

Zoology into Legend Plato's 'Ornithology' and 'Entomythology'¹

Abstract

The myth of the cicadas (Phaedrus, 259b5ff.) and that of the dying swans (Phaedo, 84e3ff.) occupy a special position among Plato's myths, in that they are entirely the author's invention, as scholars have often argued. However, both myths clearly draw on a rich poetic tradition that is already well-established in archaic epic. At the same time, both myths incorporate zoological details into their fabric. By comparing Plato's myths both with their poetic models and with Aristotle's zoology, I show how Plato's cicadas and swans reveal a careful blend of tradition and 'science'. Plato created a new hybrid, which can be jokingly christened 'ornithology' and 'entomythology'.

Key-words: Plato . cicadas . swans . zoology . myth

Resumo

O mito das cigarras (Fedro, 259b5sq) e o dos cisnes morrendo (Fédon, 84e3sq) ocupam uma posição especial entre os mitos de Platão, no sentido de que são inteiramente inventados pelo autor, como os comentadores têm frequentemente argumentado. Entretanto, ambos os mitos apóiam-se claramente em uma rica tradição poética que já está bem estabelecida na épica arcaica. Ao mesmo tempo, ambos os mitos incorporam detalhes zoológicos em sua composição. Comparando os mitos de Platão tanto com os seus modelos poéticos quanto com a zoologia de Aristóteles, eu mostro como as cigarras e os cisnes de Platão revelam uma cuidadosa mistura de tradição e 'ciência'. Platão criou um novo híbrido, que pode ser bem-humoradamente batizado de 'orniteologia' e 'entomitologia'.

Palavras-chave: Platão, cigarras, cisnes, zoologia, mito.

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Introduction

Intersections between philosophy and literature were of course not only frequent but somehow inevitable in classical Greece. The word 'literature' did not even exist, and philosophy, a relatively new term, was a battleground in the 4th Century, the main contenders being Plato and Isocrates². In Plato's *Phaedrus*, a work which is in many ways both philosophical and literary, the word *poietes* is referred to poets and prose-writers alike³. However, poetry and myth had long been the objects of attacks and critiques on the part of historians, sophists and scientists. I will examine this tension from a particular angle, namely that of the animal world. Animals are of course ubiquitous in Greek poetry, and they play a major role as early as in Homer: nobody is likely to forget Achilles' horses or Odysseus' dog. It was only in the fourth Century that animals became the object of a specific form of rational inquiry, namely zoology. I will argue that Plato provides an intriguing compromise between the old 'poetic' view of animals and the new scientific approach that was bound to play a major role in Aristotle's philosophy.

The epiphany of zoology

Who invented zoology? The beginnings of this branch of science are obscure, and in some respects Aristotle's anatomical treatises, which scholars increasingly see as the backbone of his philosophy⁴, look very much like Athena jumping out of the head of Zeus. Only, the new-born child, far from a beautiful baby-goddess, was seen as a rather monstrous offspring, inspiring disgust and repulsion:

Since we have completed stating the way things appear to us about the divine things, it remains to speak about the animal nature ... For even in the study of animals disagreeable to perception, the nature that crafted them likewise provides extraordinary pleasures to those who are able to know their causes and are by nature philosophers ...

2 See Nightingale 1995, 13ff.

3 Cf. 234e, 236d, 258a, 258b, 278e.

4 See e.g. Heath 2013, 56ff.

For this reason we should not be childishly disgusted at the examination of the less valuable animals. For in all natural things there is something marvellous (Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, 645a4-17).

Aristotle's apologetic tone is unmistakable, and points to the suspicions that must have surrounded the invention of zoology - think of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, featuring a grotesque Socrates discussing the anatomy of mosquitoes⁵. Rather more surprisingly, philosophers should be credited with a no less ground-breaking idea, namely that humans can be distinguished from other species inasmuch as they are, supposedly, rational beings. In a recent and persuasive book⁶, John Heath has argued that from Homer through all the archaic period and well into the fifth Century there was a basic opposition between animals and human beings, one that easily extended to other allegedly 'non-man' creatures such as slaves, women and barbarians⁷: unexpectedly, this opposition was not to do, if not marginally, with rationality as such, and was rather connected with the simple notion of authoritative speech⁸.

