

*Comedy, the fable and the
ethnographic tradition*

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CHAPTER II

The Aesopic in Aristophanes

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Unlike most genres that informed and interacted with Old Comedy – epic, tragedy, satyr-play, choral lyric – the ancient fable tradition did not manifest its presence in comic theatre through the insinuation or parody of distinct metres, melodies, musical conventions, or dance movements. But since my first introduction to Aristophanes in the 1970s, when I attended a reading of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, I have been forcibly struck by the *prima facie* affinities between the world imaginatively conjured up in the Aesopic fables and the world dramatically realized in Old Comedy.

The most obvious affinity is in the use of animal allegory.¹ Of course, archaic ritual had played a role in the adoption of animal choruses in early comedy, as evidenced by the choral performers in various animal and bird costumes in vase-painting,² and Aristophanic animals, as well as those in the plays by other poets of Old Comedy,³ will have had residual ritual associations. But in the plays which have survived, almost all the animals are actually used vicariously, to stand in as surrogates for certain types of character, social or political stereotype, or point of view – litigious wasps, for example. Animals used to represent human characteristics, in both Aesop and Aristophanes, are animals used allegorically. This aspect of Aristophanes also opens up the scope of Old Comedy's 'intergeneric

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¹ Schirru 2009 lists and analyses most of the evidence for Aesopic fables in Aristophanes, but his emphasis, which is on the comic effect of allusions to the fable rather than their philosophical, ideological or socio-political functions, is very different from mine. The animal allegories in Plato's *Republic*, which Saxonhouse 1978 argued are part of a conscious Platonic strategy to bring Old Comedy to mind, may imply that Socrates regularly used animal fables in his teaching (for Plato's engagement with the rhetoric of Old Comedy, see Prauscello in this volume). It has also been suggested that animal allegory was used frequently by some Presocratic philosophers, most of whom composed treatises in prose. See also below, pp. 000–000 on Democritus and fable.

² See Sifakis 1971 for a discussion of the theriomorphic choruses on sixth-century vases, with the excellent photographs in Rothwell 2007.

³ See, in addition to Sifakis 1971: 76–7, the testimonia in Rothwell 2007: 187–211.

dialogue' to the symbolism of oracular language and proverbial sayings,⁴ as we shall see; it extends it even to the ancient tradition of dream interpretation, which, like Aesopic and other types of fable such as those anciently labelled 'Sybaritic', is a genre that primarily manifests itself in prose. The earliest example of a fable in Greek literature may be the reference to the story of the hawk and the nightingale in Hesiod (*Op.* 202–12), and verses about battles between certain species of animal certainly existed,⁵ but this does not mean that the fables were ordinarily performed in metre even in the archaic period, from which we happen to possess no records of storytelling in ancient Greek prose.⁶

In Aristophanes' *Wasps* the audience are introduced, by the dream-interpretation session conducted by the slaves Xanthias and Sosias, to the notion that they will later need to 'read' wasps and dogs on stage as symbolic substitutes for political figures and constituencies. Xanthias has had a dream in which an eagle picked up the shield that the notorious *rhipsaspis* Cleonymus had discarded, and this raises the question (which is actually not answered) of whom the eagle might represent (17–20). But the animal symbolism in Sosias' more complicated dream is read quite explicitly as a political allegory (31–51). Sosias saw a rapacious whale, screaming like a pig, haranguing sheep in the Athenian assembly and weighing portions of ox-fat. Xanthias immediately interprets this scene as Cleon depriving the Athenian people of what was theirs. Sosias also saw Theorus turning into a crow, witnessed by Alcibiades, which Xanthias hopes holds the significance that Theorus will 'go to the crows'.

This dialogue is conducted in the language which we know from the surviving examples of the ancient oneirocritical tradition was the standard way in which dreams were presented for interpretation.⁷ Although the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus of Daldis was composed several centuries later than Aristophanes' comedies, it not only uses the identical vocabulary to denote the experience and interpretation of dreams but is indeed self-consciously dependent on a much older established body of dream interpretations, dating from the fifth century BC onwards (see especially 2.9). Moreover, not only does animal symbolism play a prominent role in

⁴ On the relationship between proverbs and fables as instantiated in the example of the 'dog in the manger', see Priest 1985: 52–3. Trygaeus in *Peace*, who cites Aesopic fables and aligns his mission to Zeus with the fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle (see below), is probably himself to be associated through his name with the proverb 'to strip unwatched vines': see Hall 2006: 328.

⁵ On Aristophanes, fable, and the *Batrachomyomachia* see the remarks of Bliquez 1977: 24 and n. 42.

⁶ On the implications of this for the early writers of artistic prose, who often self-consciously (if ambivalently) aligned their works with the Aesopic tradition, see the excellent article of Kurke 2006 (esp. 40 n. 11).

⁷ See further Hall 2010: 211. On the oneirocriticism in *Wasps* see Reckford 1977.

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Artemidorus' analyses, but he implies that slaves have always participated in dream interpretation, as both dreamers and dream analysts themselves.⁸

Another dimension of experience shared by the worlds of ancient fables, dreams and Aristophanic comedy is the somatic, especially sexual activity and eating. But whereas it is with dream interpretation that comedy shares its tendency towards the discussion of erotic matters in its characteristically matter-of-fact idiom, unabashed by explicit naming of body parts, genitals, apertures, and techniques of masturbation, the emphasis on food and drink overlaps more specifically with the world of fable. It is connected with the third *prima facie* affinity between the Aesopic and Aristophanic worlds – that the perspective they share is so often that of the peasant farmer. Aristophanes' Dicaeopolis and Trygaeus are the primary examples, but even his more urban heroes are never from the upper class of Athenian citizen families and have much in common with their rural counterparts; Philocleon has a history of stealing vine-props, and Chremes' most valuable possession is his wine-sieve (*Vesp.* 1200, *Eccl.* 730–1). The modern distinction between town and country, as Robin Osborne rightly insists, is wholly misleading in the case of classical Attica.⁹ The literary genre most closely allied to comedy – tragedy – sidelines eating almost completely, as well as preferring aristocratic personnel. This throws the fable/comedy affinity into sharper perspective.

