Part VI: **Fable and Epigram**

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Of Lions and Eunuchs: The Fables of Babrius between Epic and Epigram

Abstract: Many fables (ancient and modern) invite readers to assume a rather stereotypical scheme in both their formal structure and their content. Yet the stunning variety of fables — at least in ancient collections — almost contradicts the need for a 'model' that is often proposed by modern fable theory. With examples from Babrius' *Mythiambi*, this paper illuminates the discrepancy between the set of literary expectations as generic markers of fable literature on the one hand, and the actual material in the fable collections of the Imperial period on the other. Babrius' fables, containing no promythia and rendering most of their epimythia superfluous, offer ample evidence for their structural 'non-typicality'; further, some poems actively allude to and provoke comparisons with other genres such as epic or epigrammatic poetry — subverting an audience's generic expectations. To analyse this feature and its significance for the interpretation of the *Mythiambi*, I focus on fables that stand out from the rest of the collection for their length: Babr. 95, the longest extant fable from antiquity; and a number of short tetrastichs, Babr. 40, 54, and 73. An analysis and comparison of these fables will illustrate the extent to which their structure and content is influenced by ancient epic and epigram; this prompts a reflection on what this means for the question of genre in fable scholarship as a whole.

1 Introduction

The question of what constitutes a 'typical' fable is difficult to answer.[1] From a modern perspective, one might imagine a short narrative story acted out by humanoid speaking animals that aims to convey a certain point of view, sometimes but not always with a moral expressed at its beginning, end, or both beginning and end. The narrative may be condensed to the absolutely essential elements of the story or be generously expanded, while dialogue is often present in direct or indirect speech.[2]

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1 On this question, cf. also the introduction to this volume.
2 For an attempt at structural schematization, cf. e.g. Dithmar 1997, 190–196. However, as Gärtner 2015, 47–48, has shown in the case of Phaedrus, ancient fables defy an all too strict categorization.

Ancient literary criticism, however, had a much broader view of fables, which were sometimes only described very generally as fictitious stories that illustrate truth or reality, as Aelius Theon defines them in his *Progymnasmata*.[3] A broad understanding of the term 'fable' in antiquity is also suggested by the fact that a variety of different types survive in various forms in the extant fable collections of the Imperial period. As I aim to show in this paper, the evident narrative complexity of Greek and Roman fable literature prompts us to somewhat re-assess our modern understanding of the term and the generic expectations that come with it. To illustrate why such a re-evaluation can be fruitful, I will discuss examples from Babrius' *Mythiambi*, a collection of Greek verse fables written presumably in the 2nd or 3rd century CE by an author of whom we know almost nothing but his name. Assumptions about his biography, nationality, and sphere of influence are based largely on information derived from the fables themselves with no significant external evidence, and remain mostly speculation.[4]

Some of Babrius' poems defy a clear categorization and seem to call into question what a 'typical' fable even consists of. While the *Mythiambi* share common characteristics with the fables of Phaedrus, Avianus, and the texts of the *collectio Augustana* on a macrolevel, there are examples in the collection that illustrate how much the individual works differ from one another. In line with the theme of this volume and using Babrian examples, I want to reflect on the coherence and boundaries of ancient fable literature and shed light on the ways in which it can absorb and morph into other genres.

At first glance, the fables analysed in this paper seem not to conform fully to what we would expect of a fable: Babr. 95, on the one hand, is the longest known fable from antiquity; on the other, Babr. 40, 54, and 73 are part of a group of short four-line poems, so-called tetrastichs (*tetrasticha*). None of these poems have comparable examples in other, earlier fable collections; they may well be original creations.[5] In the larger context of the collection, their length is significant. In the

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3 Theon *Prog.* 72 Spengel: Μῦθός ἐστι λόγος ψευδὴς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν ("A fable is a fictitious story that illustrates [a] truth/reality").

4 On Babrius' date and biography, cf. Holzberg 2012, 57–66; 2019, 9–13; Grethlein 2022; Spielhofer 2023, 12–18. Among the most recent contributions to the study of Babrius are Pertsinidis 2022, Allgaier 2022, Spielhofer 2022 and 2023, Althoff 2023, and Bottini's contribution in this volume. An overview of past and current scholarship is given in Spielhofer 2023, 23–27; cf. also Holzberg 2018 for a current bibliography.

5 Babr. 95 may have parallels with an iambic poem of Archilochus (cf. *fr.* 188–199 Lasserre), the authenticity of which is contested, however; parts of it are transmitted in a supposed Byzantine paraphrasis of Archilochus by Constantinus Rhodius (cf. Lasserre 1958, 58–59), other editors such as West do not include it in their editions. Interesting to mention are also possible parallels to

fragmentary state in which they survive, the *Mythiambi* consist of 144 fables in choliambic metre prefaced by two prologues;[6] the majority of the compositions are of between 10 and 20 lines in length; there are occasional longer poems, though — with one notable exception — they do not exceed 30 lines. In light of this, both the much larger Babr. 95 and the brief tetrastichs stand out. I argue that these fables reflect a playful literary exchange with other genres — more specifically, with epic and epigrammatic poetry — and that, by adapting elements and narrative devices characteristic of these types of texts, they subvert their audience's generic expectations of fable.[7]

2 The lion's feast: Babrius and epic

As with many issues in the field of classical literature, there is no straightforward answer to the question of how to define epic poetry. Most ancient texts deemed 'epic' today, starting from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, can be described as longer narrative poems written in hexameters.[8] Stylistically, they share a formulaic, 'high' style of language, make use of epithets, similes, comparisons, catalogues, and descriptions, and have a high proportion of direct speech. With regard to content, epic poems — at least those of the mythological, heroic, and historical type — deal with subjects removed from everyday life, such as myths, the deeds of kings and noble men, or historical events. These subjects often revolve around a central epic hero and are organized by a set of typical scenes.[9] Further, their stories are told by

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Mesopotamian Wisdom literature: The Babylonian *Series* (or *Tale*) *of the Fox*, a longer narrative work or 'disputation poem', revolves around the fox's adventures and interactions with other animals such as the wolf, the dog, or the lion. However, the exact plot of this text is difficult to ascertain due to the highly fragmentary status of transmission, with less than a tenth of the original poem preserved; thus, these connections, though not impossible given Babrius' familiarity with the Near Eastern tradition of animal fable, remain tenuous; cf. Jiménez 2017, 4–5; 377; see also Sövegjártó 2021.

6 If we add the paraphrases of some lost fables in the *Paraphrasis Bodleiana,* a collection of prose retellings found in a 15th-century codex which appear to be largely based on Babrius' text, we may assume the complete work to have contained around 200 fables, though this is somewhat speculative: for this approach, cf. Holzberg 2019, 10–11; Spielhofer 2023, 18–20.

7 On the different conceptions of genre and their methodological implications, I refer to the introduction to this volume.

8 For a modern definition, cf. Toohey 1992; for Roman epic, cf. von Albrecht 1994, 64–75.

9 On the study of structural elements of epic poetry, cf. Reitz/Finkmann 2019.

an objective, all-knowing narrator, following an organic structure of narration with a beginning, a middle, and an end.[10]

Bearing these generic categories of epic in mind, one might ask whether and in what way Babrius approximates this type of poetry in his fables.[11] As regards content, we find several examples in the *Mythiambi* that deal with mythological subjects and gods in their epic, anthropomorphic form: Babr. 12 is a sequel to the myth of Procne, Tereus, and Philomela, in which the sisters, now turned into birds, meet again in the wilderness;[12] Babr. 68 deals with an archery contest between Zeus and Apollo with Hermes and Ares as bystanders; finally, Babr. 31 depicts the battle of the weasels and mice, a variation on the epic parody of the *Batrachomyomachia*, the Battle of the Frogs and Mice.[13] Moreover, some characters in the fables are described or speak in a way that seems to hark back to epic speech and characterization, e.g. the lion in Babr. 1 who challenges his human opponent to battle using formulaic expressions that may evoke Homeric combat scenes.[14]

Besides these more general observations, however, there is a fable in the collection that specifically seems to draw upon characteristics of ancient epic: Babr. 95.[15] For illustrative purposes, I print the text of the poem in its entirety:

Λέων νοσήσας ἐν φάραγγι πετραίη
ἔκειτο νωθρὰ γυῖα γῆς ἐφαπλώσας,
φίλην δ' ἀλώπεκ' εἶχεν ᾗ προσωμίλει.
ταύτῃ ποτ' εἶπεν "εἰ θέλεις με σὺ ζώειν—
πεινῶ γὰρ ἐλάφου τῆς ὑπ' ἀγρίαις πεύκαις   5
κεῖνον τὸν ὑλήεντα δρυμὸν οἰκούσης,
καὶ νῦν διώκειν ἔλαφον οὐκέτ' ἰσχύω—
σὺ δ' ἢν θελήσῃς, χεῖρας εἰς ἐμὰς ἥξει
λόγοισι θηρευθεῖσα σοῖς μελιγλώσσοις."
ἀπῆλθε κερδώ, τὴν δ' ὑπ' ἀγρίαις ὕλαις   10

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10 Cf. Latacz 1998, 11–13.