On the one hand, animals were thought to differ from men in that they cannot speak at all, let alone with authority. On the other hand, animals were thought to be very much like us because their inner system of emotions, instincts and volitions was not perceived as significantly different than ours, something that - as Heath notes - can be easily argued for by analysing Homer's (and other poets') vocabulary. After all, the only time Achilles' horse Xanthus given the gift of speech, he proves fully human⁹. This profound analogy is the rationale behind Homer's similes (most of which revolve around animals), Aesop's fables and more generally the widespread notion that an animal's and a man's mind work by and large in the same way¹⁰. According to Heath, it was the philosophers who first pointed to rationality as the hallmark

5 *Clouds*, 156ff.

6 Heath 2005.

7 This of course makes the very notion of 'animal' a problematic one. Arguably, 'animals' are the result of a cultural 'invention'. See e.g. Wolff 1997.

8 For an ample discussion of the ancient debate about the more or less rational faculties of animals, see Sorabji 1993.

9 *Iliad* 19.404ff.

10 For an extensive survey of animals in ancient Greek sources, see Dumont 2001.

of humans¹¹. That humans (or should I say Greek, male, free humans) are foremost rational animals is of course a quintessentially Aristotelian notion, and yet according to Heath Plato, in important ways, anticipated his pupil.

Needless to say, this is yet one more account of a very familiar story, namely the teleological trajectory supposedly leading from *mythos* to *logos*, complete with its occasionally derogatory overtones (which, it must be noted, are otherwise wholly absent from Heath's account). By contrast, I will linger on two creatures that do not fall within Heath's dichotomy between speaking men and inarticulate animals, inasmuch as they are both endowed with a fully meaningful voice, pointing to *dialogue*, that is Plato's quintessentially philosophical tool. Plato's cicadas and swans are a curious hybrid, combining poetic traditions and ethology in embryo. As such - and this will be my main point - they reveal Plato's intention not so much to abandon myth in favour of *logos* as to create a new mythology, critically incorporating what were possibly the first attempts at zoological inquiries.

Swans in the *Phaedo*

Let us begin with Plato's celebrated swans in the *Phaedo*:

Simmias! I should have hard work to persuade other people that I do not regard my present situation as a misfortune, when I cannot even make you believe it, but you are afraid I am more churlish now than I used to be. And you seem to think I am inferior in prophetic power to the swans who sing at other times also, but when they feel that they are to die, sing most and best in their joy that they are to go to the god whose servants they are. But men, because of their own fear of death, misrepresent the swans and say that they sing for sorrow, in mourning for their own death. They do not consider that no bird sings when it is hungry or cold or has any other trouble; no, not even the nightingale or the swallow or the hoopoe which are said to sing in lamentation. I do not believe they sing for grief, nor do the swans; but since they are Apollo's birds, I believe they have prophetic vision, and because they have foreknowledge of the blessings in the other world

11 Heath is thus to interpret along original lines such over-studied masterpieces as the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Oresteia* and Plato's dialogues, all of which can be fruitfully examined through this polarity/analogy.

they sing and rejoice on that day more than ever before. And I think that I am myself a fellow-servant of the swans; and am consecrated to the same God and have received from our master a gift of prophecy no whit inferior to theirs, and that I go out from life with as little sorrow as they. So far as this is concerned, then, speak and ask what ever questions you please, so long as the eleven of the Athenians permit (Phaedo, 84e-85b, transl. Fowler).

Scholars have thoroughly investigated the fascinating traditions linking swans to poetry and prophecy, so I need not linger on this point here¹². Suffice it to say that swans feature as singing servants of Apollo and as the embodiment of poetry as early as in one of the *Homeric hymns* (XXIII), and swan songs are connected to prophecy already in the *Oresteia*¹³. To be sure, the legend of the swan song - which incidentally has been proven true by modern research¹⁴ - is presented as a self-evident fact in the *Phaedo*.

Rather less obviously, the alleged misrepresentation of swans by these unidentified men is part of a consistent strategy designed to represent Socrates' death in a distinctly anti-tragic way, inasmuch as swans, along with the three birds they are compared to, were closely - and wrongly, according to Socrates - associated with tragic poetry¹⁵. Before telling the myth, we are told, Socrates laughs, and then he laughs again at the end of the final myth just before drinking the hemlock: this is all the more remarkable because there is no other instance of Socrates' laughter in the entire Platonic corpus. Thus, swans clearly embody the philosopher's *studium mortis* and his willingness to joyfully 'sing', i.e. practice philosophical dialogue, on the very day of his death¹⁶.

