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Phaedrus and the Latin Mime: Preliminary Remarks

Abstract: The connection between Phaedrus' fables and the Latin mime is very close, more so than that with other literary genres that also influenced them, such as epigram. The mime author who most inspired Phaedrus was Publilius Syrus. Phaedrus shared with him a servile origin (much discussed by critics), the use of the iambic senarius — a metre not favoured by the cultured poetry of the Augustan age —, and the creation of characters that functioned as moral types. This last feature contributed to the creation of proverbs out of the work of both authors. However, it is very difficult to seek textual correspondences between the work of the two poets, due both to the lacunose tradition of Publilius' mimes and, above all, to the oral component that plays an important role in the work of both authors.

1 Introduction

Already in ancient and medieval treatises, it is emphasized that there are close links between fable and theatre, especially comic theatre,[1] starting with the constituent elements of the two genres.[2] Both are united by the dialogical and dialectical

Given the difficulty, if not impossibility, of tracking the moments of transition of Greek mime from the East to Italy (see Bonaria 1965, 1) — due also to the only partial literary tradition of the genre — the still debated possible influence of the literary mime of the Greek Herodas on Latin poetry of the first half of the 1st century BCE (see Di Gregorio 1997, xiv–xv), and, in general, the fact that the links between the textual fragments of the Greek and Latin mime still remain fundamentally doubtful (Giancotti 1967, 17–18), we have decided to limit ourselves here to exploring Phaedrus' connection with Latin mime, possibly postponing to a later specific examination that with the Greek mime tradition.

1 See in this volume the essays of Pütz and Gärtner. On Aesopic fable and Greek comedy, see van Dijk 1997, 188–229, and Morosi forthcoming. On the proverbial fable in Plautus' comedy, see Suleiman 2005, 14–15, and Zaffagno 2009.

2 On the link between the two genres, see Mordeglia 2024, 69–78, esp. 69–72.

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character of the narrative,[3] which presents facts that are mostly invented rather than real;[4] by the masking of its protagonists, which in fable are mostly non-human and hidden behind a moral allegory,[5] while in the theatre they are strongly typified on the basis of dramatic and narrative conventions; and by the short and sententious joke, which often draws on proverbs and generates them in turn.[6]

The outcome over time of such correspondences has been twofold. On the one hand, in the Middle Ages, a time of frequent contamination or even dissolution of literary genres, there was confusion between theatre authors and authors of fiction, and not only of fables; this was also promoted by a progressive loss of appreciation for classical metrics.[7] This led to the emergence of a series of texts considered by

3 See e.g. Arist. *Rh.* 1393a20, 23–29: Λοιπὸν δὲ περὶ τῶν κοινῶν πίστεων ἅπασιν εἰπεῖν, ἐπείπερ εἴρηται περὶ τῶν ἰδίων εἰσὶ. δ' αἱ κοιναὶ πίστεις δύο τῷ γένει, παράδειγμα καὶ ἐνθύμημα· ἡ γὰρ γνώμη μέρος ἐνθυμήματός ἐστιν. […] παραδειγμάτων δὲ εἴδη δύο· ἓν μὲν γάρ ἐστιν παραδείγματος εἶδος τὸ λέγειν πράγματα προγενομένα, ἓν δὲ τὸ αὐτὸν ποιεῖν. τούτου δὲ ἓν μὲν παραβολὴ, ἓν δὲ λόγοι, οἷον οἱ Αἰσώπειοι καὶ Λιβυκοί ("It remains to speak of the proofs common to all branches of Rhetoric, since the particular proofs have been discussed. These common proofs are of two kinds, example and enthymeme; for the maxim is part of an enthymeme. […] 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).

4 See e.g. Isid. *Etym.* 1.40.1: *Fabulas poetae a fando nominauerunt, quia non sunt res factae, sed tantum loquendo fictae. Quae ideo sunt inductae, ut fictorum mutorum animalium inter se conloquio imago quaedam uitae hominum nosceretur* ("Poets named 'fables' [fabula] from 'speaking' [fari], because they are not actual events that took place, but were only invented in words. These are presented with the intention that the conversation of imaginary dumb animals among themselves may be recognized as a certain image of the life of humans"; transl. Barney/Lewis/Beach/ Berghof).

5 See e.g. Phaed. 1 *prol.* 3–7 Z. [= G.]: *Duplex libelli dos est: quod risum mouet* | *et quod prudentis uitam consilio monet.* | *Calumniari si quis autem uoluerit,* | *quod arbores loquantur, non tantum ferae,* | *fictis iocari nos meminerti fabulis* ("A double dowry comes with this, my little book: it moves to laughter, and by wise counsels guides the conduct of life. Should anyone choose to run it down, because trees too are vocal, not wild beasts alone, let him remember that I speak in jest of things that never happened"; transl. Perry).