Besides animal allegory, a strong interest in food, and a subjectivity and agency of an agricultural smallholder, a further feature that the Aesopic and Aristophanic worlds had in common, at least in the fifth century, was the physical presence and involvement in the narrative of gods, often in an aetiological role. Gods and aetiology, which tended to be excised in the later, secularized Aesopica, were still prominent in the Aesopic tradition in the fifth century BC.¹⁰ Evidence for this is supplied by Plato's *Phaedo*. Just after his wife has been led away, Socrates rubs his leg and remarks on the intimacy of the relationship between pleasure and pain. If a man pursues pleasure, he is usually compelled to accept pain along with it (60b–c),

as if the two were joined together at a single head. 'And I think,' he said, 'if Aesop had thought about them, he would have composed a fable telling how they fought each other and god wished to make a truce between them, and when he couldn't do it, he fastened their heads together; and that is the reason why, whenever one of them comes upon someone, it is followed by the other. That's what seems to have happened to me. I had pain in my leg because of the fetter, but pleasure seems to have come following after it.'¹¹

⁸ Hall 2010. ⁹ R. Osborne 1987. ¹⁰ See the references in Dover 1966: 42 and n. 10.

¹¹ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Socrates here invents, extempore, an aetiological explanation for a universal principle of human experience in a manner that he explicitly associates with Aesop. The fable not only is aetiological but uses embodiment to make pleasure and pain – concepts that have no material form – concrete and material: they are a creature with two bodies but one head, which once upon a time consisted of two separate creatures. It can be no coincidence that the closest parallel to this aetiology in Plato is constituted by the story of the primeval two-faced, four-footed, four-handed hominid, split asunder by Zeus and Apollo for challenging the supremacy of the Olympians and destined to feel yearning desire for reunion for ever (*Symp.* 189d–193b) – a story told, of course, by none other than the comic playwright Aristophanes. ‘Aesopic’ cosmic aetiology, where both animal and human bodies are used to discuss abstract principles such as pleasure, pain and desire, thus has a demonstrable affinity with its Aristophanic counterpart.

The final obvious feature shared by the worlds of Aesop and Aristophanes, at least in the fifth century, is the prominence of the god Dionysus. Dionysus is the god of the festival at which comedies were produced, as well as god of vines and wine production, and he of course appears not infrequently in plays by Aristophanes and his contemporaries, including, famously, *Frogs*. But he also features prominently as the architect of aetiologies in the Aesopic fable tradition, as early as the poet Panyassis of Halicarnassus in the first half of the fifth century BC. A fragment of Panyassis quoted by Athenaeus (2.36d = fr. 17 Bernabé) describes Dionysus apportioning wine at a symposium. The first share goes to the Graces, the Hours, and Dionysus himself; the second to Aphrodite and Dionysus again; but the third share goes to Hybris and Atē, personifications of the kind of regrettable behaviour which drinking in excess can provoke. As Ben Perry saw, this was an Aesopic fable, discussed as such in great detail in a letter by Photius.¹² It is actually related by Aesop himself in the *Life of Aesop* (*Vit. Aesop.* 68), but in a later, ‘secularized’ form in which Dionysus gives the servings of wine directly to men, the first for pleasure, the second for joy, and the third for irresponsible or violent behaviour.¹³ Vines, wine and Dionysus form a thematic cluster which belongs to both comedy and fable, and indeed to a third genre which has its own close dialogues with both comedy and fable, and that is the Attic *skolion* (drinking-song).¹⁴

The affinity between the Aesopic and comic worlds was certainly recognized explicitly in the fourth century BC, when Aesop appeared in several

¹² Perry 1962: 294–5; Photius’ text is discussed in detail by Grumel 1951.

¹³ Perry 1962: 298. ¹⁴ On fable and *skolia* see Van der Valk 1974: 4–5.

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plays as a character, including one by Eubulus, entitled either *Semele* or *Dionysus*, which actually enacted the fable narrated by Panyassis. A fragment of the play features Dionysus as a character serving portions of wine to himself, then to the gods of love, and then to Hybris (fr. 93, quoted by Ath. 2.36b–c).¹⁵ The wine theme seems also to have been important in Alexis' *Aesop*, the sole fragment of which (fr. 9) features Solon explaining to a surprised Aesop that the Greeks drink their wine mixed with water. Other fourth-century comic playwrights seem to have structured whole fables around their plots, since Archippus composed a comedy entitled *The Ass's Shadow*, which refers to one of the most famous fables of the day.¹⁶ In New Comedy it may have been common practice for character types from fables to be absorbed into the dramatic narrative. It has been plausibly suggested, for example, that the character of Knemon in Menander's *Dyskolos* is the equivalent of the dog in Aesop's fable of the gardener and the dog. Knemon has fallen down a well, like the dog in the fable, whose character is similarly ungrateful and aggressive, and the Aesopic connection is rendered more likely by the explicit reference to the 'logos' in Menander's comedy (633–4).¹⁷

We have already noticed that a fable narrated by Panyassis and dramatized by Eubulus – Dionysus and the three servings of wine – is actually quoted by Aesop himself in the *Life of Aesop*, generally regarded as reaching its full development in around the first century AD, but including elements that can be traced back as far as the fourth century BC or earlier.¹⁸ Three decades ago, Adrados demonstrated that there are wide-ranging echoes of the diction of Aristophanic comedy in the *Life of Aesop*, especially in the scatological language,¹⁹ an inference supported by the apparent popularity of Aristophanes as reading material in Roman Egypt;²⁰ one detailed example of shared diction, discussed by Dickie, shows how deeply the language of Old Comedy seems to have become ingrained in the traditional narrative of Aesop's own life, in an intergeneric dialogue conducted over several centuries after the work of Aristophanes himself. While discussing metalwork, Pollux (7.108) says that blacksmiths attached *baskania* to their furnaces. These were ridiculous objects (γελοῖα) with an apotropaic function. He illustrates this with a line and a bit from Aristophanes (= fr. 607):

¹⁵ This is fr. 94. Hunter 1983: 183 suggests that the play may have 'concerned the birth and early career of Dionysus'.

¹⁶ See Freeman 1945: 36 with Ar. fr. 199; Hall 2006: 387–8.

¹⁷ See Tzifopoulos 1995: 172.

¹⁸ See Lissarrague 2000: 133.

¹⁹ Adrados 1981.

²⁰ Aristophanes assumes thirteenth position in Willis 1968, a review of the Greek authors most frequently found in the papyri from Egypt.

πλὴν εἴ τις πρίαιτο δεόμενος
βασκάνιον ἐπικάμινον ἀνδρὸς χαλκέως.

Unless one bought by begging
a forged amulet from a blacksmith

The idea seems to be that nobody would have purchased something or someone *unless they were so laughably ugly* that a blacksmith could use them as a *baskanion*. Dickie points out that in the *Life* (*Vit. Aesop.* 16), when Aesop is bought by a slave-dealer and sent into the slave quarters, the good-looking slaves ask each other, ‘What has become of our master that he has purchased such a filthy creature? It can only be that he has bought him to protect the slave shop from envious fascination’ (πλὴν πρὸς βασκανίαν . . . ὠνήσατο).²¹ Dickie suggests that the joke in Aristophanes did indeed originally refer to someone with some of the physical characteristics commonly attributed to Aesop, presumably a newly purchased slave.