11 On the 'epic' fable in Babrius more generally, cf. Nøjgaard 1967, 316–328.

12 Cf. a famous version of this story in Ov. *Met*. 6.412–674; for a study of this fable, cf. Spielhofer 2023, 231–247.

13 Coincidentally or not, Babr. 31 is also one of the few longer fables in the collection surpassing 20 lines; cf. also Holzberg 2019, 31. Other comparable epic subjects and characters appear in Babr. 59 (Zeus, Poseidon, Athena), 18 (Helios, Boreas), 70 (Polemos, Hybris), or 72 (Iris). In this context, the parallels of some of Babrius' epic fables to other examples of ancient 'animal epic' like the *Batrachomyomachia* or comparable poems known from Greek papyri offer rich ground for further investigation; however, such a study lies beyond the scope of this paper.

14 For an interpretation of this fable, cf. Spielhofer 2023, 123–134; cf. also Gärtner 2022, 67–68.

15 For an interpretation of this fable, cf. Nøjgaard 1967, 320–326.

σκιρτῶσαν εὗρε μαλθακῆς ὑπὲρ ποίης.
προσέκυσε δ’ αὐτὴν πρῶτον, εἶτα καὶ χαίρειν
προσεῖπε, χρηστῶν τ’ ἄγγελος λόγων ἥκειν.
“ὁ λέων” ἔφασκεν, “οἶδας, ἔστι μοι γείτων,
ἔχει δὲ φαύλως, κἀγγύς ἐστι τοῦ θνῄσκειν.   15
τίς οὖν μετ’ αὐτὸν θηρίων τυραννήσει
διεσκοπεῖτο· σῦς μέν ἐστιν ἀγνώμων,
ἄρκτος δὲ νωθής, πάρδαλις δὲ θυμώδης,
τίγρις δ’ ἀλαζὼν καὶ τὸ πᾶν ἐρημαίη.
ἔλαφον τυραννεῖν ἀξιωτάτην κρίνει·   20
γαύρη μὲν εἶδος, πολλὰ δ’ εἰς ἔτη ζώει,
κέρας δὲ φοβερὸν πᾶσιν ἑρπετοῖς φύει,
δένδροις ὅμοιον, κοὐχ ὁποῖα τῶν ταύρων.
τί σοι λέγω τὰ πολλά; πλὴν ἐκυρώθης,
μέλλεις τ’ ἀνάσσειν θηρίων ὀρειφοίτων.   25
τότ’ οὖν γένοιτο τῆς ἀλώπεκος μνήμη,
δέσποινα, τῆς σοι τοῦτο πρῶτον εἰπούσης.
ταῦτ’ ἦλθον. ἀλλὰ χαῖρε, φιλτάτη. σπεύδω
πρὸς τὸν λέοντα, μὴ πάλιν με ζητήσῃ–
χρῆται γὰρ ἡμῖν εἰς ἅπαντα συμβούλοις–   30
δοκῶ δὲ καὶ σέ, τέκνον, εἴ τι τῆς γραίης
κεφαλῆς ἀκούεις· ἔπρεπέ σοι παρεδρεύειν
ἐλθοῦσαν αὐτῷ καὶ πονοῦντα θαρσύνειν.
τὰ μικρὰ πείθει τοὺς ἐν ἐσχάταις ὥραις,
ψυχαὶ δ’ ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσι τῶν τελευτώντων.”   35
ὣς εἶπε κερδώ. τῆς δ’ ὁ νοῦς ἐχαυνώθη
λόγοισι ποιητοῖσιν, ἦλθε δ’ εἰς κοίλην
σπήλυγγα θηρός, καὶ τὸ μέλλον οὐκ ᾔδει.
λέων δ’ ἀπ’ εὐνῆς ἀσκόπως ἐφορμήσας
ὄνυξιν οὔατ’ ἐσπάραξεν ἀκραίοις,   40
σπουδῇ διωχθείς· τὴν δὲ φύζα δειλαίην
θύρης κατιθὺς ἦγεν εἰς μέσας ὕλας.
κερδὼ δὲ χεῖρας ἐπεκρότησεν ἀλλήλαις,
ἐπεὶ πόνος μάταιος ἐξανηλώθη.
κἀκεῖνος ἐστέναξε τὸ στόμα βρύχων   45
ὁμοῦ γὰρ αὐτὸν λιμὸς εἶχε καὶ λύπη,
πάλιν δὲ κερδὼ καθικέτευε φωνήσας
ἄλλον τιν’ εὑρεῖν δεύτερον δόλον θήρης.
ἡ δ’ εἶπε κινήσασα βυσσόθεν γνώμην·
“χαλεπὸν κελεύεις. ἀλλ’ ὅμως ὑπουργήσω.”   50
καὶ δὴ κατ’ ἴχνος ὡς σοφὴ κύων ᾔει,
πλέκουσα τέχνας καὶ πανουργίας πάσας,
ἀεὶ δ’ ἕκαστον ποιμένων ἐπηρώτα
μή πού τις ἔλαφος ἡματωμένη φεύγει.
τὴν δ’ ὥς τις εἶδε, δεικνύων ἂν ὡδήγει,   55
ἕως ποθ’ εὗρεν ἐν κατασκίῳ χώρῳ
δρόμων ἀναψύχουσαν. ἡ δ’ Ἀναιδείης

ὀφρὺν ἔχουσα καὶ μέτωπον εἱστήκει.
ἐλάφου δὲ φρὶξ ἐπέσχε νῶτα καὶ κνήμας,
χολὴ δ' ἐπέζει καρδίην, ἔφη δ' οὕτως·   60
[σὺ νῦν διώκεις πανταχοῦ με καὶ φεύγω.]
"ἀλλ' ὦ στύγημα, νῦν μὲν οὐχὶ χαιρήσεις,
ἢν μοι προσέλθῃς καὶ γρύσαι τι τολμήσῃς.
ἄλλους ἀλωπέκιζε τοὺς ἀπειρήτους,
ἄλλους δὲ βασιλεῖς αἱρέτιζε καὶ ποίει."   65
τῆς δ' οὐκ ἐτρέφθη θυμός, ἀλλ' ὑποβλήδην
"οὕτως ἀγεννής" φησί "καὶ φόβου πλήρης
πέφυκας; οὕτω τοὺς φίλους ὑποπτεύεις;
ὁ μὲν λέων σοι συμφέροντα βουλεύων,
μέλλων τ' ἐγείρειν τῆς πάροιθε νωθείης   70
ἔψαυσεν ὠτός, ὡς πατὴρ ἀποθνήσκων·
ἔμελλε γάρ σοι πᾶσαν ἐντολὴν δώσειν,
ἀρχὴν τοσαύτην πῶς λαβοῦσα τηρήσεις.
σὺ δ' οὐχ ὑπέστης κνῖσμα χειρὸς ἀρρώστου,
βίῃ δ' ἀποσπασθεῖσα μᾶλλον ἐτρώθης.   75
καὶ νῦν ἐκεῖνος πλεῖον ἢ σὺ θυμοῦται,
λίην ἄπιστον πειράσας σε καὶ κούφην,
βασιλῆ δέ φησι τὸν λύκον καταστήσειν.
οἴμοι πονηροῦ δεσπότου. τί ποιήσω;
ἅπασιν ἡμῖν αἰτίη κακῶν γίνῃ.   80
ἀλλ' ἐλθέ, καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν ἴσθι γενναίη,
μηδ' ἐπτόησο πρόβατον οἷον ἐκ ποίμνης.
ὄμνυμι γάρ σοι φύλλα πάντα καὶ κρήνας,
οὕτω γένοιτο σοί μόνῃ με δουλεύειν,
ὡς οὐδὲν ὁ λέων ἐχθρός, ἀλλ' ὑπ' εὐνοίης   85
τίθησι πάντων κυρίην σε τῶν ζῴων."
τοιαῦτα κωτίλλουσα τὴν ἀχαίνην
ἔπεισεν ἐλθεῖν δὶς τὸν αὐτὸν εἰς ᾅδην.
ἐπεὶ δὲ λόχμης εἰς μυχὸν κατεκλείσθη,
λέων μὲν αὐτὸς εἶχε δαῖτα πανθοίνην,   90
σάρκας λαφύσσων, μυελὸν ὀστέων πίνων,
καὶ σπλάγχνα δάπτων· ἡ δ' ἀγωγὸς εἱστήκει
πεινῶσα θήρης, καρδίην δὲ νεβρείην
λάπτει, πεσοῦσαν ἁρπάσασα λαθραίως,
καὶ τοῦτο κέρδος εἶχεν ὧν ἐκεκμήκει.   95
λέων δ' ἕκαστον ἐγκάτων ἀριθμήσας
μόνην ἀπ' ἄλλων καρδίην ἐπεζήτει,
καὶ πᾶσαν εὐνήν, πάντα δ' οἶκον ἠρεύνα.
κερδὼ δ' ἀπαιολῶσα τῆς ἀληθείης,
"οὐκ εἶχε πάντως" φησί "μὴ μάτην ζήτει.   100
ποίην δ' ἔμελλε καρδίην ἔχειν, ἥτις
ἐκ δευτέρου λέοντος ἦλθεν εἰς οἴκους;"
                                                      (Babr. 95)