6 On the relationship between fable and proverb, see Tosi 2022 and, with a specific focus on Phaedrus, Mordeglia 2017.

7 See e.g. Isid. *Etym.* 1.40.3: *Fabulas poetae quasdam delectandi causa finxerunt, quasdam ad naturam rerum, nonnullas ad mores hominum interpretati sunt. Delectandi causa fictas, ut eas, quas uulgo dicunt, uel quales Plautus et Terentius composuerunt* ("Poets have made up some fables for the sake of entertainment, and expounded others as having to do with the nature of things, and still others as about human morals. Those made up for the sake of entertainment are such as are commonly told, or that kind that Plautus and Terence composed"; transl. Barney/Lewis/ Beach/ Berghof), and Hugo Trimberg *reg. mult. auct.* 272–275: *Salustius et Tulius in usu modernorum* | *Non sunt et Therencius et plures antiquorum;* | *Qui quamuis docuerint instar ethicorum,* | *Non tamen in*

their authors to be products of ancient theatre, even though they probably had not been written for performance but only for reading,[8] and, conversely, to the 'recitation' of texts that were properly narrative and had no supposed model in theatre.[9] On the other hand, especially in the modern era, highly successful plays — dramas, comedies, but also musicals — have been produced on Aesopic and, in general, fable-like topics.[10]

2 Phaedrus and the Latin mime

Among the ancient fabulists, the Latin poet Phaedrus is perhaps the one who is most credited with the conception of an ambitious and refined literary project and an awareness of his own poetic worth. Given the almost total lack of knowledge of Greek in the western Middle Ages, it is mainly to him that we owe the dissemination of Aesopic motifs in the Latin West. His work therefore constitutes a privileged site in which to observe this multiform interchange between fable and theatre.

In Phaedrus' collection, the most immediate evidence of this relationship lies in the content and style, especially from Book III onwards, when he partly disengages from the generic fable *auctor* Aesop, by drawing on different models and on his own inventiveness. His fables are populated by characters from the circus and different kinds of show: boxers (5.25 Z. [= 4.26 G.]), comic poets (4.2 Z. [= 5.1 G.]), jesters (4.6 Z. [= 5.5 G.]), flute players (5.27 Z. [= 5.7 G.]). Phaedrus borrows the traditional *personae* of Comedy: old drunkards (3.1 Z. [= G.]), boastful soldiers (4.3 Z. [= 5.2 G.]), prostitutes (*app.* 4 Z. [= G.]), young lovers (*app.* 27 Z. [= *app.* 29 G.]), starving slaves (*app.* 14 Z. [= *app.* 16 G.]; *app.* 18 Z. [= *app.* 20 G.]). From tragedy he borrows tones and situations, for example competing with the beginning of Euripides'

numero ponuntur metricorum ("Sallust and Tullius are not used by moderns, nor Terence and many of the ancients; these, although appreciated for their moral teachings, are not to be considered poets"; transl. C.M.).

8 Famous examples are the 12th-century Plautus remakes *Geta* and *Aulularia* by Vitale of Blois and *Miles gloriosus* attributed to Arnulf of Orleans. All three works are part of the corpus of elegiac comedies, published in 6 volumes under the direction of Ferruccio Bertini (Bertini 1976–1998).

9 This is the case, for instance, with the *Ecbasis captivi*, the first example of an animal epic written in the 10th century; see Mordeglia 2020.

10 We mention only *Les Fables d'Ésope, comédie* or *Ésope à la Ville* (by Edmé Boursault, Paris, 1690), *A rapôsas e as uvas* (by Guilherme Figueiredo, Rio de Janeiro, 1953), *Story Theatre* (by Paul Sills, Broadway, 1970). For more examples, see Mordeglia 2020 and 2021.