Goins has accumulated a series of further parallels between the content of these two genres of ancient Greek literature.²² One is the similarity between the characterization of the lascivious wife of Aesop’s master Xanthus in the *Life* and the treatment of women in Old Comedy.²³ Another is the resemblance borne by Xanthus to the Aristophanic Socrates of *Clouds*. Xanthus studies claptrap disguised as philosophy and surrounds himself with a crowd of students who want to share in ‘the beautiful’. But, as Goins stresses, what is more important than questions of direct influence is ‘the common perspective held by both authors’. Like Aristophanes, the author of the *Life* ‘used a deceptively simple cleverness to demonstrate the arrogance of the intellectually pretentious’.²⁴

To sum up the argument so far: there are strong *prima facie* similarities between the worlds of Aesopic fable and the world dramatized in Aristophanic comedy (animal allegory, eating and drinking, peasant personnel and perspective, aetiology and the Dionysiac); the post-Aristophanic comic tradition, in Middle Comedy and Menander as well as the prose *Life of Aesop*, suggests that the intimate connection between the two genres of fable and comic drama was consciously perceived and elaborated over centuries. We are now in a position to address the extended sequences of dialogue between the genres as they are conducted within the extant plays

²¹ Dickie 1995: 242. ²² Goins 1989: 28–30.

²³ The fable tradition is also fairly well represented in other types of ancient Greek prose fiction, including the Lucianic *Onos* and ‘romances’ of Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus. See Van Dijk 1996.

²⁴ Goins 1989: 30.

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of Aristophanes. Although the manifestations of fable are diverse, I argue that incorporation of Aesopic material performs three main functions in his comedies: (i) Aesopic fables are used as a source of knowledge by individuals engaged in trying to control other people's behaviour; (ii) they signify a cultural product almost universally known, familiar even to the least educated members of the audience, and with rather 'low-class' associations; and (iii) the act of interpreting a fable is presented as analogous to the process of interpreting allegories staged within the play.

Before turning to the texts themselves, however, it will be helpful to define a key concept which I have used in exploring the Aesopic in Old Comedy: knowingness. Almost all the passages I am about to discuss feature an invocation of Aesop by individuals engaged in trying to control other people's behaviour, whether to good or evil purpose, through positioning themselves as in possession and control of specially significant knowledge. I first came across the notion of dramatic 'knowingness' in the cultural-historical sense in which it is used by Peter Bailey in his brilliant analysis of the ideological workings of Victorian music hall:

The bourgeois man and wife . . . were learning to savour the collusive but contained mischief of the performer's address, in whose exchanges they too could register the competencies of knowing-ness. By the turn of the century, music-halls' knowingness was fast becoming a second language for all classes, as music-hall itself became an agreeable national alter ego, a manageable low other.²⁵

In the nineteenth century those who used the term 'knowingness' or its cognates in a tone of disparagement were invariably asserting a position of superiority in class, taste and actual education: James Hardy Vaux can in 1812 speak of a thief who 'affects a knowingness in his air and conversation'.²⁶ But, in the music hall, all classes could unite in adopting the knowing but manageable collective 'alter ego', despite (or perhaps on account of) this persona's somewhat déclassé identity. In such heroes as Dicaeopolis, Philocleon and Trygaeus, the ancient Athenians had similarly identified collective 'low others' who were, however, extremely shrewd and knowledgeable.

Knowingness has recently attracted the interest of contemporary psychoanalysts and philosophers, who use the term in two slightly different ways. For the psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, knowingness can have tragic effects. In the political realm, cynical journalists' *assumption* that politicians are

²⁵ Bailey 1994: 167.

²⁶ Vaux 1964, s.v. knowingness. See also the 'knowing look' in Martineau 1833: 1.1: 13.

corrupt has the potential, for example, to occlude occasions on which individual politicians are acting altruistically and with integrity. In the personal realm, knowingness – feeling confidently in charge of information both technologically and intellectually – can prevent us all from understanding deeper emotional and psychological currents at work which are obscuring crucial information, often with tragic results.²⁷ For the philosopher Richard Rorty, on the other hand, ‘knowingness’ is particularly a hallmark of the postmodern literary critic, who no longer believes in any of the grand narratives of social progress and in tandem with this cynical political stance rejects aesthetic appreciation of literature in favour of controlling it through knowing sociological analysis. In a trailblazing lecture entitled ‘The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature’, delivered in 1995, Rorty began with the famous Horatian advice to Numicius, ‘*Nil admirari*’: to stand in awe of absolutely nothing is virtually the only way in which to feel good about oneself (*Epist.* 1.6.1–2). Rorty argued that contemporary critics ‘substitute knowing theorization for awe, and resentment over the failures of the past for visions of a better future’.²⁸ Knowingness is the enemy of utopian thinking and enthusiasm; it is ‘a state of soul which prevents shudders of awe’.²⁹ This formulation is helpful, I think, in approaching the perspective of Aristophanic comedy, with its underlying cynical pessimism about human nature, allied with a competence in parodying all kinds of literature and philosophical discourse. It can also help us to understand the way that Aristophanic comedy functions socio-politically.

Raymond Tallis has used Rorty’s definition of knowingness to characterize the stance adopted by a certain type of demagogic politician whose appeal actually depends on suspicion of intellectuals and the premise that fundamental ignorance about the world, far from being a problem, is actually an advantage. Tallis points to the use by the North American republican politician Sarah Palin of unverifiable or entirely false ‘knowledge’ to impress and amuse her listeners. This kind of knowingness, Tallis urges, should ‘be of interest to philosophy if only because it is the obverse of the anguished sense of uncertainty that drives philosophy’s primary discipline – epistemology, the scrutiny of knowledge itself.’ Knowingness functions by binding the speaker and his or her hearers

²⁷ Lear’s classical paradigm for this psychoanalytical definition of knowingness is the figure of Oedipus, who is on one level master of knowledge (he has regularly consulted the Delphic oracle, etc.), but this mastery actually inoculates him against asking really penetrating questions when he should have – for example, who killed the husband of the woman he is about to marry. See Lear 1998.

²⁸ Rorty 1998: 126–7. ²⁹ Rorty 1998: 126.

