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The Use of Animal Fable in Ancient Oratory: Reality or Fiction?

Abstract: Aristotle's division of fictitious examples into comparisons and Aesopic fables seems logical in theory, but upon closer examination it appears to diverge from oratorical practice. Scholars have long been puzzled by Aristotle's extensive treatment of animal fables, compared to his treatment of historical *exempla* and similes, especially given the scarcity of such fables in surviving speeches. The use of fables as a means of persuasion is predominantly found in historiography and biographical works. As argued in this paper, none of these sources offers sufficient proof to validate the claim that animal fables were employed in actual oratory before the Imperial period. Instead, these instances reflect a literary trend that was probably inspired by rhetorical theory.

1 Introduction

In Aristophanes' *Wasps*, there is a hint that litigants in the Athenian court used to poke fun at each other by sharing "something funny from Aesop" (566).[1] In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle further confirms this by categorizing animal fables as a subset of rhetorical induction. He specifically mentions two kinds of examples that a speaker makes up himself (τὸ αὐτὸν ποιεῖν): comparison (παραβολή) and fables (λόγοι). In addition, at *Rh*. 1393b8–1394a2, Aristotle provides two illustrations of the latter, namely Stesichorus' fable of "The Horse, the Stag, and the Man" and the Aesopic fable about "The Fox and the Hedgehog" [= Aesop. 427 P.].[2] Over four decades ago, Bennett J. Price noted the remarkable fact that Aristotle's "illustration of the fables takes more than twice as many lines as those devoted to historical

1 Hsch. α 2159, for example, infers from Ar. *Vesp*. 566 (Αἰσώπου τι γέλοιον) that καὶ ἐν τοῖς δικαστηρίοις κοινοῖς ἔστιν ὅτε τοῖς Αἰσωπείοις ἐχρῶντο μύθοις ("in the Athenian courts of law the speakers sometimes made use of fables"). Some modern scholars, such as Nøjgaard 1964, 461, appear to take Aristophanes' statement at face value. See also Biles/Olson 2015, 263, and Konstantakos 2021, 246, for general discussion of that passage. Strong 2021, 69 n. 35 provides references to recent scholarship on Aesop and fables in Aristophanes.

2 Cf. van Dijk 1997, 287–291; Kurke 2011, 255; Westwood 2020, 38–39. The former fable, later elaborated for instance by Horace (*Epist*. 1.10.34–41), is also known as "The Horse and the Hunter" (Aesop. 269 (a) P. [= 238 Hsr.; 329 Ch.]).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111181936-012

examples and *parabolai* combined", despite the scarcity of fables in the extant speeches of the Attic orators.[3] Similarly, the Aesopic fable is mentioned in Latin handbooks of rhetoric, although such a device is notably absent from Roman Republican oratory. The discrepancy is even more striking since rhetorical theory mostly drew from the actual speeches that were delivered, and later published, over a specific period of time.[4] Consequently, this paper aims to re-examine the evidence for the use of animal fables in Graeco-Roman oratory. It also explores why the rhetoricians spent so much time discussing a device that seems in fact to have been avoided by the orators themselves. While the scarcity of sources makes it impossible to provide a definitive answer, a thorough analysis of relevant texts can offer new insights into the relationship between rhetorical theory and practice in Antiquity.

2 Aristotle's puzzling testimony and some modern solutions

Insights derived from ancient handbooks of rhetoric regarding Aesopic fables are often interpreted as indications of a genuine rhetorical tactic that was practised in Classical times. With regard to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and a few later treatises, Stanley F. Bonner[5] makes the following observation: "Even in the oratory of real life, the Fable was not without its uses, as a source of wise moralizing, or more often, a means of amusing an audience." However, Bonner did not provide any corroborative evidence from sources beyond theoretical writings to substantiate his assertion. One must exercise extreme caution when drawing such conclusions, especially given that historical examples held considerably more weight for both the Greeks and the Romans.[6] Indeed, this is what Aristotle himself implies:

3 Price 1975, 43, 45. Cf. Kurke 2011, 257, and more recently Biles/Olson 2015, 263: "Arist. *Rh.* 1393^{a}28–31, 1394^{a}2–5 recommends using fable in oratory, but no examples of the phenomenon survive." It is not until Late Antiquity that fables, apart from playing a significant role in (especially Greek) education, occasionally appeared in actual oratory (Julian. *Or*. 7.3.207a–d; Himer. *Or*. 66; Them. *Or*. 22.278c). See van Dijk 1997, 88–89, 91 for an overview.

4 Cf. Pierzak 2021, 77 with n. 1. To put the absence of fables from ancient oratory into perspective, what survives from Attic and Roman Republican oratory comprises 30 volumes in the Loeb Classical Library series (15 for Attic oratory and 15 for Roman Republican orators).

5 Bonner 1977, 255.

6 Cf. Jedrkiewicz 1989, 403: "Ma se occorre valutare una scelta specifica in un caso reale e di rilevanza collettiva, il ricorso all'esempio fittizio potrà con ragione apparire meno utile del

> ῥᾴω μὲν οὖν πορίσασθαι τὰ διὰ τῶν λόγων, χρησιμώτερα δὲ πρὸς τὸ βουλεύσασθαι τὰ διὰ τῶν πραγμάτων· ὅμοια γὰρ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τὰ μέλλοντα τοῖς γεγονόσιν.
>
> (*Rh*. 1394a6–9)

> It is easier, then, to supply oneself with examples from fables [τὰ διὰ τῶν λόγων], but for the purpose of deliberation, those that involve factual matters [τὰ διὰ τῶν πραγμάτων] are more useful, since for the most part the things that will happen in the future are similar to those that have happened in the past.
>
> (Transl. Bartlett)

The view that future courses of action can be determined in the light of past events reappears in other sections of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*,[7] where it specifically pertains to historical *exempla*.[8] In contrast to fables, extant speeches provide substantial evidence for the usefulness of historical *exempla* in deliberative oratory.[9] The question thus arises: why did ancient rhetoricians persist in incorporating these made-up examples within their treatises? Various explanations have been offered for Aristotle's preoccupation with fables.

