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In cothurnis prodit Aesopus nouis: Ancient Fable and the Literary Genres

1 Introduction

As works of literature, ancient fables have long had to live in the shadows of scholarship in Graeco-Latin literature. Often deemed 'simple' or 'second-class', a large part of the fabulistic writing that survives from antiquity was overlooked in favour of other, seemingly more rewarding genres. Recent years, however, have seen a new and growing scholarly interest in ancient fable literature: a wealth of new editions, translations, and commentaries attest to this trend and signal a shift towards an approach that perceives fables as original literary products which inscribe themselves — and which can be read and understood — in the literary and cultural discourses of their time, an only newly-granted status which has been a basic premise in the study of other genres for a long time.

To better situate the more or less diffuse genre of ancient fable in the literary and cultural network of Graeco-Roman antiquity, this volume, which is the product of an international conference held in June of 2022 in Graz, seeks to examine some of the manifold ways in which fables interact with other ancient works of literature; particularly, it foregrounds phenomena of literary interaction on the level of genre as a category of analysis and a framework of meaning.

The following chapters of this book examine ancient fables in their relationship with other literary genres, whether it be poetry, such as comedy, epic, elegy, and epigram, or prose like philosophical texts, historiography, rhetoric, scientific works, novels, and different types of early Christian literature. They investigate genre boundaries, genre overlaps, and the interaction between the genres. Collectively, this volume looks at fables from both directions and illuminates what role fables as embedded narrative elements play in individual genres and, at the same time, sheds light on the different genres that ancient fable literature engages with through processes of allusion, adaptation, approximation, transformation or parody.

2 What are genres?

Since the focus of this volume is on genre, it is important to define what we mean when we speak of this term as a literary category. In literary studies, genre is a highly contested concept whose nature somewhat eludes a strict systematization but which seems to be shared intuitively by certain groups in certain socio-historical contexts. On an aesthetic level, genre can be defined as a particular configuration of literary form and content, the relationship of which varies over time and space, as illustrated by historical discourses of literary criticism.[1] It has been described as "[a] recurring type or category of text, as defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria".[2]

Since the beginning of Graeco-Roman literature, the concept of genre was mostly discussed in the context of taxonomical classifications, depending on whether an audience categorized certain types of text as belonging to the same group.[3] Some of the earliest theoretical reflections on the nature of genre in antiquity can be found in works concerned with literary criticism: in his *Republic*, Plato has Socrates develop a theory of poetry characterized by a distinction between diegetic and mimetic texts to which certain genres are then attributed.[4] Adopting a similar distinction between mimetic and amimetic poetry, Aristotle's *Poetics* are a testament to the fact that by the 4th century BCE, a strong understanding of literary genres must have been established. The work, which maintained a normative status for European intellectual history for centuries, outlines a taxonomy of *genus* based on criteria of form and effect, giving us detailed insights into how Aristotle conceives of mimetic poetical genres such as tragedy or epic. In Rome, the theoretical discussions surrounding genre were quickly adapted from the 3rd century BCE onwards and continued to exert influence on the reception and production of literature, as works on literary and rhetorical theory attest to: both Horace's *Ars poetica* and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* offer catalogues of important genres and their characteristic forms and contents.[5]

In modern Graeco-Roman literary studies, it was above all Gian Biagio Conte's[6] structuralist definition of ancient genre that propelled the theoretical discussion in

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1 For this historical perspective, cf. Michler 2022; for theoretical reflections on literary genres, cf. Pettersson 2006.

2 Duff 2000, xiii.

3 Cf. Hunter/Hardie 2006.

4 Pl. *Resp*. 3.392d–394c6.

5 Hor. *Ars P*. 73–85; Quint. *Inst*. 10.1.46–131.

6 Conte 1992; 1994.

recent decades: according to him, it is not possible to define genres purely based on formal criteria — such as the hexameter as characteristic of epic poetry, for example[7] — nor purely on the content of the texts. Instead, he offers a relational, systemic concept:

> Facts acquire meaning only in connection with one another. A genre is not made up by 'stuffing' it with isolated fragments of content, but by a total system of reciprocal, structured relations: the single element must enter into a constellation with others if it is to be transvalued and redefined until it too is able to connote, by itself, the presence of a whole genre.[8]