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into an ‘epistemic community’, affirming cognitive solidarity. This is linked to a wider, unspoken solidarity with a constituency out there of the like-minded . . . A shared cultural reference . . . reinforces the warrant that comes from being established as a regular guy talking to others who feel themselves spoken to as regular guys. Knowingness . . . carries an air of cognitive privilege. Reinforced by the wink, the finger tapping the nose, the complacent smirk, it lays claim to the superior condition of the one who is ‘in the know’.³⁰

Aristophanic comedy certainly lays claim to the superior condition of being ‘in the know’, and it functions to create an ‘epistemic community’ through cognitive solidarity, often achieved through the humorous use of fiction, falsehood, unverifiable information or unsubstantiated allegation. The invocation of Aesop in Aristophanes almost always constitutes just such an amusing appeal to fiction.

The earliest Aristophanic use of an Aesopic fable appears in the memorable scene in *Acharnians* when Dicaeopolis looks closely at Pseudartabas’ retinue and sees that its members are Athenians (117–21):

καὶ τοῖν μὲν εὐνούχοιν τὸν ἕτερον τουτονὶ
ἐγὼ δὲ ὅς ἐστι, Κλεισθένης ὁ Σιβυρτίου.
ὦ θερμόβουλον πρωκτὸν ἐξυρημένε,
τοιόνδε γ’, ὦ πίθηκε, τὸν πώγων’ ἔχων
εὐνούχος ἡμῖν ἦλθες ἐσκευασμένος;
ὄδι δὲ τίς ποτ’ ἐστίν; οὐ δῆπου Στράτων;

(Dicaeopolis) Well! I recognize one of this pair of eunuchs; it is Cleisthenes, the son of Sibyrtius. Behold the audacity of this shaved rear-end! How did you think, monkey-man, you could play the role of a eunuch coming to us with a beard like that?

The joke here seems to parody Archilochus fr. 185 W², from an epode addressed to Cerycides, itself related to an Aesopic fable (83 Hausrath). This instance of Aesop in Old Comedy may come by way of the iambographic tradition of invective, *psogos*,³¹ which seems to have been similarly attracted to animal allegory, as Semonides’ invective against women amply testifies. The physical image of a monkey with a hairy bottom is somehow connected, through mask or costume, with the appearance of Pseudartabas’ attendant, who is likely to have worn an imposing beard.³² Aristophanes and his audience are far too knowing to be fooled by the attempt of public men to camouflage their true natures. But the joke also implies that the decoding of an animal identity in Aesop (here, the monkey) is analogous to seeing through the allegorical personae in which public men might

³⁰ Tallis 2009. ³¹ Rosen 1988: 31–2. ³² Chiasson 1984: 135.

appear in comedy, equipped with costume and props (here, Cleisthenes' *skeue*). Reading the political scene, like reading theatrical personae, is akin to reading the 'real', human meaning underlying an animal fable.

In their lives beyond the theatre Aristophanes' audience also frequently encountered animal allegory in the context of oracular language; in the mouth of the Delphic Pythia, Cyrus, King of the Medes, could be just a 'mule' (Hdt. 1.55). In Aristophanes, Aesop tends to figure in the attempts of knowing charlatans to control the behaviour of others. In *Peace* 1075–9 the charlatan oracle-peddler Hierocles, who (in order to continue making a living) needs to promote the war with Sparta, seems to refer (although text is slightly problematic) to the fable of the noisy she-dog who gives birth to blind puppies:

HIEROCLES . . . it does not please the blessed gods that we should stop the War until the wolf shall unite with the sheep.

TRYGAEUS How, you cursed animal, could the wolf ever unite with the sheep?

HIEROCLES As long as the wood-bug gives off a fetid odour, when it flies; as long as the noisy bitch is eager to litter blind pups, so long shall peace be forbidden.

A more extended example of the same trope occurs when the Sausage Seller in *Knights* tries to manipulate Demos, who does not know how the navy is to be paid, with an oracle from Apollo (1067–76):

SAUSAGE SELLER 'Son of Aegeus, beware of the dog-fox; he bites in secret and runs swiftly away; he is cunning, crafty, knowing.' Do you know what this means?

DEMOS The dog-fox is Philostratus.

SAUSAGE SELLER No, it's Cleon here, who is constantly demanding that you send light ships to collect tribute, and Apollo says that you should not grant them to him.

DEMOS How can a trireme be a dog-fox?

SAUSAGE SELLER How? Because a trireme and a dog both move at speed.

DEMOS So what is the point of adding the 'fox' bit to the dog?

SAUSAGE SELLER The god is likening the soldiers to fox cubs, since they both eat grapes in the fields.

The 'knowing' Sausage Seller is trying to confuse Demos, who is indeed bewildered by his use of animal allegory. When the Sausage Seller explains that the dog-fox is Cleon,³³ Demos thinks he means that the dog-fox is a trireme! Finally, the Sausage-Seller ends up completely inverting the original allegory by equating foxes, seeking grapes like the fox in the

³³ As E. L. Brown 1974 showed, there are of course several other reverberations in the canine imagery which surrounded Cleon and which reached a climax in the trial scene of *Wasps* (see also below pp. 000–000).

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famous Aesopic fable (15 Hausrath) which is certainly already portrayed on a fifth-century vase-painting,³⁴ with the sailors in the Athenian navy. The effect of this interchange is to show how a manipulative orator could invent extempore and radically reinterpret animal allegories, lending them a sheen of oracular profundity at will, in order to gain political leverage.

Another individual aspiring to political influence who finds Aesop useful is Peisetaerus in Aristophanes' *Birds*. The Athenian defector is attempting, in a formal and oratorical manner, to persuade the birds to rise up against the Olympian gods, and he elaborates an argument that the birds had once been rulers of the universe (466–75).

PEISETAERUS I feel great pain on your behalf, because you were once kings.

CHORUS We were kings? Who were our subjects?

PEISETAERUS Everything that exists – first me, then this man here, and Zeus himself. You birds are more ancient than Cronus and the Titans and Earth, and prior to them.

CHORUS Even prior to Earth?

PEISETAERUS Yes, by Apollo,

CHORUS By Zeus, I never knew that!

PEISETAERUS That's because you are so undereducated (ἄμαθής) and unquestioning and have never studied your Aesop (οὐδ' Αἴσωπον πεπάρτηκας). He is the one who tells us that the lark was the first creature to be born, even before Earth. His father died of disease, but Earth did not exist then, and so he lay unburied for five days. The lark, at a loss for a solution, gave his father a grave in his own head.