Morten Nøjgaard[10] has proposed a theory suggesting that the relevant section of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* does not reflect the practice of his own day, but was instead inspired by the language of a previous generation. This relies on the dubious tes-

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richiamo all'esempio storico, dell'invocazione del precedente o antefatto reale nel quale erano già presentate le eventualità e le incognite da affrontare nella deliberazione presente" ("But if it is necessary to evaluate a specific choice in a real case of collective relevance, resorting to a fictitious example may rightly appear less useful than referring to a historical example, invoking a real precedent or an action that took place in the past in which the circumstances and uncertainties to be addressed in the current deliberation were already presented").

7 See Arist. *Rh*. 1368a, 1418a, and cf. 1357b (with Quint. *Inst*. 5.11.8); Lys. 25.23.

8 After recounting the story that Aesop had told the Samians, Aristotle describes (*Rh*. 1394a2–4) fables in almost exactly the same words he had used in reference to examples in general, namely that they are δημηγορικοί ("characteristic of the public assembly", i.e. the deliberative kind of oratory). Cf. Arist. *Rh*. 1368a29–31 with Rapp 2002, 430; *Rhet. Her*. 3.9; Price 1975, 170, 173 and *passim*; Nouhaud 1982, 24; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 399–400; Gazich 1990, 93; Lausberg 1990, 55 (§ 61.2); Demoen 1997, 131 n. 18; Kurke 2011, 256–257; and Strong 2021, 69. What distinguishes them favourably from *exempla*, he goes on to say, is that εἰσὶ δ' οἱ λόγοι δημηγορικοί, καὶ ἔχουσιν ἀγαθὸν τοῦτο, ὅτι πράγματα μὲν εὑρεῖν ὅμοια γεγενημένα χαλεπόν, λόγους δὲ ῥᾷον ("while it is difficult to discover past events similar to the matters at hand, it is easier to find fables", Arist. *Rh*. 1394a2–4 as transl. by Bartlett). On this subject, cf. for instance *Rhet. Her*. 1.6.10; Cic. *De or*. 2.264; Quint. *Inst*. 6.3.44; Price 1975, 45; Adamik 1982, 58; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 400; van Dijk 1997, 41; Rapp 2002, 734 *ad loc*.

9 See e.g. Andoc. 3.3–12, 28–32, 37–39; Dem. 3.23–29, 9.22–25; Cic. *Leg. agr*. 1.20, 2.95, *Leg. Man*. 14, 55, *Phil*. 5.25, 6.4–6, and cf. for other numerous examples Jost 1936, Nouhaud 1982, Bücher 2006, and more recently Westwood 2020, 39, 50, and *passim*, Pierzak 2021, *passim*.

10 See Nøjgaard 1964, 465.

timony of Aristophanes (cf. n. 1) and certain anecdotes about Demosthenes and Demades (discussed in the next section) that are found in later sources. Nøjgaard presumes that, because contemporary examples of this phenomenon were unavailable, Aristotle's illustrations are exclusively drawn from a distant past, but this would not explain why Aristotle failed to supply an example from the period before Demosthenes. And if we look back to a previous generation, to the time before Antiphon and Andocides, the theory becomes unverifiable, owing to the complete absence of evidence.

Another perspective, not necessarily contradictory to the previous one, was offered by Stefano Jedrkiewicz.[11] He addresses the discrepancy between Aristotle's precepts and actual oratorical practice in the following way: an orator could employ Aesopic fables when they were deemed suitable for a rhetorical goal, but only during oral performances. When a speech — particularly in the legal and political contexts — was prepared for publication, however, these fables were probably omitted, as they may have seemed inappropriate (cf. the final section). This view poses some challenges and does not easily align with our understanding of the relationship between oral delivery and the written record of an oration. Although a speech may become detached from its original purpose during the process of publication, the written version generally remains faithful to its initial form.[12]

More recently, Ioannis Konstantakos[13] has shown how the mock trial of the two dogs in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (826–1008) may, in fact, reflect the manner of speech of the Athenian demagogue Cleon and the general Laches. On this basis, Konstantakos argues that the narration of Aesopic fables was indeed a known practice in Athenian oratory of the 5th century. In his essay, Konstantakos acknowledges in his concluding remarks that "the tracking of elements from Athenian political oratory has been restricted to a single Aristophanic scene" and that there "is material for a further, more extensive study."[14] While this is a promising area of investigation, the evidence drawn from Old Comedy, though compelling, must remain inconclusive until further research has been conducted.

11 See Jedrkiewicz 1989, 402–403.

12 See Stroh 1975, 56, on the pedagogical function of the written version of the speech, and cf. Fuhrmann 1990, 55–56, 61 on the concept of "fictive orality." See also recently Manuwald 2018, xxxviii, on the delivery and publication of Cicero's *Agrarian Speeches*. Extreme cases include Cicero's *Pro Cornelio* of 67 BCE, where (as reported by Cornelius Nepos, *fr*. 38 Marshall [= T10 Crawford]) the published version closely mirrored the original, and his *Pro Milone*, which significantly deviated from the speech Cicero actually delivered in 52 (Cass. Dio 40.54.3).

