Part III: **Fable and Comedy**

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Not For Beetle Brains: Fables in Aristophanes

Abstract: The fable most frequently used in Aristophanes' comedies is that of "The Dung beetle and the Eagle". It appears in *Vespae*, *Pax*, and *Lysistrata*, each time with a slightly different focus and new jokes. This fable lends itself perfectly to Aristophanes' humour and it comes as no surprise that in all three passages the fable-tellers identify themselves with the lowly dung beetle, who triumphs over the much stronger eagle and even tricks Zeus himself. Furthermore, the fable is used to highlight other important themes in the plays: in *Vespae* the theme of a role-reversal of old and young, in *Pax* the rivalry between comedy and tragedy, and in *Lysistrata* gender.

1 Introduction

Dung beetles are funny: The little insects roll dung — their food — into balls much larger than themselves, climb up onto the balls with great effort and clumsily tumble down at the other side. Also, their apparent business and persistence in their job of tidying up other animals' messes have something humorous about it. The ancient Greeks evidently saw this the same way as we do now, so it does not come as too much of a surprise that the fable most frequently embedded in Aristophanes' comedies is that of the dung beetle and the eagle. The three relevant passages are *Vesp.* 1446–1449, *Pax* 127–314, and *Lys.* 695. The repetition of the same fable does not become boring however, because in each instance Aristophanes has a focus on a slightly different aspect of the fable and uses it for different jokes. This chapter, which aims to be a starting point for a wider conversation about fables in Aristophanes, will analyse these three passages as examples for the great versatility with which Aristophanes employs fable allusions.

2 Aesop's fable of "The Dung beetle and the Eagle"

This fable has been transmitted in three versions (Aesop. 3 I–III Hsr.), starting with a simple, straightforward tale (3 I) which became more and more embellished,

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especially in *Vit. Aesop*. 135–139 G [= 3 III Hsr.].[1] Aesop's fable, in its simplest form, tells the following story:[2] A dung beetle tried to save a hare from an eagle, warning the eagle that the hare was under his protection, but the eagle killed and devoured the hare, as he overlooked the dung beetle because of his small size.[3] Angrily, and unnoticed by the eagle, the dung beetle followed the bird to his nest and, whenever the eagle laid an egg, the dung beetle smashed it. The eagle was upset.[4] So he placed his eggs into Zeus' lap for protection. The dung beetle, however, made a dung ball and placed it into the god's lap.[5] Zeus completely forgot about the eggs in his lap and stood up to shake the dung ball off his clothes, so that the eagle's eggs were broken yet again. Since then, eagles never lay eggs at times when dung beetles are about.[6]

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1 We cannot be sure which version of the fable Aristophanes refers to. His allusions do not mention any material which is not already found in version I Hsr.

2 Aesop. 3 P. [= 3 I Hsr.; 4 Ch.]; cf. *Vit. Aesop.* 135–139 G. The fable is found in three slightly different versions (cf. 3 I–III Hsr.); the first reads like this: ΑΕΤΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΚΑΝΘΑΡΟΣ. ἀετὸς λαγωὸν ἐδίωκεν. ὁ δὲ ἐν ἐρημίᾳ τῶν βοηθησόντων ὑπάρχων, ὃν μόνον ὁ καιρὸς παρέσχεν, κάνθαρον ἰδὼν, τοῦτον ἱκέτευεν. ὁ δὲ παραθαρσύνας αὐτὸν, ὡς ἐγγὺς ἐλθόντα τὸν ἀετὸν ἐθεάσατο, παρεκάλει μὴ ἀπάγειν αὐτοῦ τὸν ἱκέτην. κάκεῖνος ὑπεριδὼν τῆν σμικρότητα ἐν ὄψει τοῦ κανθάρου τὸν λαγωὸν κατεθοινήσατο. ὁ δὲ ἀπ' ἐκείνου μνησικακῶν διετέλει παρατηρούμενος τοῦ ἀετοῦ τὰς καλιὰς καί, εἴ ποτε ἐκεῖνος ἔτικτε, μετάρσιος αἰρόμενος ἐκύλιε τὰ ὠὰ καὶ κατέασσε, μέχρις οὗ πανταχόθεν ἐλαυνόμενος ὁ ἀετὸς ἐπὶ τὸν Δία κατέφυγεν — καὶ αὐτοῦ ἐδεήθη τόπον αὐτῷ πρὸς νεοττοποιίαν ἀσφαλῆ παρασχεῖν. τοῦ δὲ Διὸς ἐν τοῖς κόλποις αὐτοῦ τίκτειν ἐπιτρέψαντος αὐτῷ ὁ κάνθαρος τοῦτο ἐωρακὼς, κόπρου σφαῖραν ποιήσας ἀνέπτη καὶ γενόμενος κατὰ τοὺς τοῦ Διὸς κόλπους ἐνταῦθα καθῆκεν. ὁ δὲ Ζεὺς ἀποσείσασθαι τὴν κόπρον βουλόμενος, ὡς διανέστη ἔλαθεν τὰ ὠά ἀπορρίψας. ἀπ' ἐκείνου τέ φασιν περὶ ὃν καιρὸν οἱ κάνθαροι γίνονται, τοὺς ἀετοὺς μὴ νεοττεύειν. — ὁ λόγος διδάσκει μηδενὸς καταφρονεῖν, λογιζομένους ὅτι οὐδεὶς οὕτως ἐστὶν ἀδύνατος ὡς προπηλακισθεὶς μὴ δύνασθαι ποτε ἑαυτὸν ἐκδικῆσαι. On the tradition of this fable in antiquity, see von Möllendorff 1994, 141–161.