A sick lion lay in a rocky cave, his sluggish limbs stretched out on the earth. He had a fox as a friend with whom he conversed. One day he said to her: "If you want me to survive — [5] for I am hungry for that deer who lives in the woody thicket there underneath wild pines, and now I have no longer the strength to chase a deer — but if you want, she will come into my hands, caught by your honey-tongued words." [10] The crafty one went away and found that one in the wild woods jumping over soft grass. And at first she welcomed her respectfully, then she also addressed her with a greeting, and said that she came as a messenger of good words. "The lion," she said, "you know, is my neighbour. [15] He is ill and close to death. So he has been considering who will rule the animals after him: the boar is senseless, the bear sluggish, the leopard hot-tempered, the tiger boastful and altogether solitary. [20] He judges that the deer is worthiest to rule: she has a splendid appearance, but lives for many years; she grows horns that are fearsome to all creeping animals, similar to trees, not like those of bulls. What need I say more? Save that you have been confirmed, [25] you are destined to rule over the animals who roam the mountain. But, then, may there be memory of the fox, my Lady, who first told you this. That is why I came. But now farewell, dearest one; I hurry back to the lion, lest he looks for me again, [30] since he needs me as adviser in all things. And I think you too should hurry, my child, if you would listen to an old head in any way: it would be appropriate for you to go, sit beside him, and cheer him up in his suffering; little things win over those in their last hours, [35] and the souls of the dying are in their eyes." So spoke the crafty one. And this one's mind was puffed up by feigned words. She came to the hollow cave of the beast, and did not know what was going to happen. The lion attacked her heedlessly from the bed [40] and slashed her ears with the tips of his claws, driven by haste. A panic put the wretched one to flight from the door straight into the middle of the woods. The fox threw her hands together, since her labour had been spent in vain. [45] And the other one groaned and gnashed his teeth (for hunger and grief gripped him at the same time), and again he begged the crafty one, saying that she should devise another, second hunting scheme. Setting her mind in motion from deep within, she said: [50] "You request something difficult. But I will be at your service nonetheless." And then she followed the track like a shrewd hound, devising tricks and villainies of every kind, and she always asked every shepherd if a bleeding deer was on the run anywhere. [55] When someone had seen her, he showed and guided her, until she found her at last in a shady place, recovering from the race. Having the brow and face of shamelessness, she stood there. A shudder seized her back and legs [60] and bile boiled over in her heart; she spoke thus: "[Now you follow me everywhere and I flee.] Oh you abomination, now you will not rejoice if you come near me and dare to mutter anything. Play the fox with others who are inexperienced, [65] choose others and make them kings." Yet her mind was not changed, but she interrupted her and said: "Are you so ignoble and full of fear? Are you so suspicious of your friends? The lion wanted to give you useful counsel, [70] he was about to rouse you from your former sluggishness when he touched your ear like a dying father: for he was about to give you every kind of command, how you can take over and preserve such a large empire. However, you did not even withstand the scratch of his feeble hand, [75] but with force you tore yourself away and were wounded all the more. And now he is angrier than you, having found you all too untrustworthy and careless, and he says that he will install the wolf as king. Ah, what a wicked master! What shall I do? [80] To us all you are the cause for these evils. But go and henceforward be brave, do not be scared like a sheep from the flock. For I swear to you by all the leaves and springs, as it shall come to pass that I serve you alone, [85] that the lion is no enemy at all, but that, out of goodwill, he will make you mistress of all

animals." Cajoling with such words she convinced the two-year-old deer to go to the same underworld twice. After he had shut himself up in the innermost part of the lair, [90] the lion had to himself a splendid banquet — gulping down the flesh, slurping the marrow from the bones, and devouring the inner parts. The guide stood by, starving for the prey; but she lapped up the deer's heart, having seized it stealthily when it fell down, [95] and this she had as profit for which she had worked hard. The lion, having gone through each of the inner parts, missed only the heart amid them all, and he searched for it in his whole bed and in his whole house. And the crafty one, confounding the truth, said: [100] "She did not have one, no doubt, do not search in vain. What kind of heart should she have who came a second time to the house of a lion?"

(Transl. L.S.)

This fable revolves around a sick lion, the king of animals, who is no longer able to hunt and relies on his friend, the fox, to persuade his prey, the deer, to come to him. It can be divided into the following sections:

> 1–3: introduction
> 4–42: the first attempt
>> 4b–9: the lion's first *actio* (direct speech addressed to the fox)
>> 10–13: the fox's *reactio* — she meets the deer in the woods as a messenger
>> 14–35: the fox's first *actio* (direct speech addressed to the deer)
>> 36–42: the deer's *reactio*: the lion attacks, the deer escapes
> 43–88: the second attempt
>> 43–48: *reactio* to the escape and the lion's second *actio* (indirect speech addressed to the fox)
>> 49–58: the fox's *reactio* (in direct speech) — she looks for the deer in the woods and meets her again
>> 59–65: the deer's *reactio* and first (direct) speech addressed to the fox
>> 66–86: the fox's second *actio* (direct speech addressed to the deer)
>> 87–88: the deer's *reactio*: the lion attacks a second time and kills the deer
> 89–102: result
>> 89–92a: the lion feasts on the deer
>> 92b–95: the fox eats the deer's heart
>> 96–98: the lion looks for the heart
>> 99–102: the fox's concluding speech

In the structure of this poem, while the modern, more-or-less generic scheme of *introduction — plot divided into series of actions and reactions (with or without*

speeches) — result seems to apply to this fable,[16] it is vastly more complex than comparable poems: after a short introduction, the plot is divided into two main parts of roughly equal length that detail the two attempts to lure the deer into the lion's den and are based on an *actio-reactio* structure, with some variation especially in the second part. The following long epilogue, which extends into a series of events as its own mini-narrative, is notably uncharacteristic for this scheme, especially due to its lack of dialogue, save for the fox's final speech.

Many things could be said about this fascinating poem, which warrants a separate, detailed study of its own.[17] For the sake of brevity, I will just point out some key aspects relevant to the discussion of genre: as mentioned, with its 102 lines, Babr. 95 is more than three times longer than any other fable in the collection. Thus, it has rightly been given the title of a "fable-epyllion"[18] or "epic fable"[19] in previous scholarship. Of course, this text is not an epic poem, and many of its characteristics clearly suggest a link to the fable tradition, not least the fact that it is not hexametric but choliambic poetry. And yet, some of its features seem strangely non-fabulistic, first and foremost its length: even though the story told in Babr. 95 is comparable to other fables — the collection includes several examples of a single narrative with multiple scenes —, the slower pace of narration, with descriptions and substantial amounts of direct and indirect speech, is noteworthy.[20] This rhetorical elaboration is in line with Babrian poetics[21] and contributes to the expansion of the fable to epic proportions.[22]

The fox serves as the central character of this fable and joins the different episodes together into a coherent story.[23] The smaller sub-sections are characterized by frequent scene changes, which are otherwise not very common in Babrius: we visit the lion's lair twice; the fox's and deer's dialogues take place in several locations, and so on. Further, the larger number of characters than usual is notable:

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16 Cf. Dithmar 1996, 190–196; Gärtner 2015, 47–48.