13 See Konstantakos 2021, 246–247.

14 Konstantakos 2021, 251.

3 Attic orators and the animal fable

Although unattested in the extant speeches of classical Athens,[15] the use of animal fables is ascribed to certain Attic orators in later sources. When faced with an inattentive audience or, according to an alternative account, one that obstructed his speech, Demosthenes is purported to have recounted the fable about "The Shadow of the Ass".[16] The rhetorical setting varies in the different sources: Demosthenes' speech is described as being delivered either in the assembly or in court, with the exact circumstances left unspecified. In each version, in order to reclaim the attention of the Athenians, the orator promises to share a tale. Once he has compelled them to listen, however, Demosthenes commences his narration of the fable only to abruptly halt the narrative at a pivotal moment. When the Athenians implore him to conclude, he reproaches them for preferring a story about the shadow of an ass over a speech addressing serious matters. A remarkably similar anecdote is recounted in relation to Demades, a contemporary of Demosthenes. He, too, resorts to an Aesopic fable (involving Demeter, the swallow, and the eel) when addressing the Athenian *dēmos* and, like Demosthenes, declines to disclose the conclusion of the story. When the audience asks about Demeter's fate, he retorts: "κεχόλωται ὑμῖν, οἵ τινες τὰ τῆς πόλεως πράγματα ἐάσαντες Αἰσωπείων μύθων ἀκούειν ἀνέχεσθε" ("she is angry with you, who having given up the affairs of the city bear listening to an Aesopic fable"; transl. after Zafiropoulos, adapted).[17] The shared manner in which both orators captivate the interest of their audiences aligns with the precepts that are found in Latin handbooks of rhetoric, which suggest that fables may be employed to engage an inattentive audience.[18] There are, however, at least two reasons to question the reliability of

15 Unless Dem. 18.243 counts as a fable ("The Doctor and the Sick Person", Aesop. 114 P. [= 116 Hsr.; 135 Ch.]; cf. Jedrkiewicz 1989, 401), and not simply a "hypothetical comparison" (thus, van Dijk 1997, 651). See also Dornseiff 1924/1925, 208, who provides two examples from historiography and Adrados 1999, 379–380. I do not consider Lycurg. 1.95–97 to be a fable (pace Westwood 2020, 50 n. 203: an example of a "more serious law-court fable").

16 See [Plut.] *X orat.* 848ab [= Aesop. 460 P.]; cf. *Suda* υ 357 Adler; van Dijk 1993, 179 n. 51. For the anecdote about Demosthenes, I follow the useful overview in van Dijk 1997, 298–299. Cf. more recently Westwood 2020, 50–51. On the fable about "The Shadow of the Ass", cf. Camps-Gaset (in this volume).

17 Demad. *fr.* 22 De Falco [= Aesop. 63 P./Hsr.; 96 Ch.]). The ancient sources listed by van Dijk 2015, 258 n. 208, concern "Zeus, Prometheus, Athena, Momus" (Aesop. 100 P. [= 102 Hsr.; 125 Ch.]) and not "Demades the Orator".

18 Cf. Karadagli 1981, 49–50; van Dijk 1993, 183; 1997, 298, 302; Strong 2021, 70, and on the rhetorical precept in question, see Cic. *Inv. rhet.* 1.25 and esp. *Rhet. Her.* 1.6.10 (*Si defessi erint audiendo,*

these accounts. (1) Superficially, these anecdotes might appear to confirm that fables were employed in Greek oratory of the 4th century BCE but, as Jedrkiewicz argues, they also highlight the orators' general aversion to fabulous narratives.[19] In my view, both orators demonstrate the utility of fables not so much as a persuasive tool, but rather as a means of *captatio benevolentiae*. (2) The rhetorical handbooks recommending this form of argumentation significantly predate[20] all the sources in which these episodes are reported. It thus follows that these stories are likely to have been later fabrications,[21] possibly inspired or "justified" by the guidelines found in the manuals of rhetoric. At any rate, neither of the fables mentioned above are employed to present an argument based on analogy between the narrative and the matter under dispute, as Aristotle's model would suggest.

This leaves us with the fable of "The Wolves and the Sheep" (Aesop. 153 P. [= 158 Hsr.; 218 Ch.]), which Aristobulus attributes to Demosthenes.[22] Unlike the other two accounts, this narrative not only meets Aristotle's criterion, but can also lay claim to some historicity. Following the destruction of Thebes in 335/334 BCE,

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ab aliqua re, quae risum mouere possit [sc. *exordiemur*], *ab apologo, fabula* ["If the hearers have been fatigued by listening, we shall open with something that may provoke laughter — a fable"; transl. Caplan]). For a few examples of fables "composed for entertainment" (but from outside rhetorical theory and practice), see Adamik 1982, 59–60. This is, for instance, how Menenius Agrippa introduced the story of the members and the belly (for Livy's version cf. the final section below), as reported by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 6.85 fin.): βούλομαί τινα καὶ πρὸς τοῦτον εἰπεῖν λόγον, ὦ δημόται· καί μου πρὸς θεῶν μεθ' ἡσυχίας καὶ προσοχῆς ἀκούσατε ("I desire to speak to that point also, plebeians, and I beg of you in the name of the gods to hear me with silence and attention"; transl. Cary).

19 Jedrkiewicz 1989, 401–402. For a different view, cf. Zafiropoulos 2001, 18: "This fable [i.e. Demades' — D. P.] was, we suppose, employed by the orators as an auxiliary means of persuading their audience".

20 However, in his commentary on *Rhet. Her*. 1.6.10, Calboli 2020, 498, conjectures that the idea derives from one of the following texts: Aristotle's lost treatise on comedy (second book of his *Poetics*), Theophrastus' Περὶ γελοίου, or the Περὶ χάριτος by Demetrius of Phalerum.

21 Cf. Jost 1936, 20 n. 1: "denn das beweisen, wenngleich als Ganzes erst später erfunden, dennoch die Anekdoten: sowohl Demades wie Demosthenes hätten das Volk gestraft dafür, daß es lieber Fabeln anhören wollte als Ratschläge für wichtige Tagesfragen" ("For the anecdotes, even if invented later as a whole, prove that both Demades and Demosthenes would have chastized the people for preferring to listen to fables rather than advice on important current issues"). Jedrkiewicz 1989, 402, considers the story about Demades to be a later variant of the one about Demosthenes ("la variante di quest'episodio"; cf. van Dijk 1997, 303); on the other hand, the anecdote about Demosthenes may have originated from a proverb to which the orator alludes elsewhere (5.24); see van Dijk 1997, 299–300 (cf. Ar. *Vesp*. 190; Karadagli 1981, 51).