3 In fable 3 III Hsr., the eagle not only notices the dung beetle and chooses to disregard him, but also brushes him away with his wing.

4 In fable 3 III Hsr., the eagle blames Zeus' wrath for the loss of his eggs, thinking that the god wants to make eagles a rarer species.

5 In contrast, in fable 3 III Hsr., the beetle, full of dung, flies at Zeus' face, rather than dropping a dung ball into his lap. Furthermore, version III Hsr. foregrounds Zeus' role as protector of suppliants, with Zeus displaying a keen sense of retributive justice: He points out that it is the eagle himself who is responsible for his sufferings. The stronger moralistic tone and emphasis on justice in this version of the fable might be explained by it being part of the *Accursiana* recension of the fable corpus (possibly by the Byzantine monk Planudes: see Karla 2003, 661–662).

6 This part is particularly embellished in version III Hsr. of this fable, including a conversation between Zeus and the dung beetle about the eagle's guilt, the beetle's refusal to stop his revenge and Zeus, wanting to preserve the species of eagles, changing the eagles' nesting time to a time of year without dung beetles. The *scholion* to *Pax* 130 mentions some slight variants to the fable, in particular that the eagle offended the beetle by stealing its young (rather than by killing the

This fable is an aetiology, explaining why the breeding-season of eagles is at a time when no dung beetles are seen. It tells a story which continues over quite a long time for a fable: multiple years, or, more specifically in version III, three eagle breeding seasons. In this way, this fable depicts the dung beetle as holding a grudge for a very long time and being extremely tenacious in his efforts to take revenge on the eagle. The cause of the anger of the dung beetle is important, too, as (at least in the best-known versions) it was not the insect itself who was harmed by the eagle, but a hare that the dung beetle had tried to protect from the eagle. This places the dung beetle in this fable in a strongly positive light, as a defender of what is morally right, rather than his own interests.

The dung beetle is the typical fable creature that wins against the odds: the small, lowly dung beetle outwits the eagle, Zeus' special bird, and not only once, but repeatedly, and even manages to trick Zeus himself.[7] The dung beetle in Aesop's fable, in fact, is shown to use its small size to its advantage, as it makes it easy for him to remain unnoticed, while following the eagle to find his nest, and then to hide, after destroying the eggs. The beetle's great strength relative to his size and the ability to roll large round objects enable him to break the eagle's eggs, in combination with his cleverness, tenacity and even his disgustingness, which he employs shamelessly in order to make Zeus jump up in revulsion. For such a small, low-status insect, this dung beetle certainly has much destructive power and he has our sympathies against the cruel, arrogant eagle.

It is surprising that the eagle, as Zeus' special bird, seems to be unaware of the god being the protector of those who are seeking refuge. Had he taken this fact into consideration, surely, he would have realized that getting Zeus involved, by placing his eggs into the god's lap, might be counterproductive. It is not clear whether the eagle is meant to be ignorant or arrogant. Is he ignoring Zeus' role as protector of refugees because he feels so sure of his special relationship with the god that he

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refugee-hare). This variant does not make much of a difference for a discussion of Aristophanes' use of the fable. See Sommerstein 1985, ad *Pax* 133; Olson 1998, xxxiv–xxxv; Ewbank 1980, 184–185 mentions Semonides *fr*. 11 West and Lucian. *Icar*. 10 as further sources relating to aspects of this fable. Semonides' fragment has been interpreted as quoting Zeus' words when he sees the flying beetle (ἑρπετόν) in the context of this fable. He is depicted as saying that this insect was leading the worst way of life of all creatures, clearly commenting on its involvement with dung. The Lucan passage briefly mentions that Aesop had eagles, beetles (κάνθαροι) (and sometimes camels) go to heaven. Neither passage tells us much about the actual plot of the fable.

7 There was even a proverb, κανθάρου σοφώτερος – "cleverer than a dung beetle", which according to Zenobius (4.65) was derived from this fable. The exact meaning of the proverb is unclear, but as Zenobius connects it with this particular fable, it seems best to translate it as "*even* cleverer than the dung beetle", so the sense is that the dung beetle, as in the fable, is a particularly clever creature.

does not even question whether the god will support his side, no matter the issue of the dispute? Yet, the eagle is punished for his crime of killing the hare not once, but repeatedly, by losing his entire brood. It also does not make sense that the eagle, in version III Hsr., after his eggs have been destroyed a second time and he is unable to find the culprit, concludes that it must be Zeus' intention to eliminate the race of eagles, but then, illogically, decides to place his eggs into the protection of exactly the god whom he considers responsible for having destroyed his eggs twice already.

Zeus clearly cares deeply about the protection of supplicants because, in version III, even though at the end of the fable the eagle has lost its eggs, which should be a fair enough revenge for his crime, he has no sympathy for the eagle but tells him that he got his just deserts.[8] It is surprising that Zeus, in this particular version of the fable, refers to the eagle's crime as having mistreated the beetle, not as having mistreated the hare, but it is likely that this phrasing is meant to keep the focus on the antagonistic relationship of the two enemies only.