That this understanding of literary *genera* must have already existed in antiquity, Conte argues, is illustrated by examples in Augustan literature, such as Vergil's *Eclogues* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. These works explicitly play with generic conventions by adopting characteristics of other genres under certain circumstances, such as connections motivated by the plot or subject matter. He uses this idea to explain the innovative character of Roman in relation to Greek literature: Roman authors must have been aware of a relation-based system of genre to be able to fill missing parts through generic innovation.[9] Conte also rejects an abstract, idealized conception of genre and highlights their real existence in concrete texts:

> Nothing would be more useless than to conceive of genres as simple, immobile abstractions, or as lifeless specimens to be collected in sterile bell jars: genre lives only in individual works. Just as we see not Man, but many individual human beings, whom we are capable of distinguishing from fleas or from horses, so too we see not the epic genre or the elegiac genre, but individual works which belong to particular genres, as we can recognize even in the case of hybrids.[10]

In turning away from an abstract and fixed idea of genre and embracing its inherently relativistic and systemic nature, Conte's definition bears striking parallels to perspectives inspired by modern findings in the field of cognitive sciences: from a cognitive point of view, genres constitute an example of how humans construct categories of perception as mental representations. They appear to be modelled on

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7 Note, however, that ancient literary criticism strongly defined genre by these formal criteria; cf. e.g. Hunter/Hardie 2006.

8 Conte 1992, 107.

9 Cf. Conte 1992, 107–114; Schmitz 2006, 53.

10 Conte 1992, 122. Conte therefore pursued an approach more in line with our concerns than Cairns 1972, who 20 years earlier had not only disregarded diachronic change in a much-discussed approach, but also understood the concept of genre differently. With "genre" and "generic composition" he was referring only to "classifications in terms of content" and not to the formal categories of poetry such as "epic, lyric, elegy, or epistle" (6).

certain culturally-determined prototypes in the sense of 'best-practice' examples, and display much more fluidity and overlap than Aristotelian genre theory claims. This perspective shifts the view away from a hierarchical system of genres to which texts belong once they meet certain criteria, and instead focusses on the mental processes of recipients when engaging with the text.[11]

What becomes clear from this short overview is that the term 'genre' is contested and above all relative — it changes radically depending on who and at what time in history one asks. For the context of this volume, we would like to propose a notion of genre that lends itself less to the typological or taxonomical categorizations of ancient criticism. Instead, we would like to understand the term phenomenologically: as generic markers, certain elements in a literary text are able to elicit (often shared) expectations in a reader of a certain group of recipients. The text then meets, fails, or even contradicts these generic expectations, which may create an effect of tension or suspense, thereby contributing to the readerly experience. In this sense, the category of genre takes on a hermeneutic function in the reception and reader-oriented construction of meaning of a text.

3 What is a fable?

Like the general idea of genre, the notion of what constitutes a fable is strongly determined by cultural and historical factors. Ancient definitions in works concerned with rhetorical theory or literary criticism mostly describe fable (Gr.: αἶνος, λόγος, μῦθος or παράδειγμα; Lat.: *fabula, fabella, exemplum* or *apologus*) in rather general terms:[12] the earliest theoretical discussion in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* groups fables (λόγοι) with parables as one type of invented examples.[13] Similarly, Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria* classes fable as a type of fictitious exemplum (*ficta*) which persuades through pleasure (*voluptate*).[14] Adding to this are imperial collections of

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11 Cf. Zymner 2013, 30–34.

12 For an overview, cf. van Dijk 1997, 38–78; Holzberg 2012; Gärtner 2015; 2020; Grethlein 2011; 2022.

13 Arist. *Rh*. 1393a28–31: παραδειγμάτων δὲ εἴδη δύο· ἓν μὲν γάρ ἐστιν παραδείγματος εἶδος τὸ λέγειν πράγματα προγενόμενα, ἓν δὲ τὸ αὐτὸν ποιεῖν. τούτου δὲ ἓν μὲν παραβολὴ ἓν δὲ λόγοι, οἷον οἱ Αἰσώπειοι καὶ Λιβυκοί ("There are two kinds of examples; namely, one which consists in relating things that have happened before, and another in inventing them oneself. The latter are subdivided into comparisons or fables, such as those of Aesop and the Libyan"; transl. Freese/Striker).