22 Dem. *fr*. 13 Baiter–Sauppe (*FGrH* 139 F 3 *ap*. Plut. *Vit*. *Dem*. 23.5–6).

when Alexander demanded the surrender of eight prominent statesmen and generals, including Demosthenes, the orator is reported[23] to have likened "himself and his fellow-orators to dogs fighting in defence of the people" and referred to Alexander as "the Macedonian arch-wolf".[24] As the Athenians were not immediately convinced (βουλευομένων δὲ τῶν Ἀθηναίων καὶ διαπορούντων), Demosthenes' analogy must have given them food for thought. As Gert-Jan van Dijk rightly observes, the authenticity of this account is supported by the following facts: (1) other sources confirm that Demosthenes delivered a speech on this particular occasion;[25] and (2) pastoral imagery was a commonplace in Classical Greek in general and in the *corpus Demosthenicum* in particular.[26] Because Plutarch relies on Aristobulus, a historian who lived around the same time as Demosthenes, his version may be considered reliable, especially when compared to the two episodes discussed above. However, what may cast doubt on its historicity is the existence of different variants of the story in Antiquity. For instance, in one variant preserved by Isidore of Seville (*Etym*. 1.40), Alexander is replaced by his father Philip, and the shepherds constitute an additional group of characters. Naturally, between the 4th century BCE and Late Antiquity such a story, whether genuine or not, would have undergone significant changes.

4 Possible allusions to Aesopic fable in Roman Republican oratory

With no trace of fables in what survives of Post-Classical Greek rhetoric, our focus will now shift to Roman Republican oratory — particularly as this period appears to have been neglected by fable scholars. At one point in his third *Philippic*, Cicero interrupts his flow of thought with an emphatic exclamation that may seem oddly reminiscent of how Demosthenes sought to dissuade his fellow countrymen from accepting Alexander's demands. Just before the conclusion, when reporting Mark

23 Cf. Bosworth 1988, 196–197; Corbel-Morana 2012, 133–134. Karadagli 1981, 28–29, erroneously dates the event to 336 BCE, whereas Jedrkiewicz 1989, 401, makes Philip of Macedon, rather than Alexander, the target of this comparison. Both scholars seem to have taken the historicity of this episode for granted.

24 Plut. *Vit. Dem.* 23.5: ὅτε καὶ τὸν περὶ τῶν προβάτων λόγον ὁ Δημοσθένης, ἃ τοῖς λύκοις τοὺς κύνας ἐξέδωκε, διηγησάμενος, αὐτὸν μὲν εἴκασε καὶ τοὺς σὺν αὐτῷ κυσὶν ὑπὲρ τοῦ δήμου μαχομένοις, Ἀλέξανδρον δὲ τὸν Μακεδόνα μονόλυκον προσηγόρευσεν (transl. Perrin).

25 van Dijk 1997, 293 n. 46, lists Diod. Sic. 17.15.3 and *Suda* α 1458 Adler.

26 See van Dijk 1997, 293, and van Dijk in Adrados 2003, 213. Cf. Konstantakos 2021, 242.

Antony's announcements, Cicero remarks that Antony will maintain an army near Rome until 1 May 43 BCE, with the intention of defending the city. In a tone steeped in sarcasm, Cicero suggests that Antony, in fact, poses a threat to the city and its inhabitants: *o praeclarum custodem ouium, ut aiunt, lupum!* ("What an excellent guardian of sheep, say they, is a wolf!", Cic. *Phil.* 3.27; transl. Ker). What immediately comes to mind is not a fable, but a proverb that is frequently found in Latin literature,[27] as is hardly unusual given Cicero's fondness for proverbial expressions. Incidentally, the two notions (i.e. fable and proverb) were closely connected in Antiquity, and Quintilian goes so far as to state that [sc. *paroimia*] *est uelut fabella breuior et per allegorian accipitur* ("proverb is a sort of abbreviated fable understood allegorically", *Inst.* 5.11.21; transl. Russell).[28] Another commonly held view is that a proverb derives from a fable or, conversely, a fable is made up "to explain an already existing proverb."[29] What seems to matter most from a rhetorical perspective, however, is the way in which the comparison was inserted into its context.[30] Assuming that the members of Cicero's audience knew the fable of which this proverb was a condensed version,[31] they could mentally fill in the entire narrative. Of course, even if Demosthenes indeed delivered a speech Ὑπὲρ τῶν ῥετόρων, and if Cicero, whose dependence on Attic oratory is universally recognized,[32] was acquainted with this speech, a direct influence is not very likely. The sheep, which are substituted for the Athenians and the Roman people, and the wolf, representing Alexander/Philip and Antony, respectively, fulfil a similar function in the arguments of both orators, but the dogs to be handed over to the arch-wolf, which in Demosthenes accounted for this narrative in the first place, are missing in Cicero. Cicero did not expect his audience to deduce anything on the basis of what Aristotle would call a "universal proposition."[33] His aim was simply to make clear that Antony is anything but a suitable guardian of the city. In

27 See e.g. Otto 1890/1962, 198 s.v. *lupus* 5 n. 984; Manuwald 2007, 423. This is emphasized in more recent translations, e.g. Ramsey/Manuwald 2009, 205: "Ah, a fine guardian, the proverbial wolf to guard the sheep!"; revised transl. after Shackleton Bailey.

28 Cf. van Dijk 1997, 46; Strong 2021, 222.

29 van Dijk 1997, 226. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between the beast fable and the animal proverb, see e.g. Adrados 1999, 205–209. Cf. above, n. 21, and the contrbutions by Currie and Mordeglia in this volume.

30 Cf. Demoen 1997, 144–146, on *exemplum*.

31 The most likely candidate would be "The Wolf and the Shepherd" (Aesop. 234 P. [= 165 Hsr.; 230 Ch.]; Adrados 2003 erroneously lists Cic. *Phil.* 11.17, instead of 3.27, as an allusion to this fable), but cf. also "The Shepherd and the Young Wolves" (Aesop. 209 P. [= 225 Hsr.; 314 Ch.]), and "The Shepherd and the Wolf" (Aesop. 267 P. [= 276 Hsr.; 315 Ch.]).

32 See, in general, Weische 1972 and, more recently, Tempest 2019.

33 Or an "implied whole"; see Pierzak 2021, 38–39, 44–46.

the end, whether or not we treat this passage as referring to an animal fable depends on how much we are willing to read into Cicero's text.