Peisetaerus elaborates an aetiological story about the origins of the universe which sounds like a parody of theogonic poetry, in order to flatter the birds' sense of their historic importance. Manipulating myth in order to buttress the contingent political claims of a particular city-state or ethnic group was of course customary in classical Greek diplomacy, and Aristophanes is certainly here creating humour out of the absurd lengths to which such argumentation could go. But in order to impress these undereducated birds, the authority he chooses to cite is an Aesopic fable, rather than Homer or Pindar (or, like the Sausage Seller in *Knights*, an Apolline oracle). The implication is that the birds are without learning (ἄμαθής) to such a remarkable degree that they do not know their Aesop. The verb used here, πεπάρτηκας, may conceivably be a joke referring to the birds' lack of hands and fingers with which to handle a papyrus, since

³⁴ See the jug reproduced as the frontispiece to Daly 1961. The photograph belongs to the University Museum, Philadelphia, but the vase is in a private collection.

the primary meaning of *πατέω* is 'tread'. Many translators choose to retain here the idea of physically handling a text, by translating *πεπότηκος* as, for example, 'thumbed'. But there is a direct parallel, indeed a Platonic one, for a purely metaphorical meaning of *πατέω*, 'to study' a book: in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates remarks to Phaedrus that he has studied his Teisias very carefully (*ἀλλὰ μὴν τὸν γε Τεισίαν αὐτὸν πεπότηκος ἀκριβῶς*, 73a).

The birds are so very uneducated, the implication seems to be, that they have not 'even' studied Aesop, which in turn suggests strongly that Aesop may have been regarded as an element in rudimentary education, even perhaps (as he was in later antiquity and remain today) an author to whom little children were introduced at the same time as they learned their alphabet. If this is the case, then the reasons become obvious for the popularity of Aesop amongst the least educated of the Athenian citizenry – the ones who were perhaps only just functionally literate; the 'default' or bottom-line text to which orators, oracle-mongers or comic poets alike could refer, because they could assume their audience were familiar with it, is the Aesopic fables, in whatever form they were available in the fifth century BC.³⁵ Indeed, having established Aesop as an authority by reference to whom he can persuade the birds to do what he wants, Peisetaerus repeats the strategy a little later, when he needs Epops to enable him, although a human, to fly (651–5): Peisetaerus reminds the hoopoe that Aesop's fable of the fox and the eagle (1 Hausrath), in which the fox came off badly, shows that alliances between dissimilar species can be hazardous, and the hoopoe reassures him that he will be enabled to grow wings after eating a particular root.

On the question of the date at which written collections of Aesop became available, further illumination has often been sought once again in Plato, this time in the section of the *Phaedo* which I have already mentioned in connection with Aesopic aetiology. When Cebes is prompted by the imprisoned Socrates' proposed 'Aesopic' aetiology for pleasure and pain (see above) to ask him about his recent poetic compositions – versions of Aesop's fables and a hymn to Apollo – Socrates answers (61b):

³⁵ See Perry 1962: 287. The earliest certain recension and collection was made by Demetrius of Phalerum (perhaps during his regency at Athens of 317–307 BC), according to Diogenes Laertius' biography of Demetrius (5.80). This collection, which has not survived, may have been a repertory of fables designed for consultation by rhetoricians (see Arist. *Rh.* 2.20). The Athenian local colour to some Aesopic fables may also be attributable to the Demetrian recension (so Keller 1862: 369–70). But most scholars accept, on the evidence of Hdt. 2.134, that there had been very specific information circulating about Aesop in the fifth century (so M. L. West 1974: 25), and indeed many assume on the strength of this passage in *Birds* that there was a book on Aesopic wisdom of some kind available at Athens in the late fifth century (M. L. West 1984: 119–21).

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So first I composed a hymn to the god whose festival it was; and after the god, considering that a poet, if he is really to be a poet, must compose myths and not speeches, since I was not a maker of myths, I took those of Aesop, which I had at hand and knew, and turned into verse the first I came upon (διὰ ταῦτα δὴ οὖς προχείρους εἶχον μύθους καὶ ἠπιστάμην τοὺς Αἰσώπου, τούτων ἐποίησα οἷς πρώτοις ἐνέτυχον).

My interpretation of this passage is not that Socrates has a papyrus text of Aesop available to him in prison, like a bible in a Mormon hotel, but that Socrates uses Aesop because these are stories which he, like everyone else, knew off by heart, and this is something which Cebes would immediately understand. Christopher Rowe translates, ‘I just took the stories that I had to hand and actually knew, which were Aesop’s, and turned into verse the first ones that happened to occur to me’,³⁶ and he has confirmed that he interprets the passage as I do.³⁷ Although ‘the first ones that occurred to me’ (οἷς πρώτοις ἐνέτυχον) could just mean ‘the first ones I lighted on in my text’, this interpretation of the Greek seems quite unlikely since one would naturally come across the first items in the text, and οἷς πρώτοις ἐνέτυχον is not the obvious way of saying ‘I started at the beginning’. But it is much more telling that the evidence for Plato’s use of πρόχειρος (‘at hand’) shows that this adjective for him has no tendency to imply physical proximity: for example, at *Theaetetus* 200c, something is metaphorically ‘at hand’ because it is available in the intellect (διόνοια). But the fact that Socrates knows some Aesopic fables off by heart, as I would imagine almost all of his fellow citizens did, does not mean that there was no written collection of the fables available in late fifth-century Athens (see below). On the contrary, I would imagine that the one cultural phenomenon would very likely go in tandem with the other, at least as soon as writing technologies had become accessible and used in elementary education.

In *Wasps* is to be found the most extended Aristophanic engagement with Aesop, and the emphasis is slightly different, although the association of knowledge of Aesop with rudimentary cultural awareness remains the same. Philocleon, as representative of the common Athenians who supported the demagogue Cleon, enjoys his Aesop. When he delivers his pseudo-legal speech in defence of jury attendance, he lists the types of entertaining performances he can expect to witness in court (562–70):

I can listen to the defendants letting forth every manner of voice in order to get acquitted . . . Some bewail their poverty and exaggerate their plight . . . Others tell us stories or a funny Aesopic fable; others crack jokes to make me laugh and put

³⁶ Rowe 2010: 91. ³⁷ Email of Monday, 11 October 2010.

me in a good mood. And if these means don't persuade me, they drag in their little children by the hand forthwith, girls and boys, who cower together and bleat in chorus . . .

Aesopic fables subsequently play a significant part in the formation of the contrast of class politics and their cultural expression during the scenes just before and after the symposium. Bdelycleon is rehearsing his father in the role of refined symposiast. He has dressed him in soft Persian clothes and Laconian slippers and shown him how to adopt an elegant gait. Now he must train him in elevated conversational strategies for dining in the presence of well-educated and clever men (λόγους σεμνοῦς λέγειν | ἀνδρῶν παρόντων πολυμαθῶν καὶ δεξιῶν, 1174–5).