Also in the third version, Aesop's dung beetle still does not feel that the eagle has been punished enough and reminds Zeus that his own bird has also been blasphemous towards him, but now Zeus, like a parent of two children who refuse to stop bickering, has finally had enough and finds a strategy to separate them. Furthermore, eagles are his favourite birds and so he devises a practical solution which will ensure that eagles will be able to breed without being attacked by dung beetles, by shifting their breeding season into a beetle-free time of year.

What is this fable's moral, then?[9] Most obviously: Do not believe that, only because you are strong and have powerful friends, you will not have to pay for your misdeeds. Or, the other way around: Nobody is too powerless to take revenge when they are angry enough. And possibly: At some point it is time to stop one's revenge, even when one is morally in the right.

So, this fable is one of the tales where the underdog wins the day. Most strikingly, the dung beetle uses its own disgustingness successfully to trick the king of

8 Aesop. 3 III.18–22 Hsr.: μαθὼν δὲ πρὸς τοῦ κανθάρου, ὅτι ταῦτ᾽ ἔδρασε τὸν ἀετὸν ἀμυνόμενος, οὐ γὰρ δὴ τὸν κάνθαρον ἐκεῖνος μόνον ἠδίκησεν ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰς τὸν Δία αὐτὸν ἠσέβησε, πρὸς τὸν ἀετὸν εἶπεν ἐλθόντα κάνθαρον εἶναι τὸν λυποῦντα καὶ δὴ καὶ δικαίος λυπεῖν; ("When Zeus had learned of the wrong that the dung beetle had suffered and that he had acted in this way towards the eagle in revenge, as he [the eagle] not only had mistreated the dung beetle but also had acted impiously towards Zeus himself, he [Zeus] said to the eagle, upon his return, that the dung beetle was the aggrieved one and for this reason justly gave pain to him [the eagle]").

9 Sommerstein 1983, *ad Vesp.* 1448, mentions the following morals: "Nobody is so powerless that he cannot take revenge if insulted" and "The wicked will not escape retribution even if they flee to the bosom of Zeus" but without their sources. Ewbank 1980, 185, cites as a source Aesop. 3 P. [= 3 I Hsr.].

the gods himself. The combination of θεομαχία and scatology in this fable was clearly irresistible to a comedian like Aristophanes. The following part of this chapter will discuss each of the three instances in which Aristophanes employs this fable. In all three relevant comedies, the fable-telling characters, unsurprisingly, associate themselves with the fable's protagonist, the dung beetle.

3 The fable in Aristophanes

3.1 *Vespae*

Vespae is a play which is particularly full of fable-telling, fitting its animal theme.[10] *Vespae* tells the story of an old man, Philocleon, who suffers from an extreme obsession with attending jury service, to his son Bdelycleon's great annoyance. The young man has taken over the running of the household, and, to avoid embarrassment through his father's unconventional behaviour, has locked him up in his own house to prevent him from attending jury service.

After the fight with the wasp-chorus and the famous dog-trial, Bdelycleon, who enjoys luxurious drinking parties with his aristocratic friends, tries to teach his father, who prefers to live a poor man's lifestyle and detests the pretentious behaviour of his son's wealthy friends, how to behave properly at a symposium. This includes advice on what sorts of stories to tell, not only to amuse and entertain the other guests, but also to talk himself out of difficulties, in case he gets himself into trouble when drunk: λόγον [...] ἀστεῖον [...] Αἰσωπικὸν γέλοιον ἢ Συβαριτικόν ("You can tell him <your accuser> some witty story, a funny Aesopic or Sybaritic fable", Ar. *Vesp.* 1258–1259), ὧν ἔμαθες ἐν τῷ συμποσίῳ· κᾆτ' ἐς γέλων τὸ πρᾶγμ' ἔτρεψας, ὥστ' ἀφείς σ' ἀποίχεται ("one of the stories you learned at the party, and then you've turned the whole thing into a joke, so he lets you off and goes on his merry way", Ar. *Vesp.* 1260–1261).[11]

Finally, Bdelycleon takes his father to a symposium, where Philocleon indeed gets very drunk and tells a number of witty, but offending stories and then departs, with a flute-girl in tow, and commits theft, vandalism and assault. As his son recommended, Philocleon tells his accusers fables (Ar. *Vesp.* 1399–1440), but they are outrageous inventions of his own, which are not intended to mollify the accusers'

10 Schirru 2009, 70, calls Philocleon a true Aesopic hero (vero e propio eroe esopico) in a drama that pays homage to Aesop.

11 Translations of Aristophanes are taken from Henderson (1998 and 2000), sometimes with small changes.

righteous anger, but to rudely dismiss their complaints. Just before things get completely out of hand, Bdelycleon storms onto the stage, picks up his father and carries him back into the house.

In his indignation at his son's restraining him, Philocleon tries to tell a short story which is a combination of a tale from the *Life of Aesop* and the fable of the dung beetle and the eagle.[12] The fact that it is enough to merely allude to both stories very briefly shows how well-known they must have been to the audience.