17 Of course, in the context of this contribution my analysis of such an extensive text can only be a criminally short and selective one.

18 Holzberg 2012, 64; 2019, 37; Nøjgaard 1967, 316–328.

19 Nøjgaard 1967, 205: "fable épique".

20 Around 55% of the text consists of speeches, which can comprise dozens of lines at a time; cf. Nøjgaard 1967, 321.

21 The pronounced rhetorical dimension of Babrius' fables can be seen as an expression of aesthetic ideals in the context of the Second Sophistic; cf. Spielhofer 2023, 30–32, 75–76; Pertsinidis 2022.

22 Cf. Nøjgaard 1967, 322.

23 As Nøjgaard 1967, 316, 322, remarks, the organization of the story around a main character is a key characteristic of what he calls "la fable épique".

besides the lion and the deer, the fox also interacts with some anonymous shepherds. One could, therefore, argue that Babr. 95 is generally more 'epic' in the sense that it tells a story as a more complex sequence of actions and scenes and describes its narrated world in more detail than other fables, which often seem to be quite spare in description.[24]

Considering the characteristics of mythological/heroic/historical epic outlined above, we can already discern parallels in this fable that one might call 'epic': an organic, linear narration, a central character that structures the narrative, detailed descriptions of the narrated world, and a focus on speech and dialogue. Adding to this are content-related parallels: the story deals, at least in the deceptive reality of the fox's speeches, with a royal line of succession, a dynastic topic removed from most recipients' everyday life.[25]

When we go into further detail, however, many more parallels with epic poetry appear, reflected in style and language, subject matter, and storytelling. The following examples demonstrate how Babr. 95 plays on variations of epic scenes, comparative similes, and formulaic expressions that have equivalents in the Homeric tradition, in order to evoke echoes of ancient epic. This is especially salient in the fable's many speeches, as our first example illustrates:

> **ὣς εἶπε κερδώ**. τῆς δ' ὁ νοῦς ἐχαυνώθη
> **λόγοισι ποιητοῖσιν**, ἦλθε δ' εἰς κοίλην
> σπήλυγγα θηρός, καὶ τὸ μέλλον οὐκ ᾔδει.
> (Babr. 95.36–38)

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24 Cf. in this context also Nøjgaard 1967, 317, who speaks of an "étendue épique" as "la représentation d'une action 'longue', c.-à.-d. d'une intrigue comportant un certain nombre d'étapes temporelles et d'une certaine complexité" ("the representation of a 'long' action, that is, a fabulistic plot comprising a certain number of temporal phases and of a certain complexity") in comparison to shorter fable narratives. He goes on to define an episodic sequence of actions, spatial descriptions, the creation of a social milieu, and a dialogic structure as constitutive of such an epic-fabulistic mode of narration, and names Babr. 95 as a typical example of this type of storytelling.

25 The poem's apparent nature as a tale of kings and great men is alluded to and echoed by expressions throughout such as τυραννήσει (16), τυραννεῖν (20), ἀνάσσειν (25), δέσποινα (27), βασιλεῖς (65), ἀρχὴν (73), βασιλῆ (78), δεσπότου (79), or κυρίην (86). Very interesting in this context is the role of the female gender of the deer (ἡ ἔλαφος) as highlighted by δέσποινα and κυρίην, considering that the deer in other fables (e.g. Babr. 43 and 46) is male (ὁ ἔλαφος). This may hint at a certain gender dimension in this fable and also throws a different light on the ambiguous gender of the fox — which I have cautiously interpreted as female in my translation; however, since the fox argues for the deer's royal claim on the ground of antlers, a feature that one would typically only expect in males, it is unclear how far this argument is supported by factual knowledge of the animal world.

> So spoke the crafty one (= the fox). And this one's (= the deer's) mind was puffed up by feigned words. She came to the hollow cave of the beast (= the lion), and did not know what was going to happen.

This passage is from the end of the fox's first speech to the deer. The expression ὡς εἶπε κερδώ (36), with κερδώ, "the crafty one", as a fabulistic epithet or synonym for the fox, in closing the speech evokes typical formulaic expressions that introduce or conclude epic dialogues.[26] The deer's reaction may also be reminiscent of the way emotions are expressed in Homeric epic, especially with the Ionic dative λόγοισι ποιητοῖσι (37), which only appears in a handful of fables, reinforcing the impression that we should be thinking of an epic scene here.[27]

Following the fox's advice, the deer enters the lion's cave, is attacked, and barely makes it out alive. In her flight, she is characterized as overcome with φύζα (41), an expression that is used in Homeric epic to describe a flight due to panic or cowardice.[28] Following from this, if we consider the role of the deer in epic more generally, we find that the animal frequently symbolizes (cowardly) fear in a negative, proverbial sense, e.g. in epic comparisons or similes.[29] Against this background, the characterization of Babrius' fleeing deer is striking, since it appears to provoke generic expectations of ancient epic and thereby positions the whole fable and its characters as a play on the literary tropes of this genre, almost like an expanded Homeric simile-comparison (or a sequence of them); other examples of this technique of generic absorption are also found in the rest of the poem, as we will see.

The next 'epic' passage in this fable follows immediately after the deer escapes the lion's first attack and describes his reaction:

κάκεῖνος ἐστέναξε τὸ στόμα βρύχων   45
ὁμοῦ γὰρ αὐτὸν **λιμὸς εἶχε καὶ λύπη**,
πάλιν δὲ κερδὼ **καθικέτευε** φωνήσας
ἄλλον τιν' εὑρεῖν δεύτερον δόλον θήρης.
ἡ δ' εἶπε κινήσασα βυσσόθεν γνώμην·
"χαλεπὸν κελεύεις. ἀλλ' ὅμως ὑπουργήσω."   50
καὶ δὴ **κατ' ἴχνος ὡς σοφὴ κύων** ἤει,

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26 The expression ὡς (ἔ)φάτο or ὡς εἰπών is common in Homer, cf. e.g. *Il.* 1.33; 1.43; 1.68; 1.101; 1.188; 1.245; 1.326; 1.345; 1.357; 1.446; 1.457; 1.511; 1.568; 1.595.

27 Cf. Luzzatto 1975, 28.

28 Such as in *Il.* 15.62; *Od.* 14.269; cf. LSJ s.v. φύζα.

29 Cf. *Il.* 1.225: οἰνοβαρές, κυνὸς ὄμματ' ἔχων, κραδίην δ' ἐλάφοιο ("You who are heavy with wine, who have the eyes of a dog and the heart of a deer"); 13.101–102: οἳ [...] φυζακινῆς ἐλάφοισιν ἐοίκεσαν ("<the Trojans> who resemble shy, fleeing deer").

πλέκουσα τέχνας καὶ πανουργίας πάσας,
ἀεὶ δ' ἕκαστον ποιμένων ἐπηρώτα
μή πού τις ἔλαφος ἡματωμένη φεύγει.
(Babr. 95.45–54)

And the other one groaned and gnashed his teeth (for hunger and grief gripped him at the same time), and again he begged the crafty one, saying that she should devise another, second hunting scheme. Setting her mind in motion from deep within, she said: "You request something difficult. But I will be at your service nonetheless." And then she followed the track like a shrewd hound, devising tricks and villainies of every kind, and she always asked every shepherd if a bleeding deer was on the run anywhere.

(Transl. L.S.)