Medea, which was translated into Latin by Ennius and Accius (5.7 Z. [= 4.7 G.]).[11] Less obvious on a first reading — but more deeply rooted in the inspiration and the poetic act itself — are the correspondences between Phaedrus' fable and the most popular and most frequently presented theatrical genre of his time: mime.[12]

On a formal level, the most striking evidence of Phaedrus' deliberate emulation of mime is his choice of the iambic senarius as the metre for his fables. As is well known, this metre was used in the dialogue parts of archaic theatre, but in the cultured poetry of the Augustan age it was almost systematically replaced by the iambic trimeter, which was perceived as more refined and 'modern' than the heaviness and archaic patina of the senarius. Horace's judgement of Ennius' senarius is peremptory:

> Hic [*scil.* Iambus] et in Acci
> nobilibus trimetris adparet rarus et Enni
> in scaenam missos cum magno pondere uersus
> aut operae celeris nimium curaque carentis,
> aut ignoratae premit artis crimine turpi.
> (Hor. *Ars P.* 258–262)

> In the 'noble' trimeters of Accius this *iambus* appears but seldom; and on the verses which Ennius hurled ponderously upon the stage it lays the shameful charge either of hasty and too careless work or of ignorance of the art.
> (Transl. Fairclough)

But already Cicero had criticized the senarii of the archaic comedians so severely for their closeness to speech that he did not even consider them verse:

> At comicorum senarii propter similitudinem sermonis sic saepe sunt abiecti, ut nonnunquam uix in eis numerus et uersus intellegi possit.
> (Cic. *Orat.* [55] 184)

> But the senarii of comedy are often so lacking in elevation of style because of their resemblance to ordinary conversation that sometimes it is scarcely possible to distinguish rhythm and verse in them.
> (Transl. Hendrickson/Hubbell)

Despised and neglected by the poets and prose writers of the 1st century BCE, nonetheless in Phaedrus' time the iambic senarius still found a place in popular poetry.

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11 For an in-depth look at the relationship between Phaedrus' fable and Latin theatre in general, I refer to Ursula Gärtner's contribution in this volume.

12 On the general characteristics of mime in Rome, see Zimmermann 2020, 270–276, and Panayotakis 2010, 1–30.

Traces of it remain, for instance, in epigraphic poetry,[13] especially in military circles, and in the surviving inscriptions of Pompeii,[14] which, alongside snapshots of everyday life, also contain fragments of fables and, above all, of mimes. It is most probable that this is the tradition to which Phaedrus, a freedman of Augustus and a refined poet,[15] intended to reconnect, moving away from the taste for cultured poetry of Rome in the era of Augustus and Tiberius, under whom he lived. But for what reason?

The reasons for this choice, which makes Phaedrus the initiator of that shift away from Augustan poetry inspired by Callimachus that would later lead to the archaizing taste of the 2nd century CE,[16] must be sought both in personal inclination and in the literary and cultural context in which Phaedrus operates.

Phaedrus not only espouses the narrative economy proper to the genre of the fable, but personalizes it through his biting view of reality, his portraiture skills, and, above all, his propensity for *sketching*, which moves the reader to the laughter that, together with moral teaching, constitutes the ultimate goal of his collection.[17]

Epigram[18] and indeed mime, which was composed, performed, and enjoyed above all in the milieu of the freedmen to which Phaedrus himself belonged, have similar characteristics. The language of Phaedrus, which combines rare and precious words with neologisms, Graecisms, and terms proper to popular expressions, is a composite language suitable for this rising social class — of which Petronius shortly afterwards offers us a vivid representation in the *Cena Trimalchionis* —, a class of people who frequented the cultured and liberal milieu, but who often found it difficult to forget their servile origins.[19]

Mime, therefore, is more suited to Phaedrus' sensibility than other theatrical forms. However, it also has a series of commonalities with fable, starting with the propensity for *ethopoiia* (the representation of characters) with respect to action. Cicero, when warning the good orator against abusing this resource, lest he lapse into ridiculous and obscene caricature, links this characteristic precisely to mime.

13 Bücheler 1895–1897. See also Della Corte 1958, 180–186.

14 See Panayotakis 2010, 30.

15 A critical summary, with related bibliography, of the debated question of Phaedrus' servile origin can be read in Mordeglia 2014.

16 Cf. Della Corte 1958, 180; Cavarzere 2001; Glauthier 2009.

17 See above, p. 144 n. 5.

18 On the similarities between fable and epigram, see Mattiacci 2022, 49–52 and, in this volume, Neger, Spielhofer, and Scognamiglio.

19 See Della Corte 1958, 186–187.

> In re est item ridiculum, quod ex quadam deprauata imitatione sumi solet […]. Atqui ita est totum hoc ipso genere ridiculum, ut cautissime tractandum sit; mimorum est enim ethologorum, si nimia est imitatio, sicut obscenitas
>
> (Cic. *De or.* 2.242)

> Another sort of jest depending on facts, is that which is generally derived from what may be called vulgarized mimicry […]. However this particular kind of laughing-matter is all such as to need extreme circumspection in the handling of it; for it is a matter for character-mimes, if there is too much imitation, as also with obscenity.
>
> (Transl. Sutton/Rackham, adapted)

> In dicto autem ridiculum est id, quod uerbi aut sententiae quodam acumine mouetur; sed ut in illo superiore genere uel narrationis uel imitationis uitanda est mimorum ethologorum similitudo, sic in hoc scurrilis oratori dicacitas magnopere fugienda est.
>
> (Cic. *De or.* 2.244).