Another potential allusion to a fable in Roman Republican oratory can be found in an unplaced fragment of M. Caelius Rufus.[34] At some time between 54 BCE and the outbreak of the Civil War, D. Laelius (*tr. pl.* 54) got into a quarrel with his colleague "as they both hurried off" (Quint. *Inst*. 6.3.39) to Sicily, where they were to serve as quaestors.[35] According to Quintilian, Caelius painted a delightful picture of this incident, concluding with the following words:

> hic subsecutus quo modo transierit, utrum rati an piscatorio nauigio, nemo sciebat: Siculi quidem, ut sunt lasciui et dicaces, aiebant in delphino sedisse et sic tamquam Ariona transuectum.
>
> (Quint. *Inst.* 6.3.41 [= ^{2}*ORF*, p. 489])

> He [i.e. Laelius] followed; but how he crossed over, by raft or by fishing boat, nobody knew. The Sicilians, though, as they have a naughty sense of humour and a ready tongue, said [*aiebant*] he rode on a dolphin and so made the crossing like Arion.
>
> (Transl. Manuwald)

The tale of Arion was widely known,[36] and despite him being a real historical figure, Caelius' argument appears more akin to a mythological *exemplum* than a fable. Nevertheless, beyond the fact that it is a fictional story featuring an animal character, there are reasons to categorize it as a fable. The theme of the dolphin saving Arion, as noted by Francisco R. Adrados, had been 'contaminated' with the fable about "The Dolphin and the Monkey" (Aesop. 73 P. [= 75 Hsr.; 306 Ch.]) by the Cynics, who often criticized the nobility of lineage.[37] It may also not be a coincidence that this fragment comes from a chapter on methods of arousing laughter. Quintilian concludes this section by remarking: *similis in apologis quoque et quibusdam interim etiam historiis exponendis gratia consequi solet* ("Similar attractive effects follow from expounding fables or sometimes even some episodes from history", *Inst*. 6.3.44 fin.; transl. Russell). Here, Quintilian is apparently following

34 On this fragment, cf. now Raschieri 2018, 88.

35 See Münzer 1924, 411–413; *MRR* 2.223; David 1992, 865; Dettenhofer 1992, 32 n. 57. Russell 2001, 82 n. 32 suggests that he may have accompanied Cato in 49 BCE when the latter received command of that province, probably *pro praetore* (*MRR* 2.263).

36 See esp. Hdt. 1.23–24 (adapted by Gell. *NA* 16.19); Plin. *HN* 9.28; Lucian. *Dial. mar*. 8. The authors of the preliminary exercises in rhetoric (*progymnasmata*) cite this story as an example of διήγημα that can be easily refuted by means of an argument from what is impossible: Theon *Prog*. 93 Spengel; Hermog. *Prog*. 2.10, 5.11; cf. Lib. *Prog*. 2.29 and on the subject Gangloff 2002, 34.

37 See Adrados 2003, 100. Cf. Adrados 1999, 514, and McDermott 1935, 176: "a burlesque of the famous legend of Arion and the dolphin."

Cicero (*De or*. 2.264), who includes fabulous narratives (*narrationes apologorum*) among the sources of situational humour.[38] Naturally, it is impossible to ascertain whether Cicero would have regarded Caelius' narrative as an *apologus* in that sense, because both the dramatic date and the date of the composition of his dialogue precede the latter's speech. As for Quintilian's view, he probably did not detect any hints of an Aesopic fable there; otherwise, he would not have included the *apologi* and *historiae* as another potential source of humour. However, some subtleties may have eluded his notice. If, following the Cynic philosophers, we substitute Arion with a monkey, a potential parallel between individual referents could be drawn. Caelius might be suggesting that Laelius is being disingenuous about his true identity, like the monkey: although D. Laelius' father, who served under Pompey in Spain, "was a respected figure and may have had senatorial status before the Sullan dictatorship",[39] he did not belong to the consular branch of that family and, consequently, Laelius the younger was not a *nobilis*.[40] Caelius may thus be mocking Laelius' claims to noble ancestry, but due to the fragment's lack of context this must remain a speculative interpretation.

When we compare the wording of the two passages, we observe that both Cicero and Caelius employ the verb *aio* in a similar sense, although for slightly different reasons. Whereas it is used impersonally in the third *Philippic*, marking the expression as proverbial,[41] it accompanies a definite subject in the fragment quoted by Quintilian. Caelius attributes this narrative to the Sicilians, renowned for their wit,[42] to distance himself from a story that might otherwise be dismissed as incredible (cf. n. 36 above). In doing so, he seems to be adhering to Aristotle's advice (from a now lost text) cited by Theon of Alexandria in the chapter *On Fable*:

> Κλιτέον δὲ τοὺς μύθους ὡς καὶ τὴν χρείαν εἴς τε τοὺς ἀριθμοὺς καὶ τὰς πλαγίους πτώσεις. Μάλιστα δὲ ἐμμελετητέον ταῖς αἰτιατικαῖς, ὅτι καὶ οἱ παλαιοὶ τοὺς πλείστους τῶν μύθων

38 Cf. Nøjgaard 1964, 128; Price 1975, 123–124; Rabbie et al. 1989, 291 *ad loc*.

39 Gruen 1995, 185–186; cf. Cic. *Flac*. 2, 18; *MRR* 2.95.

40 See Shackleton Bailey 1977, 391 on Cic. *Fam*. 8.4.2 [= 81 SB]; Gruen 1995, 198 n. 138. *Contra* Dettenhofer 1992, *loc. cit*.

41 OLD s.v. *aio* 4b.

42 See e.g. Cic. *De or*. 2.217 with Rabbie et al. 1989, 213; Corbeill 1996, 94. In fact, Caelius could have drawn inspiration from Cicero's *Verr*. 4.95: *Numquam tam male est Siculis quin aliquid facete et commode dicant, uelut in hac re aiebant in labores Herculis non minus hunc immanissimum uerrem quam illum aprum Erymanthium referri oportere* ("Sicilians are always ready with some appropriate jest, even under the most trying circumstances; thus on the present occasion they observed that this monstrous hog ought to be counted among the labours of Hercules quite as much as the celebrated Erymanthian boar"; transl. Greenwood).