Φ: Αἴσωπον οἱ Δελφοί ποτ' – Β: ὀλίγον μοι μέλει.
Φ: – φιάλην ἐπῃτιῶντο κλέψαι τοῦ θεοῦ.
ὁ δ' ἔλεξεν αὐτοῖς ὡς ὁ κάνθαρός ποτε –
Β: οἴμ' ὡς ἀπολεῖς με τοῖσι σοῖσι κανθάροις.
(Ar. *Vesp*. 1445–1448)

Philocleon: "One time the Delphians accused Aesop –" Bdelycleon: "I'm not interested." Philocleon: "– of stealing a bowl from the god. He told them how once upon a time the beetle –" Bdelycleon: "Damn it, you'll be the death of me with these beetles!"[13]
(Transl. Henderson)

The first part of Philocleon's fable alludes to a well-known story that Aesop, annoyed that he was not rewarded, as he felt he should be, by the Delphians for his fable-telling, made some insulting remarks about them.[14] In revenge, the Delphians, who were worried that he would give them a bad reputation in Greece, decided on a plot to kill him: When he was leaving Delphi, they secretly put in his luggage a golden bowl taken from a temple to Apollo, then caught him on his way, sued him for sacrilege and condemned him to death.

According to this story, Aesop, before his execution, told the Delphians the story of the dung beetle and the eagle, hinting that they would pay for treating him so badly, no matter how powerful and closely connected with a god they were.[15] In *Vespae*, Philocleon implies the same message, directed at his son. Bdelycleon may

12 See Pertsinidis 2020, 141–159 for a detailed analysis of the meaning of the dung beetle fable in connection with Aesop's situation in this story. See Konstantakos 2021, 245–246 for a short discussion of Philocleon's affinity with fables.

13 For a detailed and convincing discussions of the different emendations to this line, see Biles/Olson 2015, *ad Vesp.* 1449.

14 See *scholia* and *Vit. Aesop.* 124 G with Sommerstein 1983 and Biles/Olson 2015, *ad Vesp.* 1446–1447.

15 See Biles/Olson 2015; Sommerstein 1983, *ad Vesp.* 1446–1448. Hausrath's version III of the fable is quoted at this place in the *Vita Aesopi*. Schirru 2009, 57 stresses that the joke of the fable lies not so much in its content but the background story, with Philocleon comparing his own situation, which he feels is unjust, to that of Aesop's unjust accusation by the Delphians. Schirru 2009, 98, notes that the joke of the passage lies in the cheekiness of Philocleon comparing himself to Aesop.

be physically stronger and well connected, but Philocleon refuses to put up with his bad treatment. It is notable, though, and adds to the humour of the passage, that while Aesop in this story was innocent and wrongly accused, Philocleon is clearly guilty of theft and several other misdemeanours.[16]

In this short passage, Philocleon has turned the tables on his son: He does indeed employ Bdelycleon's advice to tell a fable when in trouble, but uses it against Bdelycleon himself. The focus in this scene is on the two characters' role reversal, with old Philocleon now acting like an irresponsible, out-of-control youngster. Like a stereotypical young man, inexperienced in proper behaviour at a symposium, he gets completely drunk, causes much mayhem, runs off with a flute-girl (Ar. *Vesp.* 1368–1369) and adds insult to injury through his insolent stories, when he is confronted by the victims of his drunken behaviour. All the wine he has drunk has somehow rejuvenated him, and he uses his new-found energies for nothing but mischief.

His son, who clearly avoided getting drunk at the party, yet is unable to rein in his father's behaviour, is exasperated and highly embarrassed by the old man, as one would expect a stereotypical father in comedy to be with his stereotypical teenage son. At this point in the play, he is at a loss as to how to prevent Philocleon from doing more harm, except by physically wrestling the unruly old man back into the house (Ar. *Vesp.* 1443–1445).

This change of roles is cleverly emphasized through the use of the fable: Philocleon identifies himself with the beetle who is tricking Zeus into jumping up off his throne, whereas earlier in the play, speaking about his adult-role as a juror, he compared himself to Zeus, regarding his power. Then he said: ἆρ᾽ οὐ μεγάλην ἀρχὴν ἄρχω καὶ τοῦ Διὸς οὐδὲν ἐλάττω, | ὅστις ἀκούω ταὔθ᾽ ἅπερ ὁ Ζεύς ("So don't I wield great authority, as great as Zeus? I'm even spoken of in the same way as Zeus.", Ar. *Vesp.* 619–620). The shift in perspective goes hand in hand with the great versatility Philocleon displays when re-imagining himself as all sorts of animals in his escape attempts earlier in the play (Ar. *Vesp.* 126–213). He is an opportunist who changes roles as it fits his needs at any given moment.

16 Van Dijk 1997, 193, notes that the jar stands for the vase in which legal evidence was kept. Avdoulou 2020, 123–125 and 128–130, interprets the use of this fable as a threat, in *Vespae* and other comedies and connects it with the iambic tradition. However, here Philocleon seems to be more concerned with defending himself against his son physically removing him from the scene, rather than uttering a threat. Similarly, in the dung beetle scene in *Pax*, Trygaeus is not planning to threaten Zeus but to ask him the question what the god was trying to do to the Greeks (ἐρησόμενος […] ὅ τι ποιεῖν βουλεῦεται; "asking […] what he is going to do", Ar. *Pax* 105–106) and will only indict him should he refuse to answer (Ar. *Pax* 107–108). Trygaeus does meet gods in the play, but never comes face to face with Zeus.