> As regards words, however, the laughter is awakened by something pointed in a phrase or reflection. But just as, with the former kind, both in narrative and in mimicry, all likeness to buffoons in pantomime is to be avoided, so in this latter case the orator must scrupulously shun all buffoonish raillery.
>
> (Transl. Sutton/Rackham, adapted).

As Seneca tells us in epistle 95, the Stoic philosopher Posidonius emphasized how the description of character types is useful to represent human vices and virtues and, consequently, to point the way to wisdom:

> [Posidonius] ait utilem et descriptionem cuiusque uirtutis; hanc Posidonius "ethologian" uocat, quidam "characterismon" appellant, signa cuiusque uirtutis ac uitii et notas reddentem, quibus inter se similia discriminentur.
>
> (Sen. *Ep.* 95.65)

> He remarks that it will also be useful to illustrate each particular virtue; this science Posidonius calls "*ethology*", while others call it "*characterization*". It gives the signs and marks which belong to each virtue and vice, so that by them distinction may be drawn between like things.
>
> (Transl. Gummere)

The moral value of the individual highlighted in the *ethopoiia* takes on a universal character in the proverbial *sententia* or aphorism. Quintilian says this expressly, speaking of the definition of characters and the *sententia*, where *sententia* is understood not so much as the witticism, but rather the synonym of the Greek word *gnōmē*, i.e. precisely the proverb.[20]

20 Quint. *Inst.* 1.9.3: *sententia uniuersalis est uox, ethologia personis continetur* ("The proverb is a universal voice, while the imitation of characters concerns the character of persons"; transl. Russell);

3 Phaedrus and Publilius Syrus

If we apply these considerations to the mime and the only two major authors of it that tradition has preserved,[21] it is easy to see that the *sententiae* to which Quintilian refers can be attributed not so much to Laberius, who is more inclined to witty banter, as to Publilius Syrus.

As Seneca the Elder testifies, Publilius was much loved by young people and, especially for his moralistic tones, was read in schools of rhetoric:

> Memini Moschum, <cum> loqueretur de hoc genere sententiarum, quo infecta iam erant adulescentulorum omnium ingenia, queri de Publilio, quasi ille [iam] hanc insaniam introduxisset. Cassius Seuerus, summus Publili amator, aiebat non illius hoc uitium esse, sed eorum, qui illum ex parte qua transire deberent imitarentur, <non imitarentur> quae apud eum melius essent dicta quam apud quemquam comicum tragicumque aut Romanum aut Graecum.
>
> (Sen. *Controv*. 7.3.8)

> I remember that Moschus, speaking of this type of epigram, which had infected all the bright young men even in those days, complained of Publilius for introducing this foolish feature. Cassius Severus, a great lover of Publilius, said it wasn't his fault, but the fault of those who imitated the side of Publilius that they should have passed by, while failing to imitate things that were better put by Publilius than by any comic or tragic writer, Greek or Roman.
>
> (Transl. Winterbottom)

It is no coincidence that a collection of proverbs soon grew out of Publilius Syrus' mimes, commonly known as *Sententiae*;[22] it probably originated in the 1st century CE — the same period as Phaedrus' fables — and circulated throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. We can presume that Phaedrus must have been familiar with this collection because it circulated in schools, just like his fables and

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8.5.3: *Antiquissimae sunt, quae proprie, quamuis omnibus idem nomen sit, sententiae uocantur, quas Graeci γνώμαϛ* appellant ("Oldest of all — and properly called sententiae, though the same name serves for all types — are what are called in Greek gnōmai"; transl. Russell).

21 Cf. Zimmermann 2020, 273–274. The most recent edition of Laberius' work now includes 96 fragments, most of which can be attributed to the 68 titles preserved to us by tradition, while 26 are of unidentifiable provenance and one of dubious attribution (cf. Panayotakis 2010, 33–67). Of the mimes by Publilius Syrus, on the other hand, only two titles have been preserved, of which we are left with a total of four verses (Bonaria 1965, 78–79 and 155–156, to whom we also refer for fragments of mimes by other or unidentified authors).