Philocleon suggests he could tell the story of Lamia farting, or 'Cardopion and his mother' (1177–8); Bdelycleon protests that such *mythoi* are not appropriate to the occasion; what is needed is stories connected with reality – 'stories with human beings' in them, which have a connection with the life of the household. Philocleon ignores the reference to humans, and launches into a 'household' story about a mouse and a weasel, which (if it were not cut short by Bdelycleon's protests) looks distinctly Aesopic in potential (see e.g. 81 Hausrath). But Bdelycleon does object that, in the company of gentlemen at a symposium, 'mice and weasels' play no part in the conversation, any contribution to which should be a reminiscence about participating in a state pilgrimage, or an athletics event, or something distinguished achieved in one's youth. Philocleon jumps on the third alternative, saying that his own most brilliant feat was the distinctively agricultural exploit when he stole some vine-props (1200): Bdelycleon is exasperated and says that a tale of a hunt or deed of daring would be much more suitable than a peasant's tale about petty theft of vine-props.

Yet even Bdelycleon admits that there is a place for the Aesopic fable in the social life of the educated gentleman. His father is concerned that if he goes out and becomes inebriated, then he will start fighting and damaging property and end up financially liable to his victims. Bdelycleon reassures him that this is not a problem (1256–61):

. . . if you are with fine and refined gentlemen (ἀνδράσι καλοῖς τε κάγαθοῖς). Either they undertake to appease the offended person or, better still, you say something witty, you tell some comic story, perhaps one of those you have yourself heard at table, either in Aesop's style or in that of Sybaris; everyone laughs and the trouble is ended.

Here Bdelycleon admits not only that fables are indeed told at the drinking parties held by refined elite gentlemen, but that they can come in useful when you need to avoid paying damages for the sort of crimes of violence

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which heavy drinking can provoke. The class politics here are complicated: if you want to impress other people at an upper-class symposium, then you avoid anecdotes of the Aesopic or Sybaritic type (whatever the latter may mean).³⁸ Such fables can, however, prove helpful to upper-class gentlemen when manipulating and indeed exploiting those less well educated.³⁹

Philocleon takes his son's advice to heart and after the symposium tells four fables in quick succession: one to the female bread-seller who has a grievance against him (1401–5), two to a man he has assaulted (1427–30), and finally, when picked up and hauled inside, the story of the eagle and the dung-beetle to his son (1446–8). In the case of the bread-seller, Philocleon announces that he will use one of those 'clever stories' (λόγοι . . . δεξιοί, 1394), a 'charming fable' (λόγον . . . χαρίεντα, 1399–1400), to avoid being prosecuted for damages to her stock of loaves. But rather than tell a well-known fable, he invents an episode in Aesop's own life, in which Aesop corresponds to himself and 'a drunken bitch' to the bread-seller (1401–5):

Αἴσωπον ἀπὸ δείπνου βαδίζονθ' ἔσπερας
θρασεῖα καὶ μεθύση τις ὑλάκτει κύων.
κᾶπειτ' ἐκεῖνος εἶπεν· ὦ κύον κύον,
εἰ νῆ Δι' ἀντὶ τῆς κακῆς γλώττης ποθὲν
πυροῦς πρίαο, σωφρονεῖν ἄν μοι δοκεῖς.'

One evening when Aesop went out to dinner, a drunken bitch had the effrontery to bark at him. So Aesop said to her, 'Oh, bitch, bitch, if by Zeus you sold your evil tongue and bought some wheat, I would say you were acting sensibly.'

Philocleon compounds his display of knowingness, at the expense of the bewildered bread-wife, by alluding to another, non-Aesopic story about a singing competition, and to Euripides' heroine Ino. He figures himself as the joke-teller and thus aligns himself not only with Aesop but with the comic dramatist; this generic alignment is counterpoised to the suggestion that the bread-seller might end up suffering the fate of a tragic heroine, or rather, to be more specific, a famous Euripidean one.⁴⁰ But the Aesop joke

³⁸ According to Σ on *Vesp.* 1259 and *Av.* 471, the distinction between Sybaritic and Aesopic fables was simply that animals featured in one and humans in another. But these statements, as MacDowell 1971: 294 points out, look like little more than ancient scholastic guesswork.

³⁹ On this scene see Rothwell 1995a: 249–52.

⁴⁰ I am not sure that the same generic contrast would have worked so well between Aesopic fable, and, for example, Aeschylean tragedy, with its rich zoological imagery. The story of the pet lion cub which grew up to savage its master's flocks is almost certainly related to a fable (*Ag.* 727–8), as is the passage on the nestlings in *Cho.* 250–1 (see Janko 1980: 292 n. 5). A fragment of Aeschylus' *Myrmidons* (*TrGF* 3 F 139) involves the fable of an eagle killed by an arrow made with its own feathers.

has been even more complicated than this. It shows Philocleon *extemporizing* an Aesopic fable which describes a situation almost identical to his own (he has gone out to dinner and is being addressed by a female), but in which the female has turned into an animal or at least is signified metaphorically by a she-dog, who does not use speech but merely barks. As MacDowell put it, the application of the fable to the bread-seller 'becomes more and more obvious as it goes on. Dogs do not have any use for wheat, but bakers do'.⁴¹ This image of the prosecuting she-dog of course also creates a link with Cleon, the prosecuting dog in the trial scene earlier in the play. Philocleon is using his grasp of the principles of *Aesopica* in order to reveal how he has in fact distanced himself from his previous admiration of Cleon and demagogue-led litigation in order to move culturally 'up-market'.

To the man who accuses him of physical assault, Philocleon tells two 'Sybaritic' tales, both involving inhabitants of Sybaris who decided to solve their problems practically, one by taking his injured head to a doctor, and the other by mending her broken box with a piece of string (1427–40). There are no animals here, nor eating, nor other somatic function; the outlook is not even specifically connected with the countryside or peasant farming. But the moral of both fables, it is implied, is that people with a problem need to go away and sort it out for themselves rather than blame someone else.

