vita G.* 112-123). Aesop decides to resume his world tour, giving exhibitions of his wisdom for payment, and at long last arrives at Delphi (*Vita G.* 124). It is here that we will witness a cautionary tale in fable-telling, as through Aesop's failures and death the audience continues to learn about the application of fable-telling.

The first fable we hear Aesop tell to the Delphians is crafted in response to their stinginess. We are told that the people of Delphi gave nothing to Aesop in return for his exhibition in their town—about which more will be said later—and shortly after this, the following exchange occurs,

...he said, "Men of Delphi, you are like a piece of driftwood floating on the sea; when we see it at a great distance, tossing on the waves, we think it is something worthwhile, but when we approach and come to it, we find that it is a very insignificant thing of no value. So it has been with me; when I was far away from your city, I was impressed with you as men of wealth and generosity, but now that I see you are inferior to other men in your breeding and in your city, I recognize that I was mistaken. I shall carry away a bad impression of you, for I see that you act in no way unworthy of your ancestors. When the Delphians heard this, they said to him, "And who are our ancestors?"

Aesop said, "Slaves, and if you don't know this, let me tell you about it. Long ago it was the custom among the Greeks when they captured a city to send a tenth of the spoils to Apollo. For example, out of a hundred oxen they would send ten, and the same with goats

and everything else—with money, with men, with women. You, being born of them as slaves, are like men in bondage, for by your birth you are marked as slaves of all the Greeks” (*Vita G.* 125-126).<sup>89</sup>

This tale angers the Delphians and, not having a legal reason to punish him, they frame Aesop by placing a golden cup from the temple in his bag. Upon its discovery, they arrest Aesop for theft (*Vita G.* 127).

In previous examples of fable-telling, Aesop always crafted his fables with intended outcomes in mind. As we saw with the Samians, the outcome might be to have his audience do what he asks or, as with Croesus, to better his relationship with his interlocutor. Here however, when we ask ourselves, “What is Aesop trying to accomplish?” we find that we are unable to provide a sensible answer. He certainly is not trying to improve his relationship with the Delphians, but neither does he appear to be directing them to perform some action. One might be inclined to say that it was an ill-conceived attempt to convince the Delphians to give him money, but this interpretation can be dismissed when one considers the line immediately following the fable, “ταῦτα εἰπὼν περὶ ἀποδημίαν ἐστέλλετο.” The aorist participle εἰπὼν is a circumstantial participle used in a temporal clause that is explaining when the main verb occurred. We can translate it as “Saying this, he began getting ready for his journey.” This means that quite soon after telling his fable to the Delphians, Aesop left the crowd to tend to his affairs before setting off for Phocis (*Vita G.* 127). If Aesop were intending to persuade or shame the Delphians into paying him, we might expect some comment by the author about the Delphians, or at the very least, for the conclusion of Aesop’s fable and the start of his preparations to be described as distinct, separate events. However, because of the immediate transition from one to the other, it

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<sup>89</sup> Trans. Lloyd W. Daly.

seems fair to assume that Aesop had no expectation that he would be collecting payment as a result of this fable.

Unable to find a reasonable purpose for Aesop to have told the driftwood fable, we find ourselves forced to consider a nonsensical motivation: Aesop is attempting to use fable in a manner similar to how we see Cyrus use fable in Herodotus's *Histories*. Aesop's fable is meant as an insult and threat to the Delphians, and to some degree Aesop's threat is successful, for the Delphians become fearful, saying to themselves, "If we let him go away, he'll go around to other cities and damage our reputation" (*Vita G.127*).<sup>90</sup> However, Aesop, who is only one man against a crowd of Delphians, lacks the power which afforded Cyrus the ability to insult without consequence—although it would seem our fabulist foolishly believes that he does. Recall the exchange between Croesus and Aesop in which Aesop states, "I have no power to injure an army, nor am I so handsome that I might give false evidence against someone and get away with it" (*Vita G. 99*).<sup>91</sup> And yet, here we see Aesop attempt to injure an entire city with his words, suggesting he mistakenly believes that he has the power to do so in this social context.