> οὕτως ἀπήγγειλαν, καὶ μάλα ὀρθῶς, ὥς φησιν Ἀριστοτέλης· οὐ γὰρ ἐκ τοῦ αὐτῶν προσώπου λέγουσιν, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἀναφέρουσιν, ἵνα παραμυθήσωνται τὸ δοκεῖν ἀδύνατα λέγειν.
> (Theon *Prog*. 4 [74 Spengel])

> Fables should be inflected, like the chreia, in different grammatical numbers and oblique cases, and one should give special attention to the accusative cases, because that is the way the ancients told most of the myths, and very rightly, as Aristotle says; for they do not relate myths in their own person, but they attribute them to antiquity in order to excuse the fact that they seem to be saying what is impossible.
> (Transl. Kennedy)

What Theon means, essentially, is that fables become more appealing when they are presented by means of accusative and infinitive constructions (i.e. in indirect discourse). In both his example (from a dialogue by Phaedo the Socratic) and in Caelius, the sentence comprises a subject accusative and a verb in the infinitive (χαρίσασθαί τινα […] σκύμνον / [*eum*] *sedisse et* […] *transuectum* [*esse*]), governed by a *verbum dicendi* (Φασὶ τοίνυν […] / *aiebant*). Although Theon's example can be classified as a fable (catalogued by Adrados as "S. 50" [= Phaedo, *Zopyr*. *fr*. 1 Rossetti: "The King's Son and the Lion's Cub"]), the principle it illustrates appears more applicable to myths, at least based on the extant speeches.[43] Therefore, it would be counterintuitive not to consider Caelius' fragment as a mythological *exemplum*.[44] In relation to the passages discussed in this section, we would, in my view, need to stretch the evidence too far to conclude that Aesopic fables were used in extant speeches as a means of persuasion.[45] This raises a further question: why did Roman orators, who were fond of mythological allusions and proverbial expressions, avoid fabulous narratives?

43 On similar strategies employed by Cicero with regard to Greek mythology, cf. Pierzak 2016, 260–262.

44 Cf. n. 42. It is important to emphasize that, in the passage quoted above, Theon does not differentiate between fable and myth. When introducing this distinction, I rely on Quintilian (*Inst*. 5.11.18–21), whose discussion of various types of *exempla* was heavily influenced by Aristotle. I am grateful to L. Spielhofer for bringing these methodological difficulties to my attention.

45 Our conclusions are constrained owing to limited data, as the scanty fragments of Roman Republican orators other than Cicero were preserved only in the indirect tradition. We cannot know for certain that none of the 176 orators listed by E. Malcovati in *ORF* made use of Aesopic fables.

5 Ancient historiography and the fable in action

An anecdote about Q. Sertorius[46] will hopefully shed some light on the matter. At some time between 79 and 77 BCE,[47] when he could not prevent his army of Spaniards from engaging the Romans with their entire force, Sertorius turned to a strategy referred to as "a fable in action."[48] Valerius Maximus provides the following account:

> duos enim in conspectu eorum constituit equos, ualidissimum alterum, <alterum> infirmissimum, ac deinde ualidi caudam ab imbecillo sene paulatim carpi, infirmi a iuuene eximiarum uirium uniuersam conuelli iussit. obtemperatum imperio est. sed dum adulescentis dextera irrito se labore fatigat, senio confecta manus ministerium exsecuta est. tunc barbarae contioni, quorsum ea res tenderet cognoscere cupienti, subicit equi caudae consimilem esse nostrum exercitum, cuius partes aliquis adgrediens opprimere possit, uniuersam conatus prosternere celerius tradiderit uictoriam quam occupauerit.
>
> (Val. Max. 7.3.6)

> He put two horses in front of them, one very powerful, the other very weak. Then he ordered the tail of the powerful horse to be plucked gradually by a feeble old man and the tail of the weak horse to be torn off whole by a young man of exceptional strength. His command was obeyed. But while the young man's hand tired itself in fruitless effort, the hand enfeebled by old age executed its service. Then he put it to the assembly of barbarians,[49] who wanted to know where this was tending, that the Roman army was like a horse's tail: anyone who attacked its parts could overcome it, but if he tried to floor the whole of it, he would more likely give the victory than gain it.
>
> (Transl. Shackleton Bailey)

What we are dealing with here is a sort of live enactment of a story (αἶνος διὰ πράγματος), the meaning of which the audience can more easily discern by direct engagement. Although it would not be considered a fable by modern standards, as no explicit story had been *told*, its images assume the role fulfilled by verbal communication in a narrative, allowing the spectators to draw certain conclusions. In this case, because his soldiers had no idea what this narrative was about, Sertorius had to provide the explanation, which he did in a manner suggestive of

46 Attested by Val. Max. 7.3.6; Plut. *Vit. Sert*. 16; Frontin. *Str*. 1.10.1 [= 4.7.6] and alluded to by Hor. *Epist*. 2.1.45–46 and Plin. *Ep*. 3.9.11. See Konrad 1994, 152.

47 Cf. *MRR* 2.90 and Konrad 1994, 152.

48 See Karadagli 1981, 72–75. Cf. the terminological overview in Kurke 2011, 398–399.

49 It is worth noting that in Plut. *Vit. Sert*. 16.9, Sertorius addresses his allies as ἄνδρες σύμμαχοι, while at the beginning and the end of that chapter (16.1 and 11) and often elsewhere (6.5; 9.6; 14.1; 20.1; 25.4), they are referred to as βάρβαροι. See Konrad 1987, 526 n. 25.

a fable-author stating the moral (ἐπιμύθιον). As with the anecdotes about Demosthenes and Demades, the historicity of this performance cannot be ascertained. Even if Enrica Malcovati was right to omit the passages listed in n. 46, above, from her collection of the fragments of Roman orators, they align, to some extent, with what we know from another source about Sertorius' manner of speaking. Cicero (*Brut*. 180) regards him as *solutissimum in dicendo et acutissimum* ("the readiest and shrewdest in speaking") among those orators of senatorial rank, who were *plane indocti et inurbani aut rustici etiam* ("quite without training and without manners, or even uncouth"; transl. Manuwald). The Romans could easily imagine someone depicted as *inurbanus* and *rusticus* telling an animal fable at an assembly, especially if his audience was far less educated than himself.