It was Bdelycleon himself, who previously had insisted that Philocleon was not like the king of the gods at all, but in fact was manipulated by the demagogue Cleon and his cronies. Now, the old man seems to finally have accepted his son's opinion, but not in the way that the young man had intended, i.e. that his father would quit his jury service and lead the quiet life of a respectable old man at home. Instead, Philocleon takes on the fierce, relentless and uncouth behaviour of the lowly dung beetle; and we, the audience, cheer for him (like we do for the dung beetle) when he makes his son regret over and over again to ever have locked him up against his will. Even after Bdelycleon drags Philocleon back into the house in this scene, he manages to pop out one last time and end the play in his very own style with a wild dancing competition — which undoubtedly would have been regarded as highly embarrassing by Bdelycleon. Here no *deus ex machina* appears to separate father and son, as Zeus does with the beetle and the eagle in the fable.

Vespae is teaming with animals — Philocleon pretending to be all sorts of animals, the wasp-chorus, the dogs in trial, a real-life donkey, animal comparisons galore and the exuberant crab-dance in the finale of the play. This fits the central theme of the play: the power of φύσις (nature) — represented by Philocleon — versus νόμος (custom) — represented by Bdelycleon. Aristophanes here, in a way, creates his own version of an animal-fable which includes further fables.[17] The beetle imagery fits not only the chorus' insect theme but also the play's sympotic focus,[18] as the same word, κάνθαρος, connotes both 'dung beetle' and the kind of bowl which was used at drinking parties to mix the wine.[19]

3.2 *Pax*

Just a year later, in 421 BCE, Aristophanes not only alludes to the dung beetle-fable again in *Pax*, but makes the dung beetle a wonderful stage-prop for a striking start to an otherwise less exuberant play. In *Pax*, the beetle serves (literally) as a comic means of air-travel, to comment on the rivalry of tragedy and comedy and, of course, to make jokes on the beetle's unsavoury feeding habits.

In this play, the protagonist, a farmer called Trygaeus, is so exasperated with the Peloponnesian War that he flies to heaven to personally ask Zeus why he

17 This is the case especially when his animal characters are used allegorically (like the dogs standing for two military leaders and politicians). As Miles 2017, 216, points out: "Here Aristophanes can take full advantage of the visual and musical opportunities offered by live-action performance drama in presenting the mix of human and animal."

18 See Pütz 2007, 19–32.

19 See LSJ s.v. κάνθαρος I. and II.

intends to destroy Greece. His ascent to heaven is an obvious parody of Bellerophon from Euripides' tragedy of the same name, yet Trygaeus' steed is not a spectacular Pegasus, but a lowly (even if grossly over-sized) dung beetle.[20] In practice, this was a model of a dung beetle, large enough for a man to ride on and attached to the stage-crane. It would have been a great spectacle and quite a surprise for the audience to see the same stage machinery, which in tragedy is used to let gods literally fly down from heaven to earth and solve human problems, now instead be employed to carry a human character up to the gods to take human affairs in his own hands, as the comic gods are clearly incapable and unwilling to help.

The play, like *Vespae*, starts with two slaves in conversation. The first slave is on stage, rolling cakes from a large mixing-dish filled with dung, whereas the second one rushes out of the door of Trygaeus' house, grabs a finished dung-cake and races back inside.[21] These are the first words of the play: αἶρ᾽ αἶρε μᾶζαν ὡς τάχιστα κανθάρῳ ("Give, give me a cake for the beetle, as quickly as possible!", Ar. *Pax* 1). The joke is here that κάνθαρος, beetle, is the same as the name of another comic poet, a rival of Aristophanes, who won the previous year's contest at the City Dionysia.[22] Not before line 7, when the audience hears that the dung-eater has rolled the cake with its feet (ποδοῖν, Ar. *Pax* 7) do they understand that this is about a dung beetle, not a human, though they would wonder how on earth a tiny dung beetle would swallow whole an entire dung-cake (ὅλην ἐνέκαψε, Ar. *Pax* 7). In real life, dung beetles only form their balls above ground, but eat them under ground,[23] but such a description of its rapacious appetite and stunning eating habits would be too funny to be left out in a comedy.

Ποδοῖν (Ar. *Pax* 7), feet, is, tellingly, in the dual form, meaning 'two feet'. This movement has been compared to real life dung beetle-behaviour, as they stand up on their two hind feet and use their front legs to shape any faeces they pick up into balls, as well as to the way in which they use their two fore *tibiae* to cut pieces out of dung, which they will then roll into balls, a movement which fits Aristophanes' description better and could, like in the ancient text, be mistaken for eating.[24]

Most importantly, the way Aristophanes describes the beetle to behave fits both the insect and a human, and this particular dung beetle, as we will see, repeatedly

20 It is unclear when this play was produced, sometime between 450 (the approx. beginning of the tragedian's career) and 426 BCE; see Olson 1998, xxxii.

21 Olson 1998, *ad Pax* 1–19 discusses the problems with line divisions in this passage. For my purposes here, it is not important which slave speaks which lines.