Aesop incorrectly assumed that the fame and respect he has gathered during his travels must necessarily translate to the social context in Delphi. This explains why we see so little regard on Aesop's part for politeness strategies in this exchange. Aesop has tossed aside impersonalization as a technique, and in fact he explicitly connects the Delphians to the fable when he compares them to driftwood (*Vita G. 125*); nor does he attempt to make his tale entertaining by mythicizing it. There are no gods, no talking beasts, only a metaphor about driftwood floating on the sea—which is blunt and boring. He then goes on to present the second half of his fable as if it is history by lending his tale "a forced appearance of plausibility," as

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<sup>90</sup> Trans. Lloyd W. Daly.

<sup>91</sup> Trans. Llyod W. Daly.

Philostratus would call it (*Apollonius* 5.14)<sup>92</sup>, essentially performing the antithesis of fable. This would not be the first time Aesop took on a more realistic tone, one might recall Aesop's first fable about the doctor and the wounded man which he told to Croesus, however, it was not at all to this degree. Additionally, Aesop displayed humble deference to the king, and Croesus displayed potential to be a willing audience. The Delphians are very much not willing.

We see indications that the Delphians are not interested in what Aesop has to say even before he tells the fable that begins all his trouble. We are told that when Aesop "came to Delphi, he undertook to give an exhibition there, too, and the people enjoyed hearing him at first, but gave him nothing" (*Vita G.* 124).<sup>93</sup> It is clear that the Delphians do not value Aesop. This should have been the moment that our wise Aesop left, and, upon departing the city, turned to some companion and shared a fable, perhaps like that of "The Cockerel and the Pearl" whose delightful epimythium states, "This tale is for those who do not appreciate me" (Phaedrus 3.12).<sup>94</sup> But Aesop does not do this, instead he continues to cast his pearls before the Delphians.

Aesop has a second opportunity to realize that the Delphians do not acknowledge him as a source of wisdom. We are told, "Seeing that the men were the same color as garden greens<sup>95</sup>, Aesop said to them, 'Even as the leaves of the trees such is the race of men'" (*Vita G.* 124). This quote comes from Homer's *Iliad*. It is spoken by Glaucus, an ally of the Trojans, in response to Diomedes, a Greek warrior. The two have come across each other on the battlefield, and

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<sup>92</sup> Trans. Jones.

<sup>93</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>94</sup> Phaedrus in *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry.

<sup>95</sup> The exact meaning of this is unclear. It is a metaphorical, and its use of plant imagery seems to be what links it to the Homer quote regarding the leaves of trees. The text between Aesop's quotation of Homer and the start of his fable of the driftwood is corrupted. Perhaps there were a few more lines that further contextualized the comparison, or perhaps "to be the same color as potherbs" was an ancient idiom lost to a modern audience.

Diomedes asks to know Glaucus's ancestry, saying that he will only fight him if Glaucus is mortal. Glaucus replies,

Why do you inquire of my lineage? Just as are the generations of leaves such are those also of men. As for the leaves, the wind scatters some on the earth, but the luxuriant forest sprouts others when the season of spring has come; so of men one generation springs up and another passes away. But, if you want, hear this also, so that you may know well my lineage (6.145-151).<sup>96</sup>

With Glaucus' original utterance of these lines so closely tied to the issue of ancestry, it is possible that Aesop's use may also allude to a similar subject. Aesop may already be considering the Delphians' ancestry as a purpose for their behavior, and subtly expressing his belief that by their birth they "are marked as slaves of all the Greeks" (*Vita G.* 126).<sup>97</sup>

Aesop's reference to this scene in the *Iliad* is even more interesting however, when we consider that as Glaucus and Diomedes discuss their ancestry, the two discover that their families were once friends. The two men then decide to honor this bond between their families, and not to fight one another. Homer tells us, "When they had thus spoken, the two leapt down from their chariots and clasped each other's hands and pledged their faith. And then from Glaucus did Zeus, son of Cronos, take away his senses, in that he made exchange of armor with Diomedes, son of Tydeus, giving golden for bronze, the worth of one hundred oxen for the worth of nine" (6.232-236).<sup>98</sup> In a fascinating parallel, Aesop also reveals a connection between himself and the Delphians: slavery. However, this shared bond does not cause the Delphians to honor Aesop as a friend, rather they become furious at its revelation and desire his death. The *Life* further parallels this scene in the *Iliad* in that we witness an unequal exchange between Aesop and the Delphians. He provides them with his wisdom, and they give him nothing of value in return. Because of the

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<sup>96</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).