14 Quint. *Inst*. 5.11.19: *illae quoque fabellae quae, etiam si originem non ab Aesopo acceperunt* (*nam uidetur earum primus auctor Hesiodus*), *nomine tamen Aesopi maxime celebrantur, ducere animos solent praecipue rusticorum et imperitorum, qui et simplicius quae ficta sunt audiunt, et capti uoluptate facile iis quibus delectantur consentiunt*; ("Also those fables which, even if they did not find

rhetorical exercises such as the *Progymnasmata* of Aelius Theon and Aphthonius, which provide us with the most concise ancient definitions of fable:

> Μῦθός ἐστι λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν
> (Theon *Prog.* 72 Spengel)

> Fable is a fictitious story that illustrates reality/truth.[15]
> (Transl. U.G./L.S.)

As Gert-Jan van Dijk has pointed out, most ancient accounts agree that fables are fictitious, metaphorical stories. However, conflicting opinions in regard to other features exist, such as to typical characters, forms, or functions of fabulistic story-telling.[16] The fables in the extant imperial collections and other works of ancient literature vary greatly in both form and content: as for their formal structure, fables are generally short and written in prose or verse; in some cases, they display features of formulaic language to signal an embedding into an argumentative context or demarcate a narrative section from a pro- or epimythium. In terms of content, the characters in these texts appear as (anthropomorphic) animals, humans, gods, plants, or even speaking objects — and contrary to popular belief, a significant number of ancient fables does not feature any animals at all.[17] With regard to subject matter, they are equally varied. Among other things, fables comprise stories illustrating proverbs or aphorisms, anecdotes, myths, aetiological or satirical stories or parodies, which connect them to a range of different genres that share these topics. Finally, there is variety in the effect that fables display: their function is often difficult to ascertain without a concrete narrative context or pro-/epimythium. This suggests that as rhetorical elements, fables favour a plurality of readings, which is

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their origin in Aesop (for Hesiod seems to have been the first to write them), are nevertheless most known under the name of Aesop, usually move the minds of the rustic and uneducated in particular, who understand more easily what is fictitious and who, captured by pleasure, readily agree with those by which they are entertained"; transl. U.G./L.S.

15 Cf. also Aphth. *Prog.* 10.1 Rabe [= 21 Spengel] : Ὁ μῦθος ποιητῶν μὲν προῆλθε, γεγένηται δὲ καὶ ῥητόρων κοινὸς ἐκ παραινέσεως. Ἔστι δὲ μῦθος λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν ("The mythical fable of poets came first, but it has also become a shared good of rhetoricians from the exhortation. A fable is a fictitious story that illustrates truth/reality; transl. U.G./L.S.). Note that the question as to how translate ἀλήθεια is highly contested — while some scholars argue for 'truth' (e.g. Perry 1965, xx), others assume it to mean 'reality' (e.g. van Dijk 1997, 5; Grethlein 2011, 321).

16 Cf. van Dijk 1997, 71–78.

17 Cf. Grethlein 2011, 321: "Häufig sind die Protagonisten Tiere, aber nicht wenige antike Fabeln haben auch Pflanzen, Menschen und Götter als Akteure" ("Animals are frequent protagonists, yet quite a few ancient fables also feature plants, humans, and gods as actors"). Note, however, that modern definitions see this as constitutive for the genre, cf. e.g. Zymner 2009, 234.

also reflected in the range of possible use cases recorded in ancient accounts — as means of persuasion, moral didaxis, illustration, entertainment or expression of opinion.[18]

For this reason, contemporary fable scholarship has rightfully highlighted the trouble of finding a uniform definition, since these texts confront us with a multitude of realities and especially since the very notion of the term fable changes over time.[19] Bearing this in mind, it seems all the more difficult to map modern theories influenced by Jean de la Fontaine's or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 17th and 18th-century reflections of fable as a purely allegorical, moralistic animal story onto the breath of material found in ancient fable collections.[20] In the last decades, scholars have put forward different configurations of the outlined categories to define fable, with some leaning more towards ancient and others favouring more modern discourses.[21] In one of the most recent contributions to the discussion, Niklas Holzberg calls fable a form of illustrative storytelling — emphasising the common denominator of comparison also found in some of the ancient definitions.[22]