12 See e.g. Lanna 2009, with further bibliography.

13 *Agamemnon* 1445. For a good introduction, see the first chapter of Jacob 2000. A more detailed and factual account is given by Baletti 1998.

14 See Arnott 1977.

15 Relevant *loci classici* include Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1440ss., Euripides *Hercules Furens* 110 (and, implicitly, Sophocles *Antigone* 883-884: see Vidal-Naquet 1993). The nightingale, the swallow and the hoopoe feature prominently in the quintessentially tragic myth of Tereus, Procne and Philomela, and especially the nightingale was considered, ever since Homer, the embodiment of grief. On the *Phaedo's* anti-tragic strategies see Nussbaum 1986 (see the section on Plato's 'anti-tragic theatre') and especially Susanetti 2002.

16 Thus emphasising that philosophy cannot be limited to rational arguments (see e.g. Gallop 2001) and possibly the superiority of oral speech in comparison to written texts (Lasserre 1986).

So far, so good, yet what is more interesting from my point of view are two neglected points. First, Socrates' words have a curious allure, as he maintains that swans 'sing at other times also, but when they feel that they are to die, sing most and best'. These words can be compared with a passage from the (possibly spurious) IX book of Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*¹⁷:

Swans are singing birds, and they sing especially towards the end of their life (Aristotle, *Historia animalium*, 615a-b).

As will be immediately clear, even the wording of this sentence is very close to Plato's. Another bit of evidence possibly comes from Aelian:

Hemlock is lethal to swans (*The Nature of Animals*, 3.7).

In the light of this passage, it might be tempting to see Plato's comparison between Socrates and swans as a somewhat technical allusion to his master's impending death, but Aelian's remark is of course very late and might ultimately derive from the *Phaedo* itself. Be that as it may, Socrates' words sound very much like what we would call today 'ethology', i.e. the study of the behaviour of animals. To the modern reader's surprise, however, the ethological argument (no bird ever sings out of grief etc.) rapidly recedes and gives way to a theological remark: qua Apollo's attendants, swans cannot but be endowed with prophetic powers, allowing them to understand that death is no fearful event. To be sure, this is the main point of the entire simile: Socrates, too, is an attendant of Apollo, and as such he knows in advance that there is no reason to be afraid.

What we have in the *Phaedo*, then, is a curious mixture of bird-ethology and theology, whence my strange subtitle 'ornitheology'. To conclude with the *Phaedo*, however, three more points should be noted. To begin with, the passage, with its mention of Socrates' last 'chanting' (*ado*), interestingly resonates with the final eschatological myth, which famously ends on a sceptical note: according to Socrates, it is impossible to attain full certainty as to the details of the metaphysical world, and still it is worthwhile to try and describe it (*kalos o kindynos*) in the attempt of 'enchanting' (*epado*) oneself (114d) - and this is of course Socrates' own swan song. Secondly, the ethological argument is fully absorbed in an overtly mythological narrative, and in this context

¹⁷ See e.g. Vegetti 1971, 127f.

'science' hardly enjoys pride of place. Thirdly, and finally, no reader can forget that in the very last days of his life Socrates, to the surprise of everybody and especially of the sophist Evenus, makes his debut as a musician, setting to music Aesop's fables and a hymn to Apollo because 'a poet, if he is really to be a poet, must compose myths and not speeches' (61b). This choice has an obvious connection to the myth of the swans, in that swans are Apollo's servants precisely in one of Homer's hymns, and - needless to say - they belong to Aesop's animal world¹⁸. Moreover, the mixture between the humble (i.e. Aesop) and the sublime (i.e. Apollo)¹⁹ resembles Plato's ideal poet as described at the end of the *Symposium*, when Socrates famously states that a true poet should be able to compose both tragedy and comedy²⁰. The true poet and myth-maker is of course Plato himself, and it comes as no surprise that animals feature so largely in his own myths.