As Luzzatto has observed, the use of εἶχε in λιμὸς εἶχε καὶ λύπη (46) as "hunger and grief gripped him" is very similar to how emotions are described in the Homeric poems as something that overwhelms a person.[30] The verb καθικέτευε in the following line in the imperfect tense without an augment is typical of Homeric language but only appears three times in Babrius.[31] The fox's short answer to the lion's new request is introduced by another expression in 49 that could be read as formulaic, especially as κινήσας is often used as the first word of such introductory lines in Homeric epic.[32] In the subsequent passage, the fox chases after the deer; in 51 and 52, she is described as devising all kinds of tricks and, in her pursuit, likened to a clever hunting dog following the deer's tracks. Correspondingly, in ancient epic, we find a wealth of similes that compare characters in pursuit of someone with hunting dogs, e.g. in the *Iliad*.[33] This short comparison is the first in a series of epic-fabulistic similes in Babr. 95 and has parallels in the rest of the collection.[34] Together with the linguistic quality of the following κατ' ἴχνος […] ᾔει (51), which can be interpreted as a Homeric tmesis, the comparative element gives the scene some epic flavour, while the animal imagery connects the epic with the fabulistic world.

Directly following this we find the depiction of the fox meeting the deer for a second time and the deer's reaction to this encounter:

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30 Cf. Luzzatto 1975, 28.

31 Cf. Rutherford 1883, 91; Luzzatto 1975, 29.

32 *Il.* 17.442 and *Od.* 5.285: κινήσας δὲ κάρη προτὶ ὃν μυθήσατο θυμόν ("He moved his head and spoke in his anger"); *Od.* 15.45: λὰξ ποδὶ κινήσας, καί μιν πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπεν ("He touched him with the foot and said the word to him").

33 Cf. *Il.* 8.338–341; 15.579; 22.188–190; cf. Nøjgaard 1967, 325.

34 Cf. e.g. Babr. 1, which can also be interpreted as an epic simile.

ἡ δ’ Ἀναιδείης
ὀφρὺν ἔχουσα καὶ μέτωπον εἰστήκει.
ἐλάφου δὲ **φρὶξ ἐπέσχε νῶτα καὶ κνήμας,**
χολὴ δ’ ἐπέζει καρδίην, ἔφη δ’ οὕτως·   60
          (Babr. 95.57b–60)

Having the brow and face of shamelessness, she stood there. A shudder seized her back and legs and bile boiled over in her heart; she spoke thus:

(Transl. L.S.)

Again, this passage brims with epic vocabulary: starting from 57, the fox is described as having the brow and face of shamelessness. This is reminiscent of several Homeric descriptions of gods, for example Zeus and Hera, with dark brows used as an epithet or a representation of their emotions, especially in formulaic expressions which introduce or conclude speeches.[35] The reaction of the deer in 59 and 60 is noteworthy for its epic tone: while the rare poetic φρίξ, here used to denote the shudder that comes over the deer upon seeing the fox, seems to be of Homeric origin,[36] ἐπέσχε points towards the Homeric idea of overwhelming emotions already mentioned in the preceding example in 46;[37] finally, the combination of νῶτα καὶ κνήμας may also evoke Homeric epic.[38] Against this background, then, the description of the deer's emotions and the introduction of her speech in a similar formulaic manner may strike us as equally emphatic: χολὴ δ’ ἐπέζει καρδίην (60) has the deer's raging bile metaphorically boiling over from her heart — note again the focus on καρδίη here. And while a reader might expect this too to be derived from epic imagery, one may be surprised to find that similar expressions are actually found in Old Comedy;[39] the insertion of a comedic expression into an otherwise rather epic scene could be interpreted as an author playing with his audience's expectations.[40]

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35 Cf. *Il.* 1.528; 15.102–103; 17.209.

36 It is used in Homer to describe the ripples on a water surface caused by the wind: *Il.* 7.63; 23.692; *Od.* 4.402.

37 Cf. also ἐπέσχε in an abstract sense to indicate that something conquers or extends outwards in *Il.* 23.238; 24.792.

38 The juxtaposition of κνήμη with other body parts is frequent in Homer: cf. e.g. *Il.* 4.146–147: μηροὶ | [...] κνῆμαί τε; 17.386: γούνατά τε κνῆμαί τε πόδες; *Od.* 8.135: μηρούς τε κνῆμας τε; however, the combination νῶτα καὶ κνήμας is not attested before Babrius.

39 Cf. Ar. *Thesm.* 468: οὐ θαυμάσιόν ἐστ’, οὐδ’ ἐπιζεῖν τὴν χολήν. ("it is not surprising, nor that your bile boils over.").

40 For the relationship between fable and comedy, cf. the contributions of Pütz and Gärtner in this volume.

In the following speech (61–65), the deer rebukes the fox and suggests she look for other rulers elsewhere, since she wants nothing to do with the lion and his machinations. In her response, the fox successfully gaslights the deer, excuses the lion's behaviour, and persuades her victim to return to the den a second time. Her speech begins as follows:

> **τῆς δ᾽ οὐκ ἐτρέφθη θυμός, ἀλλ᾽ ὑποβλήδην**
> "οὕτως ἀγεννής" φησί "καὶ **φόβου πλήρης**
> **πέφυκας**; οὕτω τοὺς φίλους ὑποπτεύεις;
>
> (Babr. 95.66–68)

> Yet her mind was not changed, but she interrupted her and said: "Are you so ignoble and full of fear? Are you so suspicious of your friends?
>
> (Transl. L.S.)

Besides the highly epically-coded θυμός, 66 contains another typical introductory clausula: in Homeric epic, ὑποβλήδην in combination with a verb denoting speech marks a change of speaker by way of interruption or answer, as in a passage in the *Iliad* where Achilles interrupts Agamemnon.[41] This gives the fox's following speech (67–86) a confident, almost hostile tone, which fits its content well: in the first few lines, the fox attempts to manipulate the deer into thinking that she herself acted wrongly against those who would wish her well. Here, we also find a case of Babrian *intra*textuality. The fox remarks: "Are you so full of fear?" (φόβου πλήρης | πέφυκας, 67–68). This collocation, which appears several times in the *Mythiambi*,[42] takes up an identical expression from Babr. 1 mentioned earlier, a fable in which wild animals flee from the mountain as a hunter arrives and only a brave lion dares to face him; through allusions to Homeric epic, their exchange is similarly staged as an epic battle scene.[43] The verbal connection between these two epically-flavoured fables, both of which strongly feature a lion as a central character, can, in my view, hardly be a coincidence.

In the rest of her speech, the fox attempts to depict the lion as a caring old friend — to rouse pity she even compares him to a dying father (71); in contrast, the deer is impetuous and short-sighted. The fox bids her not to be afraid and,

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41 *Il.* 1.292: Τὸν δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ὑποβλήδην ἠμείβετο δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς ("The divine Achilles interrupted him and answered").

42 Cf. Spielhofer 2023, 49.

43 Cf. Babr. 1.3; for an interpretation of this fable, cf. Spielhofer 2023, 123–134.

employing another short comparison-simile, likens her to a sheep in his flock (82),[44] before ending with an epic oath:

> **ὄμνυμι γάρ σοι φύλλα πάντα καὶ κρήνας**,
> οὕτω γένοιτο σοὶ μόνη με δουλεύειν,
> ὡς οὐδὲν ὁ λέων ἐχθρός, ἀλλ᾽ ὑπ᾽ εὐνοίης   85
> τίθησι πάντων κυρίην σε τῶν ζῴων."
> <div align="right">(Babr. 95.83–86)</div>

> For I swear to you by all the leaves and springs, as it shall come to pass that I serve you alone, that the lion is no enemy at all, but that, out of goodwill, he will make you mistress of all animals."
> <div align="right">(Transl. L.S.)</div>

Instead of the typical deities, the fox swears by leaves and springs; similar oaths that evoke natural elements can be found in Homeric epic where they are also marked with the verb ὄμνυμι;[45] besides epic parallels, the natural characterization of the scene also seems quite fitting for the world of fable. The fox's speech is quickly followed by an authorial comment: τοιαῦτα κωτίλλουσα τὴν ἀχαιίνην | ἔπεισεν (87–88a), which further mirrors formulaic introductory and closing clausulae of epic poetry.

Beyond these frequent, more-or-less systematic allusions to elements of Homeric poetry, the final sequence of Babr. 95 is our most important illustration of how this fable plays with the literary conventions of ancient epic: after the deer has entered the lion's den a second time — dramatically described as ᾄδην (88), the literal underworld — the lion, described as king of all animals throughout the poem, traps and feasts on her:

> λέων μὲν **αὐτὸς εἶχε δαῖτα πανθοίνην**,   90
> **σάρκας λαφύσσων, μυελὸν ὀστέων πίνων,**
> **καὶ σπλάγχνα δάπτων·**
> <div align="right">(Babr. 95.90–92a)</div>

> the lion had to himself a splendid banquet — gulping down the flesh, slurping the marrow from the bones, and devouring the inner parts:
> <div align="right">(Transl. L.S.)</div>

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44 This epic element makes use of the character traits typically associated with certain animals in fables (e.g. the timid sheep), creating an image that is at the same time epic and fabulistic.
45 Cf. e.g. *Il.* 14.271; 15.40; 23.585.