22 This is first suggested by Sommerstein 1990, *ad Pax* 1. As Sommerstein points out here, with references, being a 'shit-eater' was not an uncommon insult in ancient comedy.

23 Davies/Kathirithamby 1986, 88.

24 See Sommerstein 1990, *ad Pax* 7; Davies/Kathirithamby 1986, 89.

crosses the boundaries of human and animal: we are told that it has teeth (γομφίους ["molars"], Ar. *Pax* 34)[25] and two hands or arms (τὼ χεῖρέ, Ar. *Pax* 35). Furthermore, it can speak (φησιν, Ar. *Pax* 12) and is so conceited as to refuse to eat any dung that has not been kneaded to perfection (Ar. *Pax* 26). This description, using a mixture of human and animal features, and the beetle's extremely large size, combined with its revolting eating habits, make it a particularly grotesque and memorable fabulous creature, which immediately catches the audience's attention and draws them into the play before they even have seen the protagonist or heard what the plot will be about.

This scene gives the two slaves plenty of opportunity for excrement-related humour, including a joke on the expense of Cleon as a κεῖνος ἀναιδέως τὴν σπατίλην ἐσθίει ("shameless shit-eater", Ar. *Pax* 48), making the dung beetle into a political metaphor.[26] The reference to Cleon as an extra-large dung beetle in the underworld may also have been intended to remind the audience of Aristophanes' comedy *Vespae* from the previous year, in which he had depicted Cleon as a human-sized dog.[27]

In the following passage, one of the slaves, similar to the two slaves in *Vespae*, describes his master's mad behaviour, shouting at Zeus all the time. We hear that Trygaeus tried to reach heaven by climbing long ladders, but eventually fell off and injured his head. So instead, the previous day, he bought himself an enormous Etna Beetle (Ar. *Pax* 73), which he calls ὦ Πηγάσιόν μοι [...] γενναῖον πτερὸν ("my little Pegasus, my thoroughbred flyer", Ar. *Pax* 76) and treats like a young horse. This explains the monstrous size of the dung beetle (which the audience at this point is still only guessing at, as they have not yet seen the stage-prop) as Mount Aetna allegedly — that is, according to several mentions in ancient comedy and satyr play — was home to giant, man-sized beetles.[28] The endearing address of the

25 Olson 1998, *ad Pax* 33–34 explains the choice of words, molars instead of incisors, with its association of gluttony.

26 On the dung beetle as political metaphor, see Hall 2013, 293–294. Rosen 1988, 28–35, focusses on the identity of an Ionian audience member, whom the slave imagines here as speaking to another spectator, so linking the fable to the genre iambus. Olson 1998, *ad Pax* 47–48 refutes Rosen's 1988, 30–31 claim that this is a "proleptic allusion" to Aesopic fable. Olson thinks αἰνίσσεται (47) here, as elsewhere refers to uttering "any sort of dark and allusive sayings", including oracles which also often contain animal imagery. On the use of bad smells in this play to denote problems and war, see Bowie 1993, 135–136.

27 This character speaks Greek and so will have been played by a human actor. See also Miles 2017, 222.

28 See Davies/Kathirithamby 1986, 86; Sommerstein 1990 and Olson 1998, both *ad Pax* 72–73, all with references, especially from comedy and satyr play.

oversized insect as ὦ Πηγάσιόν μοι ("my little Pegasus", Ar. *Pax* 76) and πτερόν ("wing" or "flyer", Ar. *Pax* 76) is a parody of a line of Euripides' tragedy *Bellerophon* (Eur. *Beller. fr.* 306). Indeed, the entire passage of Trygaeus' flight to heaven is a parody of Bellerophon's flight in Euripides' play.[29]

Now the moment has come when the hefty dung beetle, with Trygaeus sitting astride it, is lifted into the air above the stage and the spectacle becomes visible to the audience (Ar. *Pax* 80–81).[30] As the slave has already told us, Trygaeus speaks with and treats the dung beetle like a Pegasus (Ar. *Pax* 82–89), except when he asks for all latrines to be walled shut and all arseholes to be locked up (Ar. *Pax* 99–101), presumably so the dung beetle will not be distracted from its path to heaven and lured back down to earth. Indeed, dung beetles rely on their sense of smell and hardly on their vision and hearing.[31] In antiquity it was even believed that dung beetles hated and could be harmed by sweet smells and could be killed by the smell of roses, rose petals, rose oil or perfume.[32]

Trygaeus' instructions here are written in anapaests, fitting the tragic parody as the same metre is used in the corresponding scene in Euripides' play. The diction is tragic, too, only for Aristophanes to suddenly drop to low level language when talking about the beetle's bad-smelling breath (μὴ πνεῖ μοι κακόν, "Don't breathe bad breath on me!", Ar. *Pax* 87) and people's bottoms (πρωκτούς, Ar. *Pax* 101), both reminding the audience of the disgustingness of the dung beetle.