22 It consists of about 700 monostichic verses. Cf. Duff/ Duff 1934 and Giancotti 1968. The epitomization in proverbs of ancient theatrical texts also occurred for other authors, both Greek and Latin, for example, in the comic field, for Menander, Plautus, and Terence (see Lelli 2011).

other collections of Latin fables in general. But he was probably also familiar with Publilius' mimes themselves, because this genre enjoyed great popularity on the Roman stage at least until the 3rd century CE, as demonstrated by the vehement attacks of the Church Fathers on the genre for its licentiousness.[23]

It is most likely Publilius, not Laberius, who inspired Phaedrus. In fact, there is no consonance between Phaedrus's text and Laberius's fragments, as evidenced also by the fabulist's absence among the names of the anticipated authors mentioned in the last editor's index of passages.[24]

Phaedrus had many things in common with Publilius, above all his presumed servile origin: Publilius was a freed slave of Syriac origin, whereas his 'rival' Laberius was a Roman knight.[25] And, unlike Laberius, whose mimes are written in various metres, Publilius chooses the iambic senarius almost exclusively. Finally, both Phaedrus and Publilius make use of *ethopoiia* for moral purposes and hence, through didactic use, their work underwent a process of proverbial epitomization through the centuries that ensured their survival. In this sense, Phaedrus' link to mime — a link that has already been highlighted for other authors of the 1st century CE such as Ovid and Petronius[26] — turns out to be closer than his link to epigram, on which recent criticism has insisted so firmly,[27] but which does not fully share the moralistic intent of the fable genre or of Phaedrus himself.

Attempts have been made to identify textual connections between the *sententiae* of Publilius and the text of Phaedrus — especially in the morals — even in fairly recent times.[28] However, it is essential to proceed very cautiously in this, for several reasons. Firstly, there is no certainty about the circumstances of composition and transmission of Publilius' text, nor of that of the other mimes. Secondly, the component of orality needs to be considered, and not only in the schoolroom, which has had a decisive effect on the transmission of Phaedrus' morals and of fables in general, but

23 See Zimmermann 2020, 274–275.

24 Panayotakis 2010.

25 On the alleged dispute between the two mimographers, see Panayotakis 2010, 45–57.

26 Cf. Fantham 1989.

27 See above, p. 147 n. 17.

28 Cf. Stocchi 2004, with other bibliographical references about the possible connections between Phaedrus and the Latin mimical tradition. Stocchi quotes all the possible textual similarity between Publilius' sentences and Phaedrus' *promythia* and *epimythia* of only one verse, by examining the possible stylistic and lexical correspondences. But in his conclusions, he too defines this imitative process as only conceivable (*Ibidem*, 412, 421).

also in the tradition of mime and in particular of *sententiae.*[29] Finally, I believe that a simplistic application of the method of intertextuality — which, when used indiscriminately, has on several occasions revealed its limitations as an approach to ancient literature — as the main criterion for evaluating Phaedrus' creative process in relation to his literary and cultural models is not adequate to his poetic genius, which is unique in the panorama of Latin, ancient, and medieval fables.

At this point, I always like to quote the classical philologist Luciano Canfora and his thought-provoking invitation to remember that in Antiquity the Library of Congress did not yet exist, despite what we are often led to think.[30] Phaedrus' cultural suggestions are so many and varied, and his literary project so ambitious, that to reduce his verses to quotations would not do him justice.

4 Conclusion

In concluding our observations in the context of the study of genre interactions inherent in Aesopic fable, what emerges is not only Phaedrus' debt to Latin theatre — already acknowledged in part by the critics and evident on both the rhetorical-structural and thematic levels — but above all his link with the Roman literary mime of the late Republic and early Imperial age.

The points of contact with this theatrical genre, so widespread and beloved by the Romans in Phaedrus' lifetime, are evident first and foremost in the common adherence to a 'popular' poetics, in the choice of metre, situations, and type characters, but also in the moral purpose proper to Phaedrus' fables, matching the compositional characteristics of the fable genre itself.

In this sense, although it is difficult and methodologically unwise to make an intertextual comparison between the two collections, given their different compositional genesis and their state of transmission and conservation, the link between Phaedrus' fables and the mimes of Publilius Syrus, of which we have traces in the gnomic-proverbial collection known as *Sententiae*, appears stronger than with those of Laberius, whose poetic inspiration was certainly less inclined to moral typification of characters.

The mime thus rightly joins the other literary genres — above all, the epigram, among the genres considered 'minor' literature — that, in a more or less intentional

29 Although Publilius' *Sententiae* can reasonably be attributed to a single author, the suspicion that interpolations and spurious verses are present in the collection cannot be ruled out (see Giancotti 1967, 338).

30 Canfora 2017.

manner, inspired Phaedrus' creative genius, contributing to the poetic value and uniqueness of his collection within the panorama of fable and Latin literature.

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