His meal is described as a δαῖς πανθοίνη (90), a splendid banquet with all sorts of meals.[46] In the context of epic, this may evoke various typical banquet scenes; but, in a fabulistic manner, the motif is turned on its head here — instead of feasting *with* his 'guest', the lion feasts *on* her.[47] 91 and 92 then further detail his meal: he gulps down the deer's flesh, slurps the marrow from her bones, and devours her inner parts. This passage contains multiple links to epic: the expression σάρκας λαφύσσων (91) is found twice in the *Iliad*, both times in similes that compare Agamemnon's and Menelaos' fighting to that of lions who kill cattle;[48] another comparable passage is found in the *Odyssey*,[49] where Polyphemus kills Odysseus' companions and, while feasting on them, is compared to a mountain lion, with the enumerated body parts identical to those present at the lion's banquet, namely innards, flesh, and bones with their marrow. Babrius' depiction has substantial parallels to these Homeric similes: the intertextual links make Babrius' lion himself appear like an epic simile in motion, acting out exactly the scenes that they usually accompany in Homer, all while combining both the animal's role of killing prey and the human's (or cyclops') role of feasting in a banquet. Taken together with the other examples discussed above, this passage is a strong indication that Babr. 95 does, in fact, play with epic conventions and, in addition to other examples that illustrate what an 'epic' fable might look like,[50] attests to the many forms that fable poetry can take.

Finally, the fox symbolically eating the deer's heart (92–95) and the lion looking everywhere for it (96–98) prompts a pointed remark spoken by our main character:

> **κερδὼ** δ' ἀπαιολῶσα τῆς ἀληθείης,
> "οὐκ εἶχε πάντως" φησί "μὴ μάτην ζήτει.   100
> ποίην δ' ἔμελλε **καρδίην** ἔχειν, ἥτις
> ἐκ δευτέρου λέοντος ἦλθεν εἰς οἴκους;"
> 			(Babr. 95.99–102)

And the crafty one, confounding the truth, said: "She did not have one, no doubt, do not search in vain. What kind of heart should she have who came a second time to the house of a lion?"

				(Transl. L.S.)

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46 For the significance of the Homeric δαῖς in epic poetry, cf. also McKeon's contribution in this volume.

47 Cf. also αὐτὸς in 90 denoting that he feasts alone.

48 Cf. *Il.* 11.176; 17.64; Luzzatto 1975, 22.

49 Cf. *Od.* 9.292–293.

50 Cf. e.g. Babr. 1; 12; 31; while Babr. 31 extensively treats the trope of the epic battle, Babr. 95 seems to focus more on the epic dialogues and banquet scenes characteristic of the genre.

With the fox's final speech, the fable returns to an almost epigrammatically unexpected ending that leaves room for interpretation. The enigmatic words have multiple implications for the interpretation of this poem: they play on the idea that the heart was seen as the seat of reason in antiquity,[51] suggesting the deer's lack thereof. Beyond that, however, her answer also alludes to the deer's role as a symbol of cowardice in ancient epic, as discussed above, with parallels in the *Iliad* that specifically mention the proverbial καρδίη ἐλάφοιο.[52] It is also notable that we cannot really deduce a *fabula docet* from the fox's words: what should we learn here? That someone who makes the same mistake twice has no common sense? The text neither expresses this explicitly nor gives any other moral instruction; instead, its focus seems to be on telling a captivating story based on common epic tropes — both human and non-human — that is so compelling that by the end we as readers may have even forgotten that we are not, in fact, reading an epic but a fable; the clever fox (κερδώ, 99), perhaps the most typical fable character of all, reminds us of this and highlights even further the contrast between the pseudo-epic storyline and the witty fabulistic frame; finally, the "crafty one's" actions, who stealthily devours the deer's proverbial heart, may also be read as a metapoetic comment on the process of literary appropriation, exemplifying the author's technique of generic absorption and representing a fable that 'eats' epic raw materials to turn them into something new.

I make one final — though very cautious — remark regarding 'epic' characterization in this poem: the fact that 'the crafty one' (κερδώ, 99) gets the heart as profit (κέρδος, 95) in the end could also hint at Odysseus and his role in both the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, especially since our fable's storyline is also about the creation of a new ruler, with the end result that the new king is precisely the old one. If we go down this route and are willing to equate the fox with Odysseus, we may wish to explore further hints towards other epic heroes in the poem and ask what influence such an equation could have on a reader's image of the different fable characters. Following this interpretation, we might equate the lion king with Agamemnon and the deer with Achilles, seeing as Odysseus was also part of the embassy to Achilles in book 9 of the *Iliad*, which might be mirrored in the lion's double embassy with the fox as messenger. Since the deer is characterized in

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51 The metonymic use of καρδία ("heart") to denote the mind appears frequently in epic poetry, e.g. *Il.* 21.441; *Od.* 4.572; 5.389; cf. LSJ s.v. καρδία I 3.
52 See n. 29.

similar terms to Achilles in some of Babrius' other fables,[53] this interpretation, though not without its faults, opens up paths to an additional epic reading.

As can be seen from these examples, Babr. 95 stands out from the rest of the collection not only for its epic length but also for its subject matter, narrative pace, multiple-scene structure, long dialogues, use of epic language, and playful variations on typical epic motifs. As such, it can, in my view, reasonably be understood as a learned author's take on what an epic poem on events unfolding in the world of Aesopic fable might look like.[54]

3 The eunuch's prophecy: Babrius and epigram

While the idea of reading Babr. 95 as a fable in epic form is compelling, it is not the only example in the *Mythiambi* of fables that engage with the conventions of other genres.[55] And what better way to explore the variety of fabulistic storytelling than by examining a narrative form that is the polar opposite of epic, at least from a quantitative point of view: epigrammatic poetry.

Epigrams, such as survive from Hellenistic and Imperial times, can be defined as short poems, in elegiac couplets or other metres, derived from the practice of writing stone inscriptions for a variety of occasions, which emancipated themselves from their original medium and developed into an independent literary form and so could be grouped together into books and collections as works of art in their own right.[56] Among other topics, epigrams deal with sympotic, erotic, and bucolic subjects; they display a fascination for the 'primitive' or 'popular', the unusual, surprising, and even bizarre. In essence, epigrams are short expressions of poetic wit with a pointed ending and may include anecdotes, aphorisms, or

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53 Cf. e.g. Babr. 43.10, where she is described as "nimble-footed" (ἴχνεσιν κούφοις), similarly to the "swift-footed Achilles" (πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς, e.g. in *Il.* 1.58; 1.84; 1.48; 1.215; 1.364; 1.489).

54 As already mentioned, the story is unique to the Babrian collection in the ancient tradition; however, it was quite influential in the Medieval and Byzantine period, as various adaptations in French (Marie de France's *Ysopet* 70 [*De leone aegrotante*]), Greek (*Paraphrasis Bodleiana* 200), and especially Latin (e.g. Baldo's *Novus Aesopus* 13; Johannes de Capua 6.68; Nicolas Bozon 6; Raimundus de Biterris 8.61) attest; for a full list, cf. van Dijk 2015 s.v. 51 (136–137).

55 This chapter can only give a brief and selective overview of the generic interactions with ancient epigram. A thorough study of the interconnected relationship between Babrius' fables and epigrammatic poetry is still a desideratum. On epigrammatic elements in Avianus, cf. Neger's contribution in this volume; on epigrammatic retellings of Babrius in the Byzantine period, cf. Scognamiglio's contribution in this volume.