Furthermore, it has been noted that fable as a 'fuzzy' literary term without well-defined edges shares parallels with similar narrative devices such as proverbs, parables, similes, comparisons, exempla, anecdotes, myths, or even fairy tales.[23] In many cases, a clear distinction cannot be drawn, a fact which has recently led to innovative approaches that consider these elements together as fluid forms of

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18 Cf. van Dijk 1997, 73–76.

19 Dithmar 1997, 165: "Eine allgemeingültige Definition der Fabel von ihrem Ursprung bis zur Gegenwart gibt es nicht, da sich jede definitorische Bestimmung an einzelnen Autoren, Epochen oder Typen der Fabel orientiert." ("There is no universally valid definition of fable from its origins to the present day, as each definition is based on individual authors, epochs, or types of fable.") For a historical overview of different theories of fable, cf. Dithmar 2000.

20 Cf. Holzberg 2012, 21–22.

21 Perry 1952, ix, names their fictitious nature, a narrative set in the past, and their argumentative effect as typical of Aesopic fable; Zymner 2009, 234, highlights fictionality, anthropomorphization, and a signal of application ("Anwendungssignal") as constitutive of the genre; Grethlein 2011, 321, differentiates a generic nucleus defining fable as "fiktive Erzählungen mit metaphorischem Charakter" ("fictitious stories with metaphorical character") from a set of more or less facultative features, such as the presence of certain characters, a short length with a fixed narrative structure, or an argumentative or persuasive effect.

22 Holzberg 2012, 21: "Form des exemplifizierenden Erzählens".

23 Cf. van Dijk 1997, 78; Zimmermann 2023, 110–115.

storytelling.[24] Several chapters in this volume will illustrate and explore these formal boundaries.

With regard to the general genre discussion outlined above, it is important to note that fable seemingly does not play a role as a literary *genus* in the strict, typological sense — and it is conspicuous that neither ancient nor modern definitions focus too much on the discussed categories of form and content when describing it.[25] But fables certainly constitute a type of text or textual element recognizable to a group of recipients — otherwise all allusions to fables in ancient literature would not exist. Furthermore, the generic affiliation with the fable tradition creates literary expectations in readers, such as an evocation of a (pseudo-)didactic frame or a mixture of instruction and entertainment, phenomena which are both addressed in a humorous, self-reflexive manner by Phaedrus in the prologue to his first book of fables; there, he inserts himself in the Aesopic tradition and proclaims that his poems will raise laughter and give life advice, suggesting that these are topical conventions an ancient audience would have expected of fable literature.[26] We thus deem it valid to consider the genre of fable in a phenomenological sense as a system of — more or less variable — generic markers that enter into a dialogue with their audience and evoke a hermeneutic response according to certain generic patterns.

4 Examples

Now that we have sketched out some definitory boundaries of the fable genre, it is necessary to acknowledge that, in line with Conte's conception of genre, the contributions in this volume are not so much interested in fable as an isolated and 'ideal' concept, but rather in its various phenotypical expressions that emerge through interactions with other texts — both in the sense of fable being used as a narrative element in 'container works' of different literary genres and as a self-standing work of art which absorbs or transforms generic features of different works. In both cases, it is worthwhile to reflect on the function of such insertions or transformative approximations and to explain what their effect on an audience might be.

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24 Cf. for example Strong 2021, a contribution to New Testament studies which blurs the boundaries of fable and parable to achieve a new reading of the parables of the Gospel of Luke in the context of the imperial fable tradition.