Bdelycleon, exasperated, decides that the time has come to get his talkative father off the streets and safely inside. Philocleon responds with his final fable, or rather fable within a fable: the account of Aesop telling the fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle (3 Hausrath) when he was framed for a crime of robbery at Delphi. The Delphians hid a sacred cup in Aesop's baggage, accused him of stealing it and condemned him to death. But before his death he told them the fable, the implication of which is that they would be no more likely to escape revenge than anyone else.⁴² Referring to this part of Aesop's biography therefore amounts to a prediction by Philocleon that any outrage Bdelycleon commits against him will one day be avenged (1446–9):

Φι. Αἴσωπον οἱ Δελφοί ποτ' –
Βδ. ὀλίγον μοι μέλει.
Φι. φιάλην ἐπητιῶντο κλέψαι τοῦ θεοῦ.
ὁ δ' ἔλεξεν αὐτοῖς ὡς ὁ κἀνθάρος ποτε –
Βδ. οἴμ', ὡς ἀπολείς με τοῖσι σοῖσι κἀνθάροις.

⁴¹ MacDowell 1971: 312.

⁴² See further the *Vit. Aesop.* 124–42 and the exhaustive discussions of Wiechers 1961.

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(Philocleon) One day at Delphi, Aesop . . . (Bdelycleon) I could not care less about that! (Philocleon) . . . was accused of having stolen a sacred cup. But he said to them that one day the dung-beetle . . . (Bdelycleon) Oh no! You will be the death of me, you and those beetles of yours!

An Aristophanic chorus, the angry old women of *Lysistrata*, also refers to the fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle (695). So does the discussion in *Peace* 129–34, where the very stage presence of the beetle, a substitute for Bellerophon's winged horse, Pegasus, is inspired by the stock *dramatis personae* of Aesopic fable. A scholion on this passage in *Peace* (Σ *Pax* 130) related the fable in full: the eagle stole the young of the beetle, and the beetle in revenge rolled away the eagle's eggs. The eagle appealed to Zeus and was invited to nest in his bosom, but the beetle came and flew round Zeus's head, causing him to jump up and break the eggs. This meant that the beetle successfully extracted revenge from the eagle. But in this, the earliest surviving Aristophanic use of the fable, merely the words 'one day the dung-beetle' seem already to be quite sufficient to let the audience see the point.⁴³

In 'reading' himself as the dung-beetle within the fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle, Philocleon is demonstrating the art of decoding animal allegory in a personal way. Aristophanes' audiences could clearly understand the identification of specific figures in animal stories with themselves and their acquaintances, and moreover the identification of specific figures who 'stood' for a particular position in class politics. But Philocleon's allegorical exercise has another twist: he knows something at least of the biography of the fabulist Aesop himself and can identify himself with the storyteller when the storyteller identified himself with the dung-beetle. As in the Aesopic scenario he dreamed up in order to deal with the baker-woman, Philocleon here likens *himself* to Aesop, who had himself likened himself at Delphi to the dung-beetle, who had subverted both the eagle and Zeus. There are therefore no fewer than *three* parallel stories of subversion of superior authority going on here – Philocleon is challenging his upwardly mobile son, as Aesop challenged the Delphians, and the dung-beetle challenged both the eagle and Zeus. Moreover, all three narratives are readable as allegories for a potential (although ill-defined) rebellion of the followers of Cleon within the Athenian political sphere. Aesop, as ever, is an important signifier that something allegorical is going on.

It is the same fable, the eagle and the dung-beetle, with which Aristophanes encourages his audience to think about the correspondences

⁴³ MacDowell 1971: 318.

between the characters of his comedy *Peace* and real-life figures in the contemporary political world – indeed, the correspondences, once again, with Cleon. Here is the relevant part of the dialogue between Trygaeus’ two slaves which opens the comedy (41–8):

Οι.^α τοῦ γάρ ἐστ’;
Οι.^β οὐκ ἔσθ’ ὅπως
οὐκ ἔστι τὸ τέρας τοῦ Διὸς σκαταιβάτου.
Οι.^α οὐκοῦν ἂν ἤδη τῶν θεατῶν τις λέγοι
νεανίας δοκησίσοφος, ‘τὸ δὲ πρᾶγμα τί;
ὁ κἀνθαρος δὲ πρὸς τί; κᾶτ’ αὐτῷ γ’ ἄνῆρ
Ἴωνικός τις φησι παρακαθήμενος.
‘δοκέω μὲν, ἐς Κλέωνα τοῦτ’ αἰνίσσεται,
ὡς κείνος ἐν Αἴδεω τὴν σπατίλην ἐσθίει.’⁴⁴

(First Slave) Who was it then? [*sc.* who afflicted the household with the dung-beetle] (Second Slave) No doubt Zeus, the God of the Thundercrap. (First Slave) But perhaps some spectator, some beardless youth, who thinks himself a sage, will say, ‘What is this? What does the beetle mean?’ And then an Ionian, sitting next him, will add, ‘I think it’s an allusion to Cleon, who so shamelessly feeds on filth all by himself.’ –

The first slave imagines a dialogue between two spectators going on simultaneously with his own conversation. Before the beetle has even been seen by the audience, they are wondering what it will signify. The second slave has used the audience’s knowledge of the fable of the eagle and the dung-beetle to introduce the idea that Zeus must lie behind the presence of the household’s strange new pet, but the first slave knows that people in comic audiences are expecting a political allegory. The young philosopher is clear that the dung-beetle must signify something more than a dung-beetle, but the Ionian (whose provenance suggests the genre of iambic invective,⁴⁵ which, as I have already noted, itself drew on Aesopic fable) is equally clear that the correspondence is insulting and is with Cleon. The slave, himself very knowing about theatre audiences, imagines a hyper-knowing spectator who can decode both fables and staged comic allegory. The introduction of the animal allegory, and its explicit discussion, thus functions as a prompt to the audience to start thinking allegorically: ‘what does the beetle *mean*?’

The intergeneric dialogue conducted in Aristophanes’ *Peace*, as I have discussed elsewhere, is simultaneously an aural battle between genres which are fighting for peace and those which fight to prolong the war. On the

⁴⁴ I follow here the distribution of lines adopted by Olson 1998, but accept the readings of MS V for ll. 41–2.

⁴⁵ See Rosen 1984.

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side of peace are ranged drama, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and choral lyric, while martial epic and (to an extent) elegy signify Athenian and wider Greek militarism.⁴⁶ But in the opening dung-beetle stunt, Aesopic fable is simultaneously *both* allied with tragedy in terms of the play's overarching narrative (that is, Trygaeus' effort to bring about peace) *and also* tonally contrasted with it in a manner similar to the contrast between on the one hand Philocleon's identification of himself with Aesop and the Aesopic dung-beetle, and on the other the baker-woman's potential identification with the tragic heroine Ino.