It appears that the use of Aesopic fables was often associated with self-taught individuals, especially those characterized by a natural instinct and ready wit in conversation. Another person who belongs to this group is Viriatus, the leader of the Lusitanians (147–139 BCE). From a fragment of the *Histories* of Posidonius of Apamaea[50] preserved by Diodorus Siculus, we learn about his wedding to the daughter of Astolpas of Tucca. On that day, according to our source, he expressed his astonishment at how eagerly the people of Tucca switched sides, aligning themselves now with the Romans, now with himself. To illustrate their instability,[51] Viriatus told Astolpas the fable about the middle-aged man and his two wives, perhaps better known[52] as "The Middle-Aged Man and the Hetaerae" (Aesop. 31 P. [= Hsr.; 52 Ch.]): "A middle-aged man had two mistresses [wives], a young one and an old one. The latter pulled out his black hair and the former his grey hair, so he ended up bald."[53] Viriatus' conclusion was that in their struggle against two hostile forces, the inhabitants of Tucca would disappear as quickly as the hair from the middle-aged man's head. Unlike Caelius' story, there is no difficulty in classifying this anecdote as a fable,[54] and here we have the additional advantage of possessing the rhetorical context. However, this passage, again in contrast to the fragment of Caelius, would be better described as a dialogue rather than a speech. Although it remains unclear what Astolpas' reaction was, we can safely assume that he would have been regarded by the Romans as a person comparable to the members of Sertorius' audience.

50 Posidon. *fr*. 105b Theiler [= Diod. Sic. 33.7.4–7]. Cf. van Dijk 1997, 283–284.

51 Cf. van Dijk 1997, 284.

52 Cf. esp. Babr. 22.

53 As summarized by Adrados 2003, 44. Cf. Zafiropoulos 2001, 96.

54 On its Cynic character, see Adrados 1999, 527; 2003, 45; on different versions of this fable (apart from Babrius, see also Phaed. 2.2 Z. [= G.]), cf. Nøjgaard 1967, 374.

6 Conclusion: fable and the rules of propriety

This brings us back to Quintilian, who, in the chapter *De exemplis,* mentions that the power to persuade simple-minded people is a characteristic of fables. His exact words are as follows:

> ducere animos solent praecipue rusticorum et imperitorum, qui et simplicius quae ficta sunt audiunt, et capti uoluptate facile iis quibus delectantur consentiunt.
>
> (Quint. *Inst*. 5.11.19)

> They often attract the mind, particularly that of uneducated rustics [*praecipue rusticorum et imperitorum*], who listen to fiction in a simpler spirit and, in their delight, readily assent to things they enjoy hearing.
>
> (Transl. Russell)

Whether or not Quintilian himself was acquainted with the anecdotes discussed in the previous section, the passage just quoted and the narratives of Sertorius' performance provide mutual support for each other. Even if the story about Sertorius was concocted, similarly to those about Demosthenes and Demades, the fabricator must nonetheless have recognized that fables are particularly effective and appealing to uneducated audiences. As an example supporting this assertion, Quintilian cites the fable of "The Stomach and the Feet" (Aesop. 130 P. [= 132 Hsr.; 160 Ch.]), a variant of which (usually referred to as "The Belly and the Members") was recounted by Menenius Agrippa to the Roman plebs to dissuade them from their secession in 494 BCE. The most renowned account of this story is found in Livy,[55] who summarizes Agrippa's speech in *oratio obliqua* (2.32.9–12). Commenting on that passage, Robert M. Ogilvie suggested that the fable was reported indirectly by the historian because, as a plebeian himself, Menenius "was supposed to speak *prisco illo et horrido modo*" (32.8). "To represent such archaic uncouthness directly", Ogilvie goes on to argue, "would offend against the canons of writing history."[56] Christoph Pieper has recently challenged this argument, noting that

55 This speech is attributed to Menenius Agrippa also by Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 6.83–86, Cass. Dio 4, *fr*. 17.9–11, Plut. *Vit. Cor*. 6.2–5, and Zonar. 7.14.7–9. According to other sources (Cic. *Brut*. 54, Plut. *Pomp*. 13, Val. Max. 8.9.1, *CIL* 11.1826 = *ILS* 50), it was delivered by the dictator Manius Valerius. On the dubious historicity of this account, see Müller 2004, 451 n. 4 (the list of sources), and Pieper 2016, 161–164. See also Zafiropoulos 2001, 101 n. 39. On the reception of this fable, cf. Martorana (in this volume).

56 See Ogilvie 1965, 313.

Ogilvie may have relied too heavily on Quintilian's definition of fable.[57] The fable recorded by Livy has been variously interpreted as an attempt to legitimize the authority of the patricians or, conversely, to blame them for the Struggle of the Orders.[58] Regardless of the interpretation, Menenius (referred to as a *vir facundus*) is portrayed as a politician who knows precisely how to address the specific audience of the plebeians.[59] Whether Quintilian is following Livy's version or not, the information regarding the suitability of fables for such a particular audience is independently confirmed in the accounts about Sertorius. In each case, our sources depict the speakers as individuals compensating for their lack of rhetorical training with life experience and practical wisdom.