25 Cf. however the moral component which could correspond to the category of effect in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

26 For Phaed. 1 *prol.* Z. [= G.], cf. Gärtner 2015, 59–68.

For an example of what form a fable inserted into a text of another genre can take, we can examine a passage taken from 2nd-century CE Greek physician and philosopher Sextus Empiricus' skeptical treatise *Adversus mathematicos*:

> Πρὸς τούτοις ὅταν λέγωσι τὸ μὲν "ἡμέρα ἔστιν" ἀξίωμα ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος εἶναι ἀληθές, τὸ δὲ "νὺξ ἔστι" ψεῦδος, καὶ τὸ μὲν "οὐχὶ ἡμέρα ἔστι" ψεῦδος, τὸ δὲ "οὐχὶ νὺξ ἔστιν" ἀληθές, ἐπιστήσει <τις>, πῶς μία οὖσα καὶ ἡ αὐτὴ ἀπόφασις τοῖς μὲν ἀληθέσι προσελθοῦσα ψευδῆ ταῦτα ποιεῖ, τοῖς δὲ ψευδέσιν ἀληθῆ. **ὅμοιον γάρ ἐστι τοῦτο τῷ κατὰ τὸ Αἰσώπειον αἴνιγμα Σειληνῷ, ὃς ὁρῶν τὸν αὐτὸν ἄνθρωπον χειμῶνος ὥρᾳ καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ ψύχεσθαι τὰς χεῖρας [ἐμφυσῶντα] καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ καίεσθαι ἐμφυσῶντα τῷ στόματι, ἔφη μὴ ἂν ὑπομεῖναι τοιούτῳ θηρίῳ συζῆν ἐξ οὗ τὰ ἐναντιώτατα προέρχεται.** [104] ὧδε γὰρ καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ ἀπόφασις τὰ μὲν ὑπάρχοντα ἀνύπαρκτα ποιοῦσα, τὰ δὲ ἀνύπαρκτα ὑπαρκτά, τεραστίου φύσεως μετείληφεν.
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> (Sext. Emp. *Math.* 8.103–104 M./M.)

> Furthermore, when they say that the proposition "It is day" is at present true but "It is night" false, and "It is not day" false but "It is not night" true, one will ponder how a negative, which is one and the same, when attached to things true makes them false, and attached to things false makes them true. **For this is like the Silenus in the riddle of Aesop who, on seeing the same man in the winter season blowing with his mouth both to save his hands from being cold, and to save himself from being burnt, declared that he could not endure to live with a beast of a kind such that out of him proceed things most opposite.** Thus, too, the negative itself, by making existing things non-existent and non-existents existent, partakes of the miraculous.
>
> (Transl. Bury, with modifications)

In this extract, Sextus Empiricus discusses the paradoxical nature of linguistic negation and its ontological implications. To make this in his view 'miraculous' (τεραστίου φύσεως) abstract concept, which influences the value of different statements in completely opposite ways, more tangible, the author employs the Aesopic fable of the "Wanderer and the Satyr", introduced as part of a comparison (cf. ὅμοιον). This embedded fable, which also features as a standalone text in ancient collections,[27] sees a human wanderer and a satyr meet in a wintry landscape; at first, the wanderer blows into his hands to try and warm them up from the freezing cold outside. However, when the satyr invites him to his cave and offers him hot food and wine as a gesture of hospitality, he witnesses the human blow on the boiling food to cool it down to a consumable temperature. Shocked by this seemingly unnatural, contradictory power, the satyr throws the wanderer out again into the cold. In Sextus Empiricus' version, the fable serves an illustrative function, it supports the preceding argument to which the author circles back in the concluding

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27 Such as Aesop. 35 P. [= Hsr; 60 Ch.] or Avian. 29; cf. also Arist. [*Pr.*] 964a10–18; Plut. *Mor.* 947f for allusions to the fable in other literary works.

sentence at the end of the passage and the beginning of which even bears traces of formulaic language similar to an epimythium (cf. ὧδε γὰρ). As the example shows, fabulistic narratives can be used in literary texts for argumentative or illustrative purposes in a similar way to other rhetorical elements and figures of speech such as exempla, similes, parables or metaphors. In this case, an audience's interpretation and evaluation of the fable strongly depends on the literary context in which it is embedded.[28]

In contrast to this, fables can also become 'containers' themselves and absorb or accommodate elements of other literary genres. Examples for this process are found in the fable collections of the imperial age, which constitute self-standing books of poetry. Let us consider the following fable in Phaedrus' fifth book of *fabulae Aesopiae*:

> Tu qui, nasute, scripta destringis mea
> Et hoc iocorum legere fastidis genus,
> Parua libellum sustine patientia,
> Seueritatem frontis dum placo tuae
> Et in cothurnis prodit Aesopus nouis.   5
> **Utinam nec umquam Pelii nemoris iugo**
> **Pinus bipenni concidisset Thessala,**
> **Nec ad professae mortis audacem uiam**
> **Fabricasset Argus opere Palladio ratem,**
> **Inhospitalis prima quae ponti sinus   10**
> **Patefecit in perniciem Graium et barbarum!**
> **Namque et superbi luget Aeetae domus,**
> **Et regna Peliae scelere Medeae iacent,**
> **Quae saeuum ingenium uariis inuoluens modis**
> **Illic per artus fratris explicuit fugam,   15**
> **Hic caede patris Peliadum infecit manus.**
> Quid tibi uidetur? "Hoc quoque insulsum est" ait
> "Falsoque dictum; longe quia uetustior
> Aegaea Minos classe perdomuit freta
> Iustoque uindicauit exemplo impetum".   20
> Quid ergo possum facere tibi, lector Cato,
> Si nec fabellae te iuuant nec fabulae?
> Noli molestus esse omnino litteris,

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28 One might argue that the pro- and epimythia, which regularly appear in fable collections and whose origin is often unclear, bear witness to the fluid nature of fabulistic narratives in light of changing contexts — while they provide a (more or less ambiguous) basis of interpretation, removing them often shifts a reader's focus on different aspects of the fable within a new interpretative frame. In the above example, the final sentence serves a very similar function of contextualising and interpreting the embedded fable narrative.

Maiorem exhibeant ne tibi molestiam.
Hoc illis dictum est, qui stultitia nauseant   25
Et ut putentur sapere caelum uituperant.
                    (Phaed. 5.7 Z. [= 4.7 G.])

You, nosey one, who scorn my writings and feel reluctance to read this kind of jesting, bear this little book with a little patience as long as I smooth the severity of your brow and Aesop appears in new cothurns.
Oh, if only the spruce had never fallen through the double axe, the Thessalian one, on the crest of the Pelian grove, and Argus had not carpentered a ship with Palladian art for the bold path of obvious death, which was the first to open the bays of the inhospitable sea to the ruin of the Greeks and barbarians! For both the arrogant house of Aeetes mourns, and the kingdom of Pelias lies in ruin through the crime of Medea, who — concealing her wild mind in various ways — made her escape possible there with the help of her brother's limbs, and stained her hands here by murdering the father of the Peliades.
How do you like that? "This too is witless," he says, "and falsely spoken; because much earlier Minos conquered the Aegean Sea with his fleet and avenged himself with just punishment for an attack." So what can I do for you, reader Cato, if you like neither my fables nor my tragedies? Be not at all troublesome to literature, lest it cause you greater discomfort. This is said for those who show disgust because of their stupidity and, in order to be considered intelligent, blame heaven.

(Transl. U.G./L.S.)

This unusual fable, for which no parallel versions exist in ancient collections, engages heavily with the generic conventions of tragedy.[29] Addressing an anonymous critic characterized as a Cato in the exposition (1–5), the speaker reacts to his criticism of the fables, asks him to be patient and offers him a piece of his Aesop in tragic buskins instead: *Et in cothurnis prodit Aesopus nouis.* Suddenly, he breaks out into a prologue to a Roman tragedy *Medea* (6–16), which is set off from the rest of the poem not only by subject matter — Phaedrus' account closely follows both Euripides' and Ennius' prologues to their versions of the play — but also by metre, seeing as it consists mostly of tragic trimeters instead of Phaedrus' usual iambic senarius. A reader familiar with the generic tradition of tragedy might be inclined to laugh at the fact that Phaedrus dresses up Aesop as Medea's nurse who usually speaks the prologue in other versions of the play. Furthermore, the fable's engagement with the tradition of this prominent example of tragedy is also reflected in a number of lexical references and in the fact that the passage mirrors the beginnings of both Euripides' and Ennius' prologues. Following his recital, the speaker

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29 For Phaedrus' playful take on tragedy in this fable, cf. Gärtner 2017; on fable and drama, see also Gärtner's, Pütz's, and Mordeglia's contributions in this volume.

interrupts himself (17–20), addresses the critic again and asks his opinion; when the critic repeats his disapproval of the poem but bases it on the factual value of the content instead of style, the speaker answers with a rhetorical question that concludes the fable (21–24) and suggests that he stop engaging with literature altogether; an epimythium (25–26) then offers a generalising interpretation.