Neither Trygaeus' slaves nor his daughter can persuade the comic hero to change his plans and come back to earth. Finally, he answers his daughter's question why he is flying a dung beetle to heaven (Ar. *Pax* 127–128) with a reference to Aesop: ἐν τοῖσιν Αἰσώπου λόγοις ἐξηυρέθη μόνος πετηνῶν εἰς θεοὺς ἀφιγμένος ("In Aesop's fables it's the only winged thing I could find that ever reached the gods.", Ar. *Pax* 129–130). This is a comic incongruency: In this fable, the eagle also flies to Zeus, and even arrives there first (before the dung beetle). It is only at first sight surprising that Trygaeus here completely ignores the eagle, as not only would Trygaeus not want to be associated with the loser of the fable, but also because the eagle, as a well-known symbol of war, is antithetical to Trygaeus.[33] To this, one could add that the eagle was seen as a kingly bird, so social class may also play a role here,

29 Cf. Sommerstein 1990, *ad Pax* 76; Olson 1998, *ad Pax* 76–77 and Intro, Section 3; Rau 1967, 89–97.

30 The beetle is wearing a bridle and reins and possibly a saddlecloth, but no saddle or stirrups; Sommerstein 1985, *ad Pax* 80–81.

31 Halffter/Matthews, 1966, 87 and Davies/Kathirithamby 1986, 88: "for these insects 'olfaction is the dominant sense' with visual and auditory stimuli very little, if at all developed".

32 Cf. Beavis 1988, 162, for ancient references.

33 Cf. Mann 2017, 302–306; Avdoulou 2020, 128. For a reference in Aristophanes which explicitly associates eagles with (kings in) tragedy, see Ar. *Av.* 511–515.

as to why the farmer Trygaeus immediately and exclusively associates himself with the dung beetle, rather than the eagle.[34] The eagle is, furthermore, associated with the serious genres of heroic epic and tragedy, while the protagonist of *Pax*, as his name Trygaeus suggests, represents the genre comedy (which Aristophanes often refers to as τρυγοδία). This contrast between the two dramatic genres becomes clear already in the first scene of the play, when Trygaeus' daughter warns him not to fall off and plummet to a tragic death like Bellerophon from Euripides' tragedy (Ar. *Pax* 146–148). When his daughter doubts that this κάκοσμον ζῷον ("stinky creature", Ar. *Pax* 132) could indeed make it to the gods, Trygaeus expands: ἦλθεν κατ᾽ ἔχθραν αἰετοῦ πάλαι ποτέ, | ᾧ ἐκκυλίνδων κἀντιτιμωρούμενος ("It went there, once upon a time, bearing a grudge against the eagle, and got revenge by rolling eggs from its nest.", Ar. *Pax* 133–134). In this way, the reference to the fable is made perfectly clear.

This passage is followed by a few more jokes from Trygaeus about beetle-related names for a ship-type, some place names and a panicked plea to the stage-crane-operator to be careful (Ar. *Pax* 174), when he makes them descend to the ground (which the audience is now supposed to imagine as heaven). Aristophanes gets all the humour he can out of his dung beetle fable allusion.

This is the most extensive beetle-scene in Aristophanes, but it focusses mostly on the humour of having a giant flying dung beetle stage prop in use and any excrement-related humour, which Aristophanes can possibly squeeze out of it. The fable is only briefly and partly alluded to, though we receive more information than in *Vespae*, as the dispute and the nature of the dung beetle's revenge on the eagle are at least mentioned. The fable reference makes it clear that Trygaeus has chosen a beetle to take him to the gods because its fable counterpart was so successful to elicit a reaction from Zeus. Unlike in *Vespae*, the focus here is not on the revenge aspect of the fable, but on the best way to reach the king of the gods, both in terms of transportation and of getting his attention. Trygaeus is as annoyed and determined as the beetle in the fable. He never actually meets Zeus in the play, but some other gods involved in the war, and he manages to free the goddess Peace, so he does achieve his goal, just like the beetle did.

Aristophanes cleverly uses the dung beetle imagery and stage prop to draw the audience into the humorous atmosphere of his comedy right from its start, with jokes on a variety of topics related to dung beetles as a species and their unusual habits of dung-eating and -rolling, including scatological humour and beetle-puns. In addition, there are numerous jokes on the beetle's role in Aesop's fable and the spoof on both the mythological creature Pegasus and Euripides' tragedy in which it

34 On fable telling and social class in *Vespae*, see Rothwell 1995, 233–254.

takes Bellerophon for a flight — though, in Euripides' play, this happened behind the scene, not literally, as in Trygaeus and his dung beetle swinging from the μηχανή. Whereas Euripides' Bellerophon falls off his noble steed and is crippled,[35] Trygaeus safely travels to heaven on his lowly dung beetle; and the comic hero has success in his endeavour to restore peace to Greece. So, the dung beetle and its fable help underline the difference between tragic Bellerophon and comic Trygaeus: No noble background nor a fancy means to reach the gods are important to achieve one's goals, but what counts are cleverness, determination, and one's imagination.[36]

3.3 *Lysistrata*

Lysistrata, like *Pax*, is a play about the wish to end the Peloponnesian War. In this play, the female protagonist Lysistrata leads the women of both Athens and Sparta in a sex-strike with the aim to force the men to stop the fighting. The fable of the dung beetle and the eagle is referenced by the Chorus of the Older Women during a heated confrontation with the Men's Chorus on the Acropolis, when both sides are preparing for a physical fight (which, however, is averted by the arrival of Lysistrata herself, seconds after). The Women's Chorus warns the men: ὡς εἰ καὶ μόνον κακῶς ἐρεῖς, ὑπερχολῶ γὰρ, | αἰετὸν τίκτοντα κάνθαρός σε μαιεύσομαι ("If you so much as curse at me, I'll boil over with such rage, I'll be the beetle midwife to your eagle's eggs.", Ar. *Lys*. 694–695). Here the eagle's eggs stand for the men's