56 On ancient epigram collections in general, cf. Höschele 2010.

satirical elements.[57] From the early Imperial period onwards, epigrams mocking historical persons or more general types in the iambic tradition also become popular. An epigram's structure is often described as comprising two parts: the first creates attention and expectation while the second either meets or, more often, confounds the expectation with a surprising twist revealed at the end.[58]

These definitions offer useful criteria to assess whether the *Mythiambi* share characteristics with the ancient epigram. As with epic, the first and most apparent formal parallel may be the length of the poems: epigrams are characterized by their brevity, many of them not exceeding a handful of lines. Although many Babrian fables are slightly longer than that (between 10 and 20 lines), there are quite a few shorter poems in the collection, the shortest of which are just two lines of text.[59] In metre, one can also draw parallels. The *Mythiambi* are composed in choliambic verse, and epigrammatic poetry too was also written in iambics, a practice that became especially popular in the Imperial period.[60] In content, the *Mythiambi* overlap with epigrammatic poetry in their use of bucolic topics and their tendency to present 'popular' or everyday scenes, as well as bizarre and unusual stories; and conversely, there are also poems in ancient epigram collections which narrate animal fables in the Aesopic tradition.[61] Finally, there are parallels in how both epigrams and fables are arranged into books and collections. In Babrius' manuscript tradition, his fables are arranged in alphabetical order, a feature they share with the fables of the *collectio Augustana* but also with

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57 Cf. Degani 1997, 1108–1112. For a list of criteria defining ancient epigram, cf. also Citroni 2019, 39–40; as constitutive of the genre he singles out brevity, the presence of inscriptional features, the elegiac metre, an expressive concentration, a two-part structure, a sense of closure, a connection to an occasion, inclusion within a collection of epigrams, and the author's profession of limited commitment.

58 This can be supported by rhetorical figures of speech such as antitheses, parallelisms, or wordplay; cf. Citroni 2019, 39.

59 This is Babr. 41.

60 Cf. examples in Martial's epigrams, e.g. Mart. 1 *praef*.; 1.10; 1.66; 1.77; 1.84; 1.89; 1.96; 1.113; 2.11; 2.17; 2.57; 2.65; 2.74 etc.; over 70 poems across all twelve books of his collection are composed in iambic metres; for a full list, cf. Norcio 1991, 906.

61 For fabulistic epigrams in the *Anthologia Palatina*, cf. van Dijk 1997, 258–269; Adrados 1999; 2000; Christodoulou 2020; for fables in the epigrams of Gregory of Nazianzus, see also the contribution by Christodoulou in this volume. For studies on the interactions between fables and Roman epigrammatic poetry, particularly Martial, cf. Weinreich 1931; Lobe 2000; Mattiacci 2007; 2008; 2010; 2011; 2014; 2022; Mindt 2013, 260–270; Neger 2012, 264–271; 2022; see also Neger's contribution in this volume.

certain epigram books, such as those of Philippus of Thessalonica or the *Carmina priapea*, which we now know displayed a very similar type of arrangement.[62]

Beyond these general points of contact between the *Mythiambi* and the genre of epigram, however, there is a group of fables within Babrius' collection that deserves further attention if we want to understand this generic relationship: *tetrasticha.* As their name implies, tetrastichs are short poems of four lines; they make up roughly one seventh of the poems in the surviving collection.[63] In scholarship on Babrius, which in the past has largely been focused on textual criticism, their authenticity has often been called into question due to their unusual nature compared to the rest of the fables. Some editors have even eliminated them altogether and expressed harsh judgments on their literary quality.[64] In my view, however, they are not poetic failures but rather expressions of a learned play on the genre of ancient epigram, as the following examples will help to demonstrate:

> **Διέβαινε** ποταμὸν ὀξὺν ὄντα τῷ ῥείθρῳ
> κυρτὴ κάμηλος, εἶτ' ἔχεζε. τοῦ δ' ὄνθου
> φθάνοντος αὐτὴν εἶπεν "ἦ κακῶς πράσσω·
> ἔμπροσθεν ἤδη τἀξόπισθέ μου **βαίνει**."
> (Babr. 40)

> A humped camel was crossing a river with a swift stream, when she eased herself. When the dung overtook her, she said: "Truly, I'm doing badly; already what was behind me is now going in front."
> (Transl. L.S.)

This tetrastich depicts a camel crossing a river and watching her own waste surpass her. In the first three lines, the reader is introduced into the scene and witnesses the camel's *actio* as well as a *reactio* involving her dung floating in front of her. In reaction to this, the camel cries out in a typical direct speech that ends the fable and serves as a kind of epimythium. Line 1 opens with the description of the raging current of a river and someone's attempt to cross it — the protagonist is only intro-

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62 Cf. Höschele 2017; 2019.

63 Of 144 fables, 19 are tetrastichs: Babr. 8; 14; 29; 39; 40; 41; 54; 60; 73; 80; 81; 83; 90; 96; 109; 110; 113; 121; 133. This type of four-line fable had significant influence in Byzantine literature, cf. Scognamiglio's contribution in this volume.

64 Cf. e.g. Rutherford's verdict on Babr. 8 (1883, 13): "Fabulam vix e Babrio profectam esse judico; si minus recte, utique tamen a Tetrastichista pessime est depravata. Una certe quaerenti manet opinio auctorem camelo suo totum ipsius ingenium deposuisse." ("I judge that this fable hardly came from Babrius; if <I judge> incorrectly, then it was at any rate badly disfigured by a Tetrastichist. Certainly, the only opinion that remains to the inquirer is that the author dumped all his own 'talent' on his camel."); cf. Spielhofer 2023, 190–197.

duced in an enjambment at the beginning of 2, heightening the reader's suspense as to who and what we are witnessing. Immediately after appearing, the camel proceeds to do her business right then and there — in the middle of the river, the line, and the poem itself. One can assume that the intent was for the river to carry away the camel's waste. However, somewhat unexpectedly, the strong current makes it pass in front of the camel and overtake her, as is described in 2 and 3. This now fuels the camel's final speech, in which she describes her sorry state and gives an explanation for it: what 'went' behind is now already in front of her.

When we look at this poem, we see several parallels to an ancient epigram: it is short, it depicts a humorous, even absurd scene with some degree of vulgarity, and closes with a witty, pointed speech, which may be read as a commentary on a mundane event, but can also be interpreted in an abstract, philosophical way. The latter interpretation is also suggested by the (probably interpolated) epimythium,[65] which situates the fable in the context of political theory and invites biographical interpretations about the empirical author's antidemocratic tendencies.[66] This reading shows that small and at first glance trivial poems can have the potential for deep philosophical discourses, as is typical of epigrams. All of this is achieved in a short narrative that appears to stand on its own; the impression of closure that this fable conveys is underlined by a verbal frame highlighting its beginning and end: διέβαινε at the beginning of 1 opens the fable, βαίνει at the end of 4 closes it.[67]

Besides this fable, Babr. 54 is another tetrastich which, in my view, illustrates even more clearly the similarities that some of the fables in the *Mythiambi* share with ancient epigrams:

Εὐνοῦχος ἦλθε πρὸς θύτην ὑπὲρ **παίδων**
σκεψόμενος. ὁ θύτης δ' ἁγνὸν ἧπαρ ἁπλώσας
"ὅταν μέν" εἶπε "ταῦτ' ἴδω, **πατὴρ γίνῃ**,
ὅταν δὲ τὴν σὴν ὄψιν, **οὐδ' ἀνὴρ φαίνῃ**."
(Babr. 54)

A eunuch went to a sacrificer to ask him about children. The sacrificer, spreading out a sacred liver, said: "When I look at this, you'll become a father; but when I look at your appearance, you do not seem to be a man."

(Transl. L.S.)

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65 πόλις ἄν τις εἴποι τὸν λόγον τὸν Αἰσώπου | ἧς ἔσχατοι κρατοῦσιν ἀντὶ τῶν πρώτων ("a city might tell this fable of Aesop, in which the lowest rule instead of the first ones.").
66 Cf. Holzberg 2012, 67, and Nøjgaard 1967, 312, who speaks of the "moralité politique" ("political morality") of this fable and relates it to the poet's professed role as royal tutor.
67 Cf. Nøjgaard 1967, 240; I thank Vittorio Bottini for pointing this out to me.

Of all the examples discussed, this poem is probably furthest from what we might call a 'typical' fable, not only but especially since it does not have any animals as protagonists.[68] Babr. 54 deals with a eunuch inquiring about becoming a father, to which the sacrificer gives a rather peculiar answer: he hints at the fact that his ritual indicates something contrary to the obvious situation at hand.