Phaedrus' prologue to his *Medea* as part of this fable displays typical generic markers that an ancient audience would have expected from tragedy on the level of form and content, such as subject matter, characters, metre, lexical allusions or tragic style and pathos. But in the context of fable, the speaker's goal is not the serious composition of tragedy but solely to poke fun at his opposite, the mean critic. The abrupt changes in content, register, and communicative situation from fable to tragedy and back again within the poem are motivated and supported by the generic expectations that the different sections elicit — they are a driving force behind its parodistic, comical nature. With this fable, then, Phaedrus inscribes himself in a tradition of tragic parodies, a caricature of literary criticism, and the discourse surrounding paratragedy more generally.

5 Some notes on methodology

These examples are representative of the kinds of phenomena that the following chapters discuss. Considering the breadth of texts and topics covered in this volume, one cannot hope to provide a unified methodological blueprint which maps onto every chapter to the same degree. However, what connects all the contributions collected here is a focus on the concept of genre as an analytical category for literary interpretation. They examine the interrelation between the ancient fable — as in the contextualized or independent forms presented above — and works that are traditionally associated with genres other than fable literature. Depending on individual standpoints, their insights shed light on different aspects of how texts construct meaning *vis-à-vis* an audience and their generic expectations.

Of course, the following chapters approach these questions from various perspectives and degrees of granularity: while in some cases, statements on the parameters of a whole group of texts can be made, other contributions present results that aim to advance the understanding of specific works or passages thereof through the analytical potential of genre. Moreover, not all examples will reveal their generic interactions with the same intensity — they can be pronounced and explicit as in Phaedrus' fable presented above or realized in a more loose or implicit manner. Thus, we cannot claim to offer an exhaustive overview of all literary

genres as they relate to and interact with the ancient fable — nor would that be our intention.

Instead, we are convinced that through the fruitful combination of different analytical scopes and areas of Graeco-Latin literature it is possible to highlight tendencies in some ancient texts more comprehensively and in more detail. Such an approach promises to open up new perspectives also on established literary genres with a stronger traditional footing in classical scholarship, which result from observing them through the lens of fable; at the same time, this volume serves to illuminate the position of fable literature in the broader literary history of antiquity and further motivate a reflection on the modern concept of genre as an open and dynamic analytical tool rather than a normative signpost of typological in- or exclusion.

6 Overview

Since genre represents an essential aspect of all the contributions presented here, it will not surprise readers to see that generic considerations also play a role in the structure of this volume. The following chapters are grouped together into sections that each focus on the interrelation between fables and specific genres of the Graeco-Roman tradition (or a group thereof), broadly conceived. Of course, not every single contribution neatly fits in one — and only one — category, seeing as many chapters touch on several different genres while others are more strongly bound together by thematic or historical rather than generic considerations; furthermore, not every literary genre can be covered, which necessarily makes the list of discussed texts a selective one. Nevertheless, our hope is that the presented arrangement provides readers with an informative overview of the ways in which fables pervade the literary culture of Graeco-Roman antiquity and beyond.

Following this introduction, the first section of the volume is dedicated to the relationship between fable and narrative or didactic epic. In his contribution, **Bruno Currie** discusses the famous fable of the "Hawk and the Nightingale" embedded in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and describes it as an abbreviated version of a fabular narrative present in the later collections of the Aesopic tradition and alluded to in Classical Greek literature. **Keating McKeon** on the other hand examines elements of fable in Homeric epic, particularly in the 24th book of the *Iliad*, thereby probing the permeable boundaries between a comparative epic simile and a condensed fable narrative.