With the exception of Aristotle's example involving Aesop,[60] all the anecdotes we have examined are situated within a deliberative context. However, given its absence from real oratory, this phenomenon should be seen as a literary trend, one that was probably influenced by rhetorical theory. If the narration of Aesopic fables was indeed a known practice in Athenian oratory of the 5th century BCE,[61] and if it did indeed find its way into handbooks of rhetoric, it seems to have declined rapidly and fallen out of use by the time the extant speeches of the Attic orators were delivered. The sole evidence for the use of animal fables in ancient oratory from the Classical period thus lies in historiography and literary biography. Two recurrent themes can be identified in these texts: (1) the speaker narrates a fable in response to an interruption from the audience; and (2) either the speaker who employs an Aesopic fable (such as Sertorius) or his audience (e.g. the Roman plebs in 494 BCE) are depicted as unsophisticated. The first theme relates to Athenian orators of the 4th century BCE, while instances of the second theme span various periods of Roman history. Although accounts falling under the first theme appear to illustrate the application of a precept found in Latin handbooks

57 See Pieper 2016, 174 n. 56. Perhaps Livy chose indirect speech because he assumed that his readers would be familiar with the exercise in composition (*progymnasma*) which involved retelling a fable in either direct or indirect speech.

58 See Müller 2004, *passim* (esp. 470–474), who challenges the traditional interpretation of this fable as reflecting, by analogy, the hierarchical structure of Roman society. He argues that Livy criticizes the upper classes for their lust for power and perfidy, while simultaneously portraying them as indispensable for the commonwealth.

59 Cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 6.83.2: ὁ δὲ τά τε ἄλλα, ὡς οἷόν τε ἦν, πιθανωτάτοις ἔδοξε χρήσασθαι λόγοις καὶ τοῦ βουλήματος τῶν ἀκουόντων ἐστοχασμένοις ("He seemed to employ in general the most persuasive arguments possible and those which gauged well the inclinations of his audience"; transl. Cary). On Dionysius' introduction of Menenius' speech, see Pieper 2016, 168.

60 Cf. Karadagli 1981, 30.

61 Thus Konstantakos 2021, 246–247.

of rhetoric, it remains doubtful whether such handbook recommendations would prove effective on the speaker's platform in Republican Rome. The Romans frequently encountered uncooperative or even hostile audiences, where the ability to command the crowd hinged on one's *auctoritas*.[62] In this context, any attempt to employ an animal fable during a tumultuous *contio* would probably have proved counterproductive. Similar considerations extend to the use of fables as a subtype of rhetorical induction. Although fables and historical *exempla* are both supposedly useful in deliberative oratory, it is challenging to envision a Roman orator favouring a fable over a historical *exemplum* in such a context.[63] Furthermore, the passage from Cicero's third *Philippic* and the fragment *incertae sedis* of Caelius illustrate the orator's caution in avoiding any direct connection with elements even remotely reminiscent of a fabulous narrative. All of this considered, it appears that an orator could deploy an animal fable only in exceptional circumstances. Cicero (*Inv. rhet.* 1.25) suggests that one way to captivate a less attentive audience is to begin with a jest containing a fable, but only *si res dabit* ("if the case permits") and *si rei dignitas adimet iocandi facultatem* ("unless the seriousness of the occasion denies an opportunity for a jest"; transl. Hubbell). Pseudo-Demetrius, in his treatise *On Style* (157), echoes a similar caveat. Although he includes fables, along with proverbs and comparisons, among the sources of elegant style, he warns that μῦθος δὲ λαμβανόμενος καιρίως εὔχαρίς ἐστιν ("fable is attractive only when inserted at the right moment"; transl. Innes).[64] This evokes the restrictions imposed by the rules of propriety (πρέπον, *decorum*). A speaker well versed in these rules had to assess what was allowed or prohibited in a given communicative situation. Most importantly, he needed to be attentive to the composition of his audience, considering factors such as their mood, social or political standing, age, and level of sophistication. At first glance, fables, with their rather ordinary plotlines and humble animal characters, seemed best suited for less well-educated

62 Cf. now Kenty 2020, 125–126, and *passim*.

63 Cf. n. 6.

64 Cf. van Dijk 1997, 42–43. According to Aristotle, the use of maxims (γνῶμαι) and myths or fables (μῦθοι) was appropriate only for those of advanced age (*Rh.* 1395a): ἁρμόττει δὲ γνωμολογεῖν ἡλικίᾳ μὲν πρεσβυτέρων, περὶ δὲ τούτων ὧν ἔμπειρός τις ἐστίν, ὡς τὸ μὲν μὴ τηλικοῦτον ὄντα γνωμολογεῖν ἀπρεπὲς ὥσπερ καὶ τὸ μυθολογεῖν, περὶ δὲ ὧν ἄπειρος, ἠλίθιον καὶ ἀπαίδευτον ("It is fitting for someone more advanced in age to speak in maxims, and about things he has experience of, since it is inappropriate for someone not of that age to speak in maxims, just as it is also to tell myths, and to do so about things he is inexperienced in, this being a mark of foolishness and lack of education"; transl. Bartlett).

and illiterate listeners.[65] This perception may be attributed, in part, to the fact that, as a form of prose writing commonly encountered in childhood, they were "ingrained in grammatical instruction"[66] and, in Quintilian's words (*Inst*. 1.9.2), *fabulis nutricularum proxime succedunt* ("followed on directly from the pupils' nurses' stories"; transl. Russell),[67] which may have further dissuaded orators from employing them before a more sophisticated audience. It would be intriguing to explore how this perspective on fables evolved during the Imperial age, when practical oratory lost its political significance, but such an examination is a matter for a separate study.

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65 Quint. *Inst*. 5.11.19; cf. Price 1975, 191, 193; Adamik 1982, 59; Jedrkiewicz 1989, 54–55, 424; Gazich 1990, 117; van Dijk 1993, 180. Strong's 2021, 277, comment on this passage from Quintilian ("the fable is a perfectly acceptable genre for use in elite settings") is somewhat misleading in a rhetorical context, as this interpretation should be confined to its application in poetry (at p. 276 n. 93, he refers to *Inst*. 5.6.20–23 citing Hor. *Epist*. 1.1.73).

66 Cribiore 2001, 202; cf. 178.

67 Cf. Suet. *Gram. et rhet*. 25.4; Plut. *Mor*. 14e; Nicol. *Prog*. 5 . See on the subject, e.g. Bonner 1977, 253–254, and Viljamaa 1988, 179–180, 191.

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