This tetrastich displays several elements that could be considered epigrammatic: first, as with the other example, the shortness of four stichic choliambs reflects the brevity typical of the genre; second, the satirical content and everyday scene bring it close to satire or comedy. The poem parodies ritual practice and introduces a character typical of comedy, the eunuch, who is mocked. Eunuchs are also present in two of Martial's epigrams, where the fact that they cannot have children is highlighted:

> Cur tantum **eunuchos** habeat tua Caelia quaeris,
> Pannyche? volt futui Caelia **nec parere**.
> (Mart. 6.67)

> Do you ask why your Caelia has only eunuchs, Pannychus? Caelia wants to be fucked, but not to bear children.
> (Transl. L.S.)

> Omnes **eunuchos** habet Almo nec arrigit ipse:
> et queritur **pariat quod sua Polla nihil**.
> (Mart. 10.91)

> Almo has only eunuchs and he cannot get it up himself; and he complains that his Polla gives birth to nothing.
> (Transl. L.S.)

In a way, we might even imagine one of Caelia's or Polla's eunuchs being the protagonist of Babr. 54 and (paradoxically) wondering why he does not have children, which gives this poem an even more humorous tone.

Besides brevity and content, the epigrammatic nature of this fable is also reflected in its skilfully crafted, symmetrical structure: while the first two lines set the scene for the following conversation and set up an expectation, lines 3 and 4 take this up but pointedly and unexpectedly change the meaning of the poem at the end. Its pun-like character seems to play off the language of visual perception,

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68 It has been observed that fables which feature mainly human protagonists exhibit the greatest parallels to epigrammatic poetry; on Phaedrus and Avianus, cf. Neger 2022 and Neger's contribution in this volume; on comparisons between Babrius and Martial, cf. also the literature in n. 61.

with key expressions placed at strategic positions: σκεψόμενος in enjambment at the beginning of 2 highlights the gaze into the future as a way to build up expectation, while acts of looking and appearing play a major role in the second part of the poem: ἴδω (3) and ὄψιν (4) share the same position in their respective lines and φαίνη concludes the fable at the end of 4. The sacrificer's answer in direct speech as a sort of epimythium mirrors the well-known epigrammatic structure of anticipation and release: line 3 introduces the first part of the argument with ὅταν μέν at the beginning of the line and πατὴρ γίνη at the end, while 4, with a parallel construction (ὅταν δὲ) and even sharing the same predicate ἴδω (3), ends the poem with the fact that the eunuch will not be a father as he is not even a man. The parallel construction of 3 and 4, ὅταν μέν — ὅταν δὲ at the beginning and πατὴρ γίνη — ἀνὴρ φαίνη at the end, stresses this antithesis even more. If one looks at the beginning of the tetrastich and sees Εὐνοῦχος, one realizes that this ending is clear from the first word onwards and that the whole story is, in fact, absurd. This kind of pointed remark, which makes one re-read and think about the content of a poem, is exactly the kind of ending one would expect from an epigram.

Finally, a third fable from Babrius' collection demonstrates that even without a final direct speech, tetrastichs are examples of concentrated, suspenseful, and pointedly epigrammatic storytelling:

> Ἰκτῖνος **ἄλλην** ὀξέην εἶχε κλαγγήν·
> ἵππου δ' ἀκούσας χρεμετίσαντος **εὐφώνως**,
> μιμούμενος τὸν **ἵππον οὔτε τὴν κρείττω**
> **φωνὴν** θελήσας **ἔσχεν οὔτε τὴν πρώτην**.
> (Babr. 73)

> The kite had a different voice, a high-pitched one. But when he heard a horse neighing euphoniously, he imitated the horse but attained neither the better voice, which he had wanted, nor the earlier one.
>
> (Transl. L.S.)

In all its brevity, this poem offers a variation of the motif of (unsuccessful) imitation frequently found in fable literature.[69] Line 1 brings us into the story: we learn that the kite once had a different voice. The following three lines explain the reason for the change: in 2, the kite first listens to the horse neighing in a beautiful tone; 3 and 4 then describe how the kite imitates the horse's voice. This imitation is reflected on the levels of syntax, prosody, and metre: lines 3b (ἵππον οὔτε τὴν κρείττω) and 4b (ἔσχεν οὔτε τὴν πρώτην) are identical in syntax (parallelism),

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69 Cf. e.g. Babr. 137 (jackdaw imitates eagle) or Phaed. 1.24 Z. [= G.] (frog imitates bull).

word length, and stress; they are bound together by the enjambment κρείττω | φωνὴν, making the pointed contrast that concludes the narrative even more apparent. While the emulous kite is not successful in achieving the horse's better voice in 3, this defeat is worsened by the revelation at the very end of 4 that he cannot even recover his original voice, being caught somewhere in between. After a string of actions in the imperfect (1) or non-finite verbal forms (2–3), ἔσχεν in 4 in the aorist breaks the suspense built up in the preceding lines about the outcome of the kite's actions and prepares us for the witty pointe to follow — the kite's absolute failure. As with the other two examples, the narrative concentration and sense of closure typical of epigrams is also present in Babr. 73; this is attested by the accentuation of the beginning and end of the poem, with πρώτην in the final position in 4 referring back to the second word ἄλλην in 1, and the verbal cross-references throughout, such as φωνὴν in the emphatic opening of 4 taking up εὐφώνως in final position in 2.

As the parallels in these examples show, there is good reason to read the Babrian tetrastichs in the context of the ancient epigram; their brevity, characters, and witty pointedness can be understood as an expression of a fable author's playful engagement with the conventions of epigrammatic poetry and an audience's expectations of the same.

4 Conclusion: Questions of genre in the *Mythiambi*

In light of the variety of fables discussed here, what conclusions can we draw about how to define a 'typical' fable? As the two parts of this paper illustrate, Babrius' poems can differ substantially both from each other and from a hypothetical 'fable model', with the generic expectations that come with it: Babr. 95 shows influences from longer, epic poetry in its structure, narrative mode, characters and subject matter, and style and language; on the other hand, the tetrastichs presented here appear to be modelled on shorter epigrammatic poetry, which is also reflected in their formal make-up, content, and narrative style. In my view, neither of these cases of approximation to another genre is meant in an ironic or parodistic way. Rather, both the smallest and largest poems in the *Mythiambi* are the expression of a learned play on poetic genres; they highlight the fact that Babrius' fables are deeply embedded in the literary culture of their time, interacting with other texts and being influenced by them, all while playing with their

audience's generic expectations of fable and displaying knowledge, skill, and appreciation for ancient literature in general.[70]

If one accepts this perspective on the *Mythiambi* as a work of literature that participates in the literary discourse of its time, the ramifications for the interpretation both of single poems and of the collection as a whole are far-reaching. One may, for example, interpret the position (and juxtaposition) of long and short poetry in Babrius' collection as a deliberate artistic decision: if the original fable book contained around 200 poems, as has been suggested,[71] our epic fable, Babr. 95, would sit squarely at the centre of the collection — a strikingly similar setup to what we find in other ancient poetry books such as Catullus' *carmina*.[72] This brings into focus the position of the epigrammatic fables too: they are regularly grouped together, often in sets of two or three, also an arrangement that has parallels in ancient poetry books[73] and one that hints at some system of internal coherence.[74] Finally, it seems noteworthy that the contrasting literary play between very long and very short poetry is highlighted by grouping them closely together: Babr. 95, the longest poem in the collection, is immediately followed by Babr. 96, another short four-liner. These are just some of the possibilities that emerge if one accepts genre — meaning a set of expectations that guide a reader's experience — as a criterion of interpretation.

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70 Babrius' playfully learned engagement with ancient literature is not limited to epic and epigram; he alludes to several other genres such as tragedy, satire, love elegy, and bucolic; cf. Spielhofer 2023, 32–33.

71 Cf. n. 6.

72 In Catullus' book of poems, his epyllion, c. 64, is also at the centre of the collection; cf. also Höschele 2010, 284, who argues for a similar emphasis on the centre of the *Corpus Priapeorum*, though on lexical rather than quantitative grounds.

73 Such arrangements are often based on content, such as Catullus' *basia* poems 5 and 7 (with 6 in a transitional position; cf. Holzberg 2002, 24–25) or similar groups of poems in the *Corpus Priapeorum* (e.g. 1–2; 6–7; 12–13; 26–27; 40–41; 42–43; 45–47; 60–63; 76–80; cf. Höschele 2010, 273–307).

74 Cf. e.g. Babr. 39–41; 80–83; 109–110; also interesting are certain patterns of repetition: 29–39; 40–60–80–90–110; cf. Höschele 2010 for similar patterns in ancient epigram collections.

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