Section two is concerned with the connection between fables and elegiac poetry. **Giovanni Zago** looks at intergeneric relationships in the fables of Avianus: he discusses the implications of considering intertextuality — in general, but

particularly with regard to the elegiac tradition — in the constitution of Avianus' text, which can provide helpful tools to solve uncertainties in textual transmission and inspire new emendations. Following from this, **Christopher Poms** sheds light on echoes of Roman love elegy in the fables of Avianus, focusing on the collection's two opening poems and its accompanying paratextual epistle and highlighting possible metapoetic effects.

The volume's third section examines the interrelation between fable and comedy. **Babette Pütz** discusses the use of fables in Aristophanes' *Vespae*, *Pax*, and *Lysistrata* as narrative elements which highlight pivotal themes of the plays — age dynamics, poetics, and gender, respectively. In her contribution, **Ursula Gärtner** traces references to comedy and their function in the fables of Phaedrus, touching on aspects of form, motifs, characters, and the saturnalian element common to both genres. Finally, **Caterina Mordeglia**, using the example of Phaedrus and Publilius Syrus, explores the close connection between fable and the Roman mime and reflects on the methodological complexity of pinpointing parallels to genres of which we have only fragmentary evidence.

The following section four focuses on the relationship between fables and various prose genres such as works on philosophy, natural history, historiography, or rhetoric. In her chapter, **Hedwig Schmalzgruber** discusses parallels between fables and examples of nature writing of the imperial period such as the works of Pliny the Elder or Aelianus, emphasizing the poetic realism of certain animal depictions in Phaedrus' collection with regard to content and style. Following this, **Claudia Luchetti** looks at Aesopic fabulistic echoes and their function in Plato's *Phaedo* and illustrates how this dialogue's argumentative framework builds on narrative patterns connected to the figure of Aesop. **Vittorio Bottini** then explores generic interactions between the fables of Babrius and Plato's *Phaedo* and *Politicus* and their significance for the fabulist's poetic programme (e.g. with regard to fictionalization). **Damian Pierzak** discusses the influence of rhetorical theory on the use of fables as a means of persuasion in ancient literature and evaluates the question whether they were actually used in ancient oratory before the advent of the fable collections of the imperial period. Rounding off this section, **Simona Martorana** traces the adaptation of the famous fable of the "Belly and the Members" across different literary genres, such as historiography, biography, *Fachliteratur*, Socratic dialogues or self-standing fable collections, from antiquity to the Middle Ages.

The fifth section deals with the interaction between fables and the ancient novel. In her contribution, **Silvia Mattiacci** highlights different parallels between the fables of Phaedrus and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* to illustrate programmatic and thematic convergences between ancient 'popular' genres.

Section six is concerned with the connection between fable and the ancient epigram. **Lukas Spielhofer** examines the presence and function of generic markers in the fables of Babrius, focusing on both epic and epigrammatic poetry to question the broader notion of genre in the fabulistic tradition. The influence of epigrams is also a defining question in **Margot Neger's** chapter which illuminates the parallels between the fables of Avianus and different types of ancient 'minor poetry' with regard to formal aspects, motifs, characters, and poetology. Finally, **Federica Scognamiglio's** contribution focuses on the role of fable in the development of new, self-standing genres in the Byzantine period — such as by way of *metaphrasis*, as is the case in a book of fabulistic-epigrammatic four-line poetry (*Tetrasticha*) by Ignatios the Deacon.

The volume's seventh and final section focuses on the relationship between the ancient fable and different genres stemming from the tradition of (early) Christian literature. Bridging the gap from the preceding chapters, **Maria Christodoulou's** contribution looks at generic elements of and allusions to animal fable in Gregory of Nazianzus' writings, particularly his epistles and Christian epigrams in the *Palatine Anthology*. Shifting the focus to biblical texts, **Justin Strong** sheds light on the techniques and functions of embedding fables (i.e. parables) in the Gospels of the New Testament as adaptations of the fabulistic genre in different cultural contexts. In her chapter, **Montserrat Camps-Gaset** discusses the role of anthropomorphized speaking animals in the *Acta Thomae* and highlights parallels between fable literature and the apocryphal writings of the Acts of the Apostles genre.

As already mentioned, the questions outlined here could be extended to other genres; with this volume, we aim to provide a first impression of fabulistic genre interactions and encourage further research. We hope that future studies will offer even more exciting and multifaceted insights into the world of ancient fable.

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