



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* by Leslie Kurke

Review by: Jeremy B. Lefkowitz

Source: *Phoenix*, Vol. 66, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer/printemps-été 2012), pp. 178-181

Published by: Classical Association of Canada

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7834/phoenix.66.1-2.0178>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Classical Association of Canada is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Phoenix*

JSTOR

labeled, and accurate. One quirk that annoyed this reviewer was the insertion of light-hearted subtitles to introduce highly technical material in Chapter Five on Canonic Theory in particular. Such irrelevant phrases as “Mules, semitones, and lukewarm coffee” (233), “The sore thumb: canonic division and the octave plus fourth” (239), and “Babylonios temptare numeros” (332), the latter leading to a footnote, “With apologies to Horace (*Carm.* I.11.2–3),” seemed miscalculated in a text which otherwise insists on mathematical precision. One problem well out of the author’s control is the extremely tight binding (at least on the review copy), which makes accessing the text block unnecessarily difficult and cumbersome for a book so worthy of careful study.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

JON SOLOMON

AESOPIC CONVERSATIONS: POPULAR TRADITION, CULTURAL DIALOGUE, AND THE INVENTION OF GREEK PROSE. By LESLIE KURKE. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2010. Pp. xxi, 495.

LESLIE KURKE FINDS IN AESOP far more than he appears to offer on the surface. In *Aesopic Conversations*, the simple tales and roguish persona of the legendary fabulist become the basis for an expansion of the author’s decades-long investigations into the nature of the relationship between the sociopolitical and generic dimensions of literature.¹ According to Kurke, Aesopic fables are marked as “popular” and “abject” (4) in Greek culture, providing a useful low end for her rigorous model of literary-generic hierarchy. Because the texts and traditions that comprise Aesopica are both “low” and “open, fluid, anyone’s property” (10), Kurke is able to approach Aesopica as a form of “common culture” (8) in which both elite and non-elite participate. Thus the title of this superb and original book invokes a number of different “conversations”: between the high and the low in ancient Greek culture; between the disempowered and their oppressors; between the “Aesopic” Socrates and his interlocutors; between Herodotus the *logopoios* and his poetic predecessors; and even the exchanges between sub-disciplines within the contemporary academy. Who would have believed that the humble Aesop could incite so much discourse?

Building upon the pioneering work of Jack Winkler and Keith Hopkins,² Kurke was initially drawn to Aesopica in the hopes that somewhere in the motley corpus of fables, proverbs, and biographical legends associated with Aesop she might excavate remnants of the “elusive quarry” (2) of Greek popular culture. In the rich and admirably reflective “Introduction” (1–49), Kurke announces her intention to read the *Lives* of Aesop and other Aesopica “symptomatically for ideologies and for cultural contestation” (25), in

¹For example, L. Kurke, *The Traffic in Praise: Pindar and the Poetics of Social Economy* (Ithaca 1991); *ead.*, “The Politics of ἀβροσύνη in Archaic Greece,” *CA* 11 (1992) 90–121; *ead.*, “Crisis and Decorum in Sixth-Century Lesbos: Reading Alkaios Otherwise,” *QUCC* n.s. 47.2 (1994) 67–92; *ead.*, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Ancient Greece* (Princeton 1999); *ead.*, “The Strangeness of ‘Song Culture’: Archaic Greek Poetry,” in O. Taplin (ed.), *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A New Perspective* (Oxford 2000) 58–87.

²J. J. Winkler, *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius’s Golden Ass* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985); K. Hopkins, “Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery,” *Past and Present* 138 (1993) 3–27.

order to shed light on the interaction of popular and high cultural forms in ancient Greece, and ultimately on the origins of Greek prose writing. This approach naturally divides the book into two equal parts: In Part I, “Competitive Wisdom and Popular Culture” (51–237), the focus is on the figure of Aesop as a non-philosophical sage figure who stands both within and outside of the elite wisdom tradition; in Part II, “Aesop and the Invention of Greek Prose” (241–431), Kurke argues that Aesop stood as an important (if deeply problematic) model for early and formative experiments in Greek prose writing.

Most of the arguments in Part I involve Kurke’s groundbreaking and sophisticated approach to the text(s) of the *Life of Aesop*. While there have been a number of valuable studies of the *Life of Aesop* in recent decades, few have attempted to grapple in earnest with the specific challenges posed by its anonymity, textual multiplicity, and popular character. Rather, the tendency has been to profit from such ambiguities by putting the *Life of Aesop* to work for diverse projects focused on this or that time, place, author, or genre.³ Kurke raises the theoretical bar by first offering a thorough overview of the manuscripts and history of scholarship on the Aesopic *vitae* in the Introduction (16–43), and then choosing to face head-on the “free-floating” (18) and “open” (7) nature of the *Life