Cicadas in the *Phaedrus*

It is no coincidence that Socrates' 'music' in the *Phaedo* (and by extension Plato's own mythmaking) is implicitly contrasted with the activity of Evenus, a sophist who probably never composed any myth and was rather likely to despise mythology, as many of his contemporaries did. Interestingly, the *Phaedo* concludes with a myth that may be incredible for someone who is ambiguously referred to as a *deinos aner* (114d), i.e. a clever/terrible man. With this contrast in mind, let us now turn to the *Phaedrus*. On the banks of the Ilissus, on a glorious summer day, Socrates quietly resists Phaedrus' attempts to deconstruct the local myth of *Oreithyia*, simply saying that he has no time (*scholē*) nor inclination to rationalise myth: in such matters, he prefers to stick to tradition. Rationalising myth, he maintains, is the province of a *deinos aner* (229d), that is - again - a clever/terrible man. This clever guy - adds Socrates - would be at pains to examine and rationalise all of the fabulous

18 As many authors in many different genres, Plato does sometimes resort to Aesop's fables (*Alcibiades Major* 123), and it comes as no surprise that Aristotle hints at the analogy between Aesop's fables and Socrates' parables (*Rhetoric* II 20, 1393b9-1394a1). See Desclos 1997.

19 See Nagy 2011, with further bibliography (including references to Nagy's own previous work and to Kurke 2011, who articulates the polarity between Apollo and Aesop in ways that significantly differ from Nagy's).

20 This and other passages are the object of Gaiser 1984, focusing on Plato's hints at his own output.

and astonishing animals of Greek mythology, and would end up living an exhausting and miserable life. Not surprisingly, then, Socrates later produces his own myth about eros and the hyperuranian world, with the authority of a Muse-inspired poet and an interesting emphasis on animals - think of the careful and detailed descriptions of the soul's horses, who, interestingly, are endowed with speech²¹. Still more to the point, Socrates criticises a second time the rationalism of Phaedrus, alleging that a lover of *music* - remember the *Phaedo* - should not ignore such a *myth* as that of the cicadas. Here is the passage:

Socrates: We have plenty of time, apparently; and besides, the cicadas seem to be looking down upon us as they sing and talk with each other in the heat. Now if they should see us not dialoguing at mid-day, but, like most people, dozing, lulled to sleep by their song because of our mental indolence, they would quite justly laugh at us, thinking that some slaves had come to their resort and were slumbering about the fountain at noon like sheep. But if they see us dialoguing and sailing past them unmoved by the charm of their Siren voices, perhaps they will be pleased and give us the gift which the gods bestowed on them to give to men. Phaedrus: What is this gift? I don't seem to have heard of it. Socrates: It is quite improper for a lover of the Muses never to have heard of such things. The story goes that these cicadas were once men, before the birth of the Muses, and when the Muses were born and song appeared, some of the men were so overcome with delight that they sang and sang, forgetting food and drink, until at last unconsciously they died. From them the cicada tribe afterwards arose, and they have this gift from the Muses, that from the time of their birth they need no sustenance, but sing continually, without food or drink, until they die, when they go to the Muses and report who honours each of them on earth. They tell Terpsichore of those who have honoured her in dances, and make them dearer to her; they gain the favour of Erato for the poets of love, and that of the other Muses for their votaries, according to their various ways of honouring them; and to Calliope, the eldest of the Muses, and to Urania who is next to her, they make report of those who pass their lives in philosophy and who worship these Muses who are most concerned with heaven

21 Cf. 254d-e.

and with thought divine and human and whose music is the sweetest. So for many reasons we ought to talk and not sleep in the noontime (Phaedrus 258e-259d, transl. Fowler, slightly mod.).

Although many modern readers have grossly misinterpreted it, the meaning of the myth is rather straightforward²². Socrates and Phaedrus should imitate the untiring cicadas, singing and *dialoguing* all day with no need for material comforts. As such, the cicadas, no less than the swans of the *Phaedo*, are a perfect symbol for the philosopher, with the usual assimilation between song and dialectic in a world Platonically dominated by the Sun-Good, and the inevitable misunderstandings of the many: arguably, 'cicada' was even a comic nickname for 'philosopher'²³. Moreover, certain elements of the setting should be especially noted, such as the summer noon, the countryside, the presence of animals and of playful Muse-like daemons eventually granting a divine gift: all of these details are embedded in a sacred landscape²⁴, and closely recall the tradition of poetic initiation. The relevant stories of Hesiod, Archilochus, Epimenides and later Aesop follow the very same pattern, with the important difference that in the *Phaedrus* there are *two* dialoguing initiates, rather than *one* solitary poet, something that arguably points to the dialectical character of Socratic philosophy²⁵.

To be sure, the myth of the cicadas builds on a well-established poetic tradition, whereby cicadas were seen as a quintessentially musical and frugal creature. Think e.g. of Hesiod's *Scutum*:

And when the dark-winged chirping cicada, which drinks and eats the gentle dew, begins to sing to men, sitting on a green branch in the summer, and all day long and early in the morning it pours forth its voice in the most dread heat, when Sirius parches the skin... (Hesiod, Shield, 393-397).

22 See Capra 2000, with further bibliography.

23 See Capra 2000.

24 See Assaël 2003 for the association of this landscape with mystic cults and Gottfried 1993 for the inverse inversed analogy between the myth of the cicadas and the cult of Pan.

25 I develop the argument in full in my book *Plato's Four Muses* (forthcoming for the CHS Hellenic Series, HUP, 2014). Cf. also Capra 2008.

The tradition is very rich and well documented, so, again, I need not linger on it. What is less obvious, once again, is the curiously ethological overtones of certain expressions. Compare, for example, the way Aristotle reworks the traditional image of the cicada:

The larva, when it has increased in size in the ground, becomes a ‘mother-of-cicada’; and that is the time when they are pleasantest to eat, before the integument bursts open. When the time of the solstice approaches, the creature comes out under cover of night, the integument immediately breaks open, and there you have cicadas instead of ‘mothers’: they turn black at once, and harder, and larger, and begin singing (Aristotle, *Historia animalium* 556b6-12, transl. Peck).

Aristotle, who elsewhere is at pains to account for the frugality of cicadas with the argument that cicadas are the only mouthless animal on earth (532b11ff.), points to an interesting detail: as soon as they are born, cicadas start singing. This detail is not found in the poetic tradition, but is emphatically referred to in the *Phaedrus*, as Socrates points out that cicadas start singing right after their birth. Just as in the *Phaedo*, however, the ethological mode, which clearly parallels Aristotle’s statement, immediately makes way for an unexpected mythological turn: the cicadas are the servants of the Muses, and have the function of rewarding those who honour them. The metamorphosis, moreover, is presumably designed to evoke the myth of Tithonus, who came close to disappearing and was eventually transformed into an ever singing cicada, a creature with a great voice and virtually no bodily presence. All in all, Plato’s cicadas closely parallel the swans of the *Phaedo*: Plato knows how to appropriate some features of an incipient entomologic ethology, but he makes it very clear that his real aim is to create new philosophical myths, a sort of ‘entom mythology’, as it were.

Conclusions

With his *Historia Animalium*, dating to the time when he was still a disciple of Plato, Aristotle launched zoology, which in his later treatises came to be increasingly based on anatomy, thus setting the agenda for many centuries of future biology. With the hardly metaphorical knife of science, he thus severed

the ancient ties between humans and animals²⁶, so clearly visible in Greek mythology: traditionally, for example, cicadas were thought to sing out of philanthropy, whereas Aristotle readily points out that they approach humans due to poor sight²⁷. By contrast Plato, who was possibly aware of some precocious attempts at zoological inquiries, twice crosses the threshold of ethology, only to step back immediately, with a sudden mythological u-turn. At close scrutiny, the context of both myths reveals a number of unnoticed analogies: Plato's 'ornithology' and 'entomology' are part of a careful strategy, aiming at saving and rejuvenating the venerable tradition of mythology along with its rich and 'humane' zoo²⁸. Both myths, moreover, have powerful meta-literary overtones, in that they allude to a new kind of poetic initiation that consciously distances itself from the excesses of rational cleverness. Life is short, time is precious: Plato seems to have no time for deconstructing mythology - far less for dissecting animals. Rather, as is suggested right at the beginning of the cicada myth, he has 'plenty of time' (*scholē*) to narrate beautiful no less than meaningful stories about animals²⁹. The Muses certainly granted him their precious gift, combining traditional mythology with a hint of philosophical as well as poetic zoology.

26 See Vegetti 1979. Aristotle's knife concealed no less than revealed important aspects of the animal world.

27 *Historia Animalium* 556B17-21.

28 Cicadas and swans are just an example, and there is of course much more to Plato's animals. For a good introduction to the subject, see Pinotti 1994.

29 *Scholē* is a key-notion in Plato's dialogues: see Isebaert 1992.

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