<sup>97</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>98</sup> Trans. A.T. Murray.

lacuna at this point of the text, it is unclear if the Delphians recognize or reply to Aesop's Homeric reference. However, considering that Aesop goes on to insult them, we know that Aesop's deference to the wisdom of Homer does not cause the Delphians to reply positively—if they even reply at all. This is Aesop's final moment, to disengage with the Delphians, but instead he goes on to tell them the fable of the driftwood, setting in motion the events which lead to his death.

Aesop's sudden inability to judge when it is appropriate to speak to his audience seems entirely out of character. Having once professed the value of keeping silent and his skill in discerning when to do so, we now find Aesop in prison because he could not hold his tongue when it would have behooved him to. A weeping unnamed friend of Aesop's comes to visit him, and Aesop uses a fable to chide his friend's behavior (*Vita G. 129*). Aesop's friend appears to be a stand-in for us in this moment, for the friend then goes on to ask what we are all certainly wondering: "Why in the world did you have to insult them in their own land and city, when you were at their mercy? Where was your training? Where was your learning? You have given advice to cities and peoples, but you have turned out witless in your own cause" (*Vita G. 130*).<sup>99</sup> Aesop responds with a fable that is unpleasant. We are told, "A woman had a simple-minded daughter. She prayed to all the gods to give her daughter some sense, and the daughter often heard her praying..." One day the girl saw a farmer having sex with a mule. Not understanding what was happening, she asked what he was doing, to which the farmer replied, "I'm putting some sense into her." The poor girl, remembering the prayers of her mother, asks to be given sense as well, and she is raped. The girl goes to her mother and tells her what has transpired,

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<sup>99</sup> Trans. Daly.



entirely unawares, to which her mother replies “My child, you’ve lost what sense<sup>100</sup> you had.”

Aesop, concludes this fable with an epimythium, “It’s turned out the same way for me my friend, for I’ve lost what sense I had in coming to Delphi” (*Vita* G. 131).<sup>101</sup>

The content of this fable is shocking, especially to those of us whose primary exposure to fables was during their childhood; it is likewise for Aesopic scholars, Hansen having said, “the employment of the tale in the *Aesop Romance* is unusual for an Aesopic fable.”<sup>102</sup> We must ask ourselves, why this unusual form then? Why does Aesop find this metaphor to be most fitting for his position? Kurke discusses this fable in great detail in her chapter on the Aesopic tradition as parody of high wisdom and makes a compelling argument that, outside the context of the *Life of Aesop*’s narrative, this particular fable is a criticism of pederasty.<sup>103</sup> Although Kurke is investigating a different issue than we are, she makes some excellent points that can lend to our understanding as to what exactly Aesop believes caused him to lose his wits by coming to Delphi.

Kurke compares this fable to the gnomic verse of the high wisdom tradition. She cites the poet Theognis of Megara’s advice to a boy named Cynrus, “Know these things thus: and do not keep company with base men, but always stick to the good. And with them drink and eat, and with these sit, and be pleasing to these, whose power is great. For from noble men you will learn noble things. But if you mix (σμίσης) with base men, you will destroy even the sense you have (ἀπολεῖς καὶ τὸν ἔόντα νόον) (31-38).”<sup>104</sup> Kurke points out the similar phrase in Aesop’s fable,

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<sup>100</sup> “...what the girl has lost is not her ‘mind’ or her ‘intellect,’ but the chastity and integrity of her body--her *sophrosune*, which for a woman inevitably inheres in her flesh.” Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 215.

<sup>101</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>102</sup> The *Aesop Romance* is another name for the *Life of Aesop*. William Hansen, *Ariadne’s Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 254.

<sup>103</sup> Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 215.

<sup>104</sup> Trans. Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations* 214.

“ἀπόλεσας καὶ ὄν πρῶτον εἶχες νοῦν,” and states that, whereas in the poetry of Theognis to “mix with base men” is metaphorical and means “to be in the company of base men,” συμμείγνυμι is made literal in the fable. Aesop is saying then that he lost his sense because he was associating with the Delphians, whom he considers to be base.<sup>105</sup> Aesop has previously changed his behavior in order to appeal to others, as one may recall from the exchange with Croesus in sections 98-100 of *Vita G*. It is not unreasonable to assume that he behaved similarly in Delphi, only this time it had negative consequences.

As previously mentioned, Aesop’s fables in Delphi so far have lacked the typical features we enjoy in fables. The characters are human (or driftwood), the only animals are mute, and the events occurring are realistic in the unhappiest of ways. At best, the audience is bored, at worst the content causes them to feel uncomfortable or upset. However, after Aesop becomes aware of his witless behavior, he reverts to mythicizing. We see this when the Delphians come to tell Aesop that he is to be thrown from a cliff to which Aesop replies,

“Let me tell you a story.” And they gave him leave to speak. Aesop said, “once when the animals all spoke the same language, a mouse made friends with a frog and invited him to dinner. [...] When he had helped himself generously, the frog said: ‘You must come to my house for dinner, too, and let me give you a good reception.’ He took the mouse to his pool and said: ‘Dive in.’ But the mouse said: ‘I do not know how to dive.’ The frog said: ‘I’ll teach you.’ And he tied the mouse’s foot to his own with a string and jumped into the pool, pulling the mouse with him. As the mouse drowned he said: ‘Even though I am dead, I’ll pay you off.’ Just as he said this the frog dove under and drowned him. As the mouse lay floating on the water a water bird carried him off with the frog tied to him, and when he had finished eating the mouse, he got his claws into the frog. This is the way the mouse punished the frog. Just so gentleman, if I die, I will be your doom. The Lydians, the Babylonians, and practically the whole of Greece will reap the harvest of my death. (*Vita G*. 133).<sup>106</sup>

In this fable we see that Aesop has returned to mythical settings with more entertaining plot lines, thus making it more likely that he will capture his audience’s attention in a positive way.

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<sup>105</sup> Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations* 214.

<sup>106</sup> Trans. Daly.

Additionally, he delivers his tale with clear purpose, and it seems to have potential to lead to a favorable outcome for Aesop. This fable seems to be a directive, attempting to influence the Delphians to free him.

One may astutely point out that this fable has threatening elements. Aesop after all claims that the Delphians will meet their doom if they kill him. So, why is this threat not considered a faux pas when Aesop's fable of the driftwood was? The primary flaw with Aesop's first threatening exchange with the Delphians, was that the proper conditions were not met for it to be felicitous. If a threat is issued, the one uttering the threat must be in the appropriate role to bring that threat to fruition. Aesop did not have the capability to fulfill his initial threat to the Delphians. This time however, Aesop is not relying on his own authority; he is deferring to the power of "the Lydians, the Babylonians, and practically the whole of Greece" which lends the utterance considerable backing power. Another point of interest lies in the fact that threats are typically commissives, meaning they commit the speaker to a future course of action. However, Aesop's threat does not actually commit him to anything (he will be dead after all), thus removing any personal responsibility for making the threat, and instead casting him in the role of a warner of things to come.

Despite his fable being well crafted in response to the situation at hand, the Delphians do not listen to Aesop. They continue with their plan to throw him off the cliff. Aesop runs to the shrine of the Muses to take refuge and when the Delphians attempt to remove him he tells another fable in hopes to deter them. Again, we see excellent use of talking animals (a rabbit, an eagle, and a dung beetle) and the tale even features Zeus. Once more the fable appears to combine a directive with elements of a threat, and we sense an oracular tone to Aesop's epimythium: "Do not dishonor this shrine where I have taken refuge, even though the temple is

small, but remember the dung beetle and reverence Zeus, the god of strangers and Olympus” (*Vita G.* 139).<sup>107</sup> Aesop has increased the power behind his threat, elevating it from the wrath of nations to the wrath of Zeus. However, the Delphians do not listen, and they drag him from the Muses’ shrine. These two instances of near perfect fable-telling failing to achieve Aesop’s desired result serve as an especially important warning to the *Life*’s audience: a fable cannot fix everything. Fables are an excellent tool, but they are not all-powerful. If even Aesop cannot fable his way out of his death, then the rest of us should certainly take caution. The best way to get out of trouble is to avoid it in the first place.

In the final chapters of *The Life of Aesop* there appears to be a shift as to whom Aesop’s fables are directed. This is suggested by the fact that Aesop seems to no longer be working towards changing the minds of the Delphians. We see this when he is brought to the cliff where he is about to die. Having now come face to face with his fate, Aesop almost appears to express defeat saying,

Since I’ve used all kinds of arguments without persuading you, let me tell you this story. A farmer who had grown old in the country and never seen the city begged his children to let him go and see the city before he died. They hitched the donkeys to the wagon themselves and told him: “Just drive them, and they’ll take you straight to the city.” On the way a storm came up, it got dark, the donkey’s lost their way and came to a place surrounded by cliffs. Seeing the danger he was in, he said: ‘O Zeus, what wrong have I done that I should die this way, without even horses, but only these miserable donkeys, to blame it on?’ So it is that I am annoyed to die not at the hands of reputable men but of miserable slaves (*Vita G.* 140).<sup>108</sup>

One may argue that the introduction to this fable is similar to the way in which Aesop introduced “The Wolves and the Sheep” at Samos: “... I agree and would be content to die at the feet of the king, but I want to tell you a story...” (*Vita G.* 96).<sup>109</sup> As such, one might conclude that it would

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<sup>107</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>108</sup> Trans. Daly.

<sup>109</sup> Trans. Daly.

be incorrect to think that Aesop is expressing defeat at the edge of the cliff, rather he is employing a negative politeness strategy and pretending to comply so that he may better persuade his Delphic audience. However, Aesop's epimythium makes it clear that his fable's purpose is not to advise to the Delphians. In fact, this fable is expressed for the benefit of the *Life's* audience.

The nature of the *Life of Aesop* poses some challenges for the author. Though many fictional liberties have certainly been taken in the author's composition of a new literary work, there are some elements from the Aesopic tradition which the author cannot remove. Because Aesop's murder at Delphi is a prominent part of the tradition (as one may recall from our earlier reference to Herodotus 2.134) the author of the *Life* is obligated to describe this event. However, as the *Life's* audience witnesses Aesop fail to persuade the Delphians to spare him, the risk becomes very great that the audience will no longer perceive Aesop as a talented fable-teller. If these scenes shake our trust in Aesop's ability, then everything which the author has aimed to teach his audience regarding fable falls apart. If we do not have a high opinion of Aesop, why should we look at him as an example worth imitating? Why even consider the genre so closely bound to him as having value? It is vital then, for Aesop's death to be explained in a way that preserves his reputation as a fabulist.

The narrator undertakes this act of identity preservation by using Aesop's final two fables to suggest to the audience that the Delphians bear the blame for Aesop's failure. In the case of the "The Old Farmer and the Donkeys," the Delphians are clearly the donkeys in the analogy, and donkeys were commonly portrayed throughout classical and archaic literature as obstinate

and stupid.<sup>110</sup> For instance, when we look at fables outside of the *Life of Aesop*, we see similar examples of donkeys characterized negatively, like in “The Ass and His Driver,”

An ass who was being driven along the road left the beaten path and headed towards a cliff. When he was about to fall headlong over the precipice the driver seized him by the tail and tried to pull him back, but the ass resisted stoutly and tugged forward. Thereupon the driver let go his tail and said, “You win, but its a bad victory that you’re winning” (Aesop 186, Perry).<sup>111</sup>

Upon hearing Aesop liken the Delphians to donkeys, the *Life’s* audience would have recognized that—no matter how reasonable the attempt—to change the Delphian’s minds would be an impossible task.

*Vita G* mentions one final fable which Aesop tells on the precipice of the cliff.

Unfortunately, this fable is missing from the manuscript; however, sections of the epimythium are preserved, “Men of Delphi, I would rather wish to roam Syria, Phoenicia, and Judea, than in this place ... to die (ἄνδρες Δέλφιοι, ἡβουλόμεν Συρίαν, Φοινίκην, Ἰουδαίαν μᾶλλον κεκλεῦσαι ἢ ἐνθάδε ... ἀποθανεῖν)” (*Vita G*.141). A similar epimythium is also found in the following excerpt from *Vita W*,

Being about to be hurled over the cliff [Aesop] spoke another fable, ‘A man fell in love with his own daughter, and suffering from this wound, he sent his wife off to the country and forced himself on his daughter. She said, ‘Father, this is an unholy thing (ἀνόσιον) you are doing. I would rather have submitted to a hundred men than to you.’ This I also say to you, o Delphians. I would prefer to roam (κεκλεῦσαι) the entirety of Sicily while suffering than to die here (ἢ ἐνθάδε [...] ἀποθανεῖν), unexpectedly, at your hands. (*Vita W*. 141).<sup>112</sup>

Up until this point both manuscripts have recorded the same fables applied in the same context; furthermore we know that both *Vita W* and *Vita G* belong to the same Aesopic tradition.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Justina Gregory, “Donkeys and the Equine Hierarchy in Archaic Greek Literature,” *The Classical Journal* 102, no. 3 (2007): 197.

<sup>111</sup> Appendix to *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry, 186.

<sup>112</sup> Appendix to *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Perry, 379.

<sup>113</sup> Perry, *Studies*, 24.

These facts, paired with the principle of *lectio difficilior*—that the stranger or more controversial of two readings is more likely the original—make it safe for us to assume that the final fable in *Vita W* is identical in its content to the fable missing from *Vita G*. This fable’s appalling nature, featuring rape and incest, make it far more likely to have been censored from *Vita G* than to have been added to *Vita W*.

As evidenced by its removal from *Vita G*, this fable elicits powerfully negative feelings from the audience of the *Life*. When Aesop makes clear the parallel between himself and the daughter, the audience’s disgust and outrage towards the father transfers to the Delphians. Now the audience sees the Delphians’ execution of Aesop as ἀνόσιον—more than a wicked act, but an act of impiety and sacrilege. As Aesop says, his death at Delphi comes “unexpectedly,” and his final fable reads as a lament, expressing his grief at having been betrayed by a people he had esteemed so highly before his arrival. Where earlier in the prison, the audience might have found themselves criticizing Aesop’s behavior, we now witness the scene on the cliff and are taken aback that the Delphians of all people framed Aesop, for we, along with Aesop, would never have expected such sacrilege from the citizens of a sacred city.

These final fables, through their portrayal of the Delphians as obstinate in their impiety, drive the audience to side with Aesop. It is difficult to view him as a fable-teller who has lost his skill entirely, when we are made to see the Delphians as wicked and immovable. However, the *Life of Aesop* does not stop here in its efforts to restore our trust in Aesop’s abilities. It goes even further by supplying the Delphian’s with a divine ally who assists in their persecution, thus suggesting to the audience that Aesop’s death in this way was never quite escapable to begin with.

Apollo's first appearance in the *Life of Aesop* occurs long before our fabulist's arrival at Delphi. We are told that when the Samians honored Aesop for saving them, he made sacrifices to the Muses and built a shrine to them "placing in the middle a statue of Mnemosyne<sup>114</sup> and not of Apollo. Apollo became angry at him as he had with Marsyas" (*Vita G.* 100). A modern audience can see that Apollo is angry, but without proper context, we would be unable to realize the full gravity of this statement. Marsyas was a Phrygian<sup>115</sup> who challenged Apollo to a contest of music. Marsyas lost the contest, and Apollo flayed him alive as punishment (*Xen. Anab.* 1. 2.8). According to some traditions, Apollo hung up his skin in the marketplace for all to see (*Hdt.* vii.26). For ancient audiences, this reference to Marsyas, would have been an obvious foreshadowing of Aesop's death. Now the focus of Apollo's wrath, Aesop's fate seems sealed.

What is particularly interesting however, is that unlike Marsyas, Aesop never pridefully challenged Apollo. Aesop behaved quite piously in giving his thanks to Isis and her daughters, for it was they who bestowed the gifts of speech and storytelling to him on account of his goodness (*Vita G.* 7). Apollo has no claim on Aesop's success. Rather Apollo's wrath is sparked because Aesop did not place him among the Muses as their leader (*Vita G.* 127). Apollo is jealous that Isis has been declared the leader of the muses, or the Musegetes,<sup>116</sup> an epithet traditionally applied to Apollo (*Diodorus* 1.18). However, as the audience has observed, Isis for all intents and purposes has been acting as the Musegetes. She is the one who walks with the Muses and she bids them to bless Aesop (*Vita G.* 7). Due to these circumstances, the audience

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<sup>114</sup> The mother of the muses. Mnemosyne and Isis "the many named" (*Vita G.* 5) have been conflated in *The Life*. We see Isis refer to the muses as her daughters in chapter 7. In other ancient traditions, Isis herself is one of the muses (*Plutarch, Isis and Osiris.* 3).

<sup>115</sup> Aesop, according to the tradition of *Vita G.*, was also a Phrygian.

<sup>116</sup> John Dillery, "Aesop Isis and the Heliconian Muses" *Classical Philology* 94, no. 3 (1999): 276.



perceives Aesop as justified to honor Isis in this way, and Apollo's wrath against our fabulist is felt to be unwarranted.

The incident at Samos is not the only time in the *Lives* that Apollo is replaced as leader of the Muses. King Lycurgus and the Babylonians honor Aesop by erecting a golden statue of him with the Muses (*Vita G.* 123), thus making Aesop himself the Musegetes.<sup>117</sup> While there is no explicit reference to Apollo in this section, it is followed immediately by, "Aesop said goodbye to the king, wishing to go to Delphi ..." (*Vita G.* 124). If the audience had at all forgotten Apollo's anger towards Aesop, the adjacency of these two events would surely have rekindled it, as Delphi is the most famous sacred shrine of Apollo. One can only imagine that the Babylonian's actions have inflamed Apollo's hatred for Aesop—though the fabulist is ignorant—and the fabulist arrives in the city whose patron is his enemy.

Knowing Apollo's jealousy, the audience cannot help but be suspicious of the fact that Aesop's sudden loss of wit occurs at Delphi of all places. The *Life of Aesop* seems to imply that Apollo may have inspired Aesop's framing, for we read: "And with Apollo being wrathful because of the dishonor at Samos after he was not placed with the Muses, the Delphians, not having legitimate grounds, contrived some crime so that [Aesop's] traveling companions could not come to his aid" (*Vita G.* 127). The antagonism displayed by the god may incline an audience to wonder if perhaps he is not also to blame for Aesop's witlessness. Admittedly, this is not the explanation which Aesop gives, but we must remember that Aesop is unaware of Apollo's hatred towards him. Apollo, though being angry, had not acted against Aesop until this time. Additionally, when Aesop realizes he must have been framed, and the Delphians refuse to acknowledge his suspicions, he tells them, "You, being mortal, do not think yourself to be above

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<sup>117</sup> Dillery, "Aesop, Isis, and the Heliconian Muses," 276.

the gods” (*Vita G.* 128), displaying his ignorance to the fact that one of the gods shared a part in his framing.

Furthermore, we find examples of the gods withholding mortals’ wit in other sources. As we may recall with Glaucus in Homer’s *Iliad*, “And then from Glaucus did Zeus, son of Cronos, take away his senses,” (6.234-236).<sup>118</sup> Even though *The Life* never states that Apollo stole Aesop’s wit, the audience may still have felt as if he had. Apollo was jealous of Aesop, and many of the ancients believed that the gods in their jealousy liked to bring misery to humans. We see this expressed in Herodotus’s *Histories*, “[I know] that the power above is full of jealousy, and fond of troubling our lot. [...] oftentimes God gives men a gleam of happiness, and then plunges them into ruin” (1.32).<sup>119</sup> The author of the *Life* seems to have gone through considerable effort to show us that Aesop was doomed to fail. These circumstances make it impossible for the audience to judge Aesop for failing to save himself in Delphi, for—as he himself laments in his prison cell—how can he, “a mortal man, flee from what is to be?” (*Vita G.* 128). If anything, his circumstances incite us to pity, rather than blame him.

Moreover, through the final fables uttered by Aesop on the edge of the cliff, the author of the *Life* does more than just prevent the audience from viewing Aesop poorly: he actively confirms Aesop’s skill and wisdom. Aesop, brought to the edge of the cliff, jumps to his death; however, before he does, he calls upon the leader (ὁ προστάτης)<sup>120</sup> of the Muses to witness that his death is unjust, and then he curses the Delphians (*Vita G.* 142). After Aesop’s death the Delphians are struck by a plague which Zeus refuses to lift until the Delphians atone for killing

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<sup>118</sup> Trans. A.T. Murray.

<sup>119</sup> Trans. George Rawlinson.

<sup>120</sup> The author of the *Life* does not specify who this leader is. Tradition would suggest Apollo, although it seems odd, given the degree to which the author has gone to pit the god against Aesop, to suddenly make the Apollo his ally. Within the context of the *Life* it seems Isis is a possible interpretation; however, ὁ προστάτης is masculine in form, which complicates the issue.

Aesop and, following this, the people of Greece, Babylon, and Samos avenge the fabulist's murder (*Vita G.* 142). These results correlate with Aesop's fable of the dung beetle and the fable of the mouse and frog, respectively, thus elevating them from failed directives, to fulfilled prophecies. Furthermore, as Kurke explains, Aesop's newfound status as a prophet places him in further competition with Apollo, the god of prophecy. And, by maintaining that Aesop's death at the hands of Apollo's city was unjust, Zeus is seen to be favoring Aesop over Apollo and endorsing Aesop as the true winner in the contest between Delphic god and mortal fabulist.<sup>121</sup> Thus, even Aesop's death proves his greatness to the audience.

The author of the *Life of Aesop* carefully weaves Aesop's death at Delphi into a cautionary tale, and the final chapters are the knots that secure the lesson and prevent its unravelling. By preserving the audience's trust in Aesop's abilities and exalting him even as he falls to his death, the audience feels confident in the message that they have read about fable-telling, because the source remains sound. They can look at the instances with the fable of the dung beetle, or the fable of the mouse and the frog, and realize that fable has limitations, while also recognizing that these limitations do not discredit the genre. The tale of the simple-minded girl balances the lesson which Aesop displayed with Croesus, revealing that, while it can be beneficial to change one's attitude to conform with the desires of others, we must be discerning in whom we mimic lest we harm ourselves. Finally, Aesop's fable of the driftwood and the Delphians' origins (paired with Aesop's unsuccessful attempts to capture the Delphians' attention prior), shows why analyzing one's audience and knowing the proper moment is so important. By demonstrating this lesson through Aesop's failures, the scenes at Delphi are perhaps far more effective than Aesop's successful fables at Samos and with Croesus; for it is

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<sup>121</sup> Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 66-67.

difficult to remember the moments where we ourselves have been glad of keeping silent, but it is, perhaps, too easy to recall mortifying memories of having spoken when we should not have.

## Conclusion

There is a comical incident in *The Life of Aesop* in which Aesop, during his time as Xanthus's slave, is ordered to cook a dinner of the finest things imaginable. Aesop brings Xanthus and his guests a meal of boiled tongue, roast tongue, spiced tongue, and tongue broth. Angered by this, Xanthus accuses Aesop of disobeying him, to which Aesop replies, "What can one imagine finer or greater than the tongue? [...] Without the tongue nothing gets done, neither giving, nor receiving, nor buying. By means of the tongue states are reformed and ordinances and laws laid down. If, then, all life is ordered by the tongue, nothing is greater than the tongue." Xanthus relents, and later tells Aesop, "Since you are determined to turn my words around, go to the market and buy the most worthless, the most inferior thing there is." Aesop once more presents a dinner of tongues saying, "What is there that is bad which does not come about through the tongue? It is because of the tongue that there are enmity, plots, battles, rivalry, strife, wars. Is it not, then, true that there is nothing worse than this abominable tongue?" (*Vita G.* 51-55).<sup>122</sup>

In a manner similar to how Xanthus's dinner unfolds, so too does the *Life of Aesop*. The audience may look down on fable, and so the author sets out to correct this view. He presents fable first within the context of the many good things it can bring about. We witness Aesop use fable to persuade the Samians to choose freedom, and, through fable, Aesop quells the anger of

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<sup>122</sup> Trans. Daly.

Croesus and preserves the Samian's freedom. The author ensures that his audience will take on these examples as testament to fable's value by emphasizing the disconnect between appearance and reality during Aesop's time as a slave in the beginning of the *Life*. This theme is made manifest in Aesop's own appearance, but it is also verbalized by the fabulist on several occasions. By devoting the beginning of the narrative to teaching this lesson, the author primes his audience to withhold any negative perception when Aesop first begins to tell fables. And as a result, the audience has only positive things to say about the genre.

It is only once the audience is made to feel quite confident in the excellence of fables that the author acknowledges the issues which may arise when a fable is used for improper purposes or at an inopportune moment. Bad things can certainly come from fable, as the author himself points out in Aesop's experience at Delphi and, moreover, as our various ancient examples in Demosthenes, Plutarch, and Aristophanes indicate. However, because the author has demonstrated that appearance and reality are not tied together, the author can effectively argue that any instance in which something κακός comes from a fable is not reflective of the genre itself; it is not some deformity of fable stemming from the fact that such tales are not elite. We see the author's nuanced perception of the genre, that fable—just like the tongue—is a tool. And just as Aesop wisely demonstrates that the value of the tongue lies in its application, so to does the author of the *Life* explain that the application of fable is the determinate of whether a fable is κακός or καλὸς ἀγαθός.

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