Trygaeus' daughter protests that it is a strange idea to harness a beetle to travel to heaven (127–8), to which he responds, 'In Aesop's fables the dung-beetle has been revealed as the only creature that can fly to the gods', adding the information that it went 'to take vengeance on the eagle and to break its eggs' (129–30, 133–4). The girl suggests that Trygaeus would cut a more impressive, tragic figure if he rode Pegasus instead (135–6), as Aristophanes' audience knew that the hero of Euripides' *Bellerophon* had done. Trygaeus responds that the dung-beetle is easier to feed since it can recycle Trygaeus' own excrement (137–9). What we are seeing here is the specifically Aesopic parody of a tragic episode – its 'Aesopification'. For the winged horse of mythology is substituted the bathetic dung-beetle of fable. This intergeneric counterpoint is wrapped up, at the end of the stunt, with the daughter's warning that if her father falls off and becomes disabled, he will cut quite another tragic figure – one of Euripides' ragged heroes (146–8, such as Bellerophon, Telephus or Philoctetes: see also *Ach.* 411, 426–30; *Ran.* 846). Even within tragedy, it is implied, heroes can be more or less déclassé.

The precise significance of the functions of Aesop in Aristophanes depends to an extent on the ideological import of the *Fables* in antiquity more widely, a question that is notoriously fraught. The two most dominant types of moral to be drawn from the fables are (1) the inevitability of *force majeure* (the hawk is simply bigger and stronger than the nightingale), and (2) the notion that smaller or weaker entities can, through favours or superior intelligence, ameliorate to some extent the unfairness created by the naturally superior power of other creatures (the mouse controls the lion through reciprocal favours; the hare is vanquished by the pluck and persistence of the tortoise). Both of these moral lessons seem to me to be entirely compatible with the worldview of either rich or poor, free or slave, in ancient Mediterranean society.⁴⁷ There seems, however, to be little

⁴⁶ Hall 2006: ch. 11. Cf. also Revermann and Telò, in this volume.

⁴⁷ See Finke 1991: 180 and Hall 2011. Unfortunately Kurke's excellent 2011 book was published too late for it to be considered in detail.

doubt amongst classical scholars that the fables reflect at some level their origins as 'low' or 'popular' culture, oral stories generated and circulated by slaves and lower-class individuals in antiquity. This line of argument can be traced to the classical Greek prose writers themselves.⁴⁸ The point at which agreement ceases is when the question is asked as to how 'progressive' or truly subversive the ideology of the fables is. Some, such as Kenneth Rothwell, have identified Aesop's *Fables*, especially in the classical period and markedly in Aristophanes, as the literature of the underdog, with a healthy rebellious and subversive content.⁴⁹ But Page DuBois has argued persuasively that the fables operated in antiquity in a rather reactionary way. She thinks that in 'naturalizing' what are actually human social inequities by comparing them with inherent biological and natural differences between animals, they suggest that human inequities are immutable and unchallengeable as well.⁵⁰ My own view is that the *Fables* actually worked in *both* ways – they are indeed expressions of the tensions that underpinned a deeply hierarchical society but they expressed that tension dialectically in ways that spoke with an equally loud voice to people on both sides of the power divide and created an 'epistemic community' in the process. I would argue that the socially 'low' knowingness of stance in which this tension is expressed is the greatest debt ancient comedy owes Aesop and is moreover one of the greatest debts it owes to any genre.

The knowing Aesopic stance may even take us into an intergeneric dialogue of a far more ancient and transcultural kind. Long before Hesiod's allusion to the fable of the hawk and the nightingale, fables in what seems to be similar to an Aesopic form appear in Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian and Aramaic texts from the third millennium onwards.⁵¹ Once Edmund Gordon began to publish his collections of Sumerian proverbs and fables, hundreds of which refer to animals, classical scholars including Ben Perry became convinced that the Aesopic fable came to the Greeks by way of the neo-Babylonian and Assyrian wisdom tradition. One example is Hierocles' proverb about she-dogs in a hurry giving birth to blind puppies (*Pax* 1075–9),⁵² which is partially preserved in a collection of Sumerian proverbs published in 1958: 'The bitch is weakened . . . the puppies' eyes will not

⁴⁸ On the role of the Aesopic in the birth of Greek prose cf. Kurke 2006. For another example of Aristophanic reception of 'popular' culture cf. Rusten in this volume.

⁴⁹ Rothwell 1995a. For further bibliography see Heath 2005: 15 with n. 50.

⁵⁰ See DuBois 2003: 170–88.

⁵¹ For a fascinating discussion of pre-Aesopic mouse fables in ancient Egyptian sources see Dawson 1925.

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open.⁵³ The fable of the eagle and the fox in *Birds* 651–3 has also been traced to an archetype in Mesopotamia.⁵⁴

Much closer to Aristophanes' time, fables similar to those associated with Aesop also appear in the Aramaic papyrus of about 500 BC recording the story and sayings of Ahikar. The papyrus was found in 1906 or 1907 in the Jewish temple at Elephantine, Aswan. The dialect in which the sayings themselves are expressed is, however, of greater antiquity, belonging to southern Syria in the eighth to seventh century BC. The very antiquity of this papyrus makes it more likely that at least some truth lies behind Clement of Alexandria's claim that sayings from the story of Ahikar were known, from a stele in Babylon, to none other than the philosopher Democritus (*Strom.* 1.15.69.4 = [Democr.] 68 B 299 D–K). Ahikar's stance is that of adviser to his nephew, whom he has adopted having been unable to beget a son himself. The boy, according to the story, did not take kindly to being hectored by his adoptive father. I would like to conclude with a recent description, by Ingo Kottsieper, of the social world implied in the tone and content of the sayings of Ahikar, a world, tone and content which bear many resemblances to those in Aristophanes. My reason is not, of course, to claim any direct relationship between specific passages of Syrian wisdom literature and Aristophanes, but to emphasize the importance of taking *psychosocial stance* into consideration when we are not only defining genre but attempting to identify more subtle forms of intergeneric dialogue:

Most of the admonitions address free men, who are adult and occupy a social position that allows them not only children but also servants. In addition, they own weapons . . . Their economic situation is typical for free members of a rural society in which one could easily procure wealth through a bountiful harvest, but also could lose it again by a bad year . . . The economic situation of the addressees . . . is also shown, where both the danger of borrowing and the advantages of giving out loans are mentioned . . . That the addressees belong to the 'middle class' is illustrated by the admonitions against desiring sizeable possessions, which are beyond their reach, or power . . . in political or social arenas.⁵⁵

⁵² On this scene see above.

⁵³ Gordon 1958: 69; see especially Moran 1978.

⁵⁴ Williams 1956.

⁵⁵ Kottsieper 2008: 111–12.