35 This would have been told to the audience in a messenger speech; Olson 1998, xxxiv.

36 The beetle is mentioned one more time later on, when Trygaeus wants to ride it home but is unable to find it. Hermes tells the comic hero that the dung beetle has found a new position in heaven, pulling Zeus' chariot (Ar. *Pax* 723). This line, once more, quotes and parodies Euripides' *Bellerophon* (*Beller*. *fr*. 312), replacing Pegasus with the giant dung beetle. Trygaeus is wondering how it will find food in heaven. It is assumed here that the gods do not produce any excrement, even though Dionysus at *Ranae* 479 is shown to soil himself in fright. Trygaeus learns that his dung beetle is now feeding on Ganymede's ambrosia (Ar. *Pax* 724) — the joke being that this is the waste product when a human, like Ganymede, digests the food of the gods.
The reason why Trygaeus cannot just fly his beetle home seems to be both practical and mytho-religious. For one, the stage crane would have been unable to carry three people, that is Trygaeus, and the two goddesses Harvest and Holiday, whom he is planning to take home with him to celebrate the new-found Peace/peace. Just as importantly, in stories involving a human entering heaven, his means of transport must be destroyed after his departure, for the divine realm to stay inviolable by humans and the hero's visit to the gods to be truly exceptional. See Olson 1998, *ad Pax* 721–722. This does, however, not happen in *Aves*, where Peisetaerus, even when he has become the highest god, keeps his wings. Here the divine realm has been taken over by a human (or rather human-bird hybrid) character and Zeus has been dethroned. Heaven, in this play, is not inviolable.

testicles which the women threaten to crush.[37] The reference of midwifery is ironical, as the dung beetle did not help deliver the eagle-chicks but killed them all systematically. It was a women's-only profession, so it fits both, women voicing their anger as well as the context of sex and reproductive ability overall.

In *Lysistrata*, the focus is on the beetle's destructive actions, breaking the eagle's eggs. The message to the men is: you cannot escape the wrath of someone as angry as us. Here gender plays an important role, fitting the overall theme of the play. While in the fable two male animals are in conflict, in Aristophanes' play females threaten males and they do not act out their threat. The main point of the fable used in this context is that physically weaker creatures are able to defeat physically stronger ones, if they are angry and determined enough.[38] In this sense, beyond this particular scene, the fable may refer to the entire play where the women win through their cleverness over the men, who try to stop them with brute force, just like the clever dung beetle who defeats the much stronger eagle in the fable.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, a fable about an insect that lends itself so perfectly to the humour typical for Aristophanes seems to have been just too irresistible for the poet to not use several times. As we have seen, the same fable is employed with a different focus in each comedy: In *Vespae*, Philocleon turns the tables on his son: like the dung beetle, he gets what he wants (the freedom to be and enjoy himself) and enacts his revenge for having been detained. The focus here is on the two characters' role reversal, reversing the stereotypes of old and young. This change of roles is cleverly emphasized through the use of this fable, in that here Philocleon identifies himself with the beetle who is tricking Zeus, whereas earlier in the play, he considered himself similar to Zeus in his role as a juror. In *Pax*, the beetle serves (literally) as a

37 See Henderson 1987 and Sommerstein 1990, *ad Lysistrata* 795. Pertsinidis 2009, 218 has convincingly refuted Rothwell's 1995, 243 claim that the fable is used to lower and coarsen the discourse of the women at this point.

38 Henderson's interpretation that the women's threat (in the lines just before this passage) to knock out the men's teeth so they will not be able to chew beans anymore marks them as jurors (Henderson 1987, *ad Lysistrata* 693) and Rothwell's 1995, 246, conclusion that this shows that fables are appropriate to be used in the law court (see also Arist. *Rh.* 1394a5–8), seem over-interpretations to me. Chewing beans is more likely to just characterize old men in general. I do agree with Rothwell's 1995, 254 point that in court "telling a fable would be a natural way to illustrate a point without sounding like a snob", a kind of "popular, non-aristocratic rhetoric" which is used in this play, among other things, to help create the atmosphere of a "parody of court-room practice".

comic means of transport, to comment on the rivalry of tragedy and comedy, as political allegory and, of course, to make numerous jokes on the beetle's unsavoury feeding habits. In *Lysistrata*, the focus is on the beetle's destructive power and its successfulness, even though it seems weaker than its opponent. Here gender plays an important role. All three plays tellingly have in common that the speakers associating themselves with the dung beetle emerge eventually as winners, and they achieve this by using the same fable in very different, clever, imaginative and, most importantly, humorous ways.

It makes sense that Aristophanes' comedies allude to fables so frequently, not only because the playwright could count on his audience knowing these stories but also because both genres, comedy and fable, share important traits: Both genres tell clever stories (often involving animal- or animal-like characters or animal imagery) which the audience is required to decipher in order to understand their deeper meaning and humour. Both genres promote a simple lifestyle, tradition and common sense. Both employ protagonists we can identify or sympathize with and clever solutions to some complex human problems. Both genres make us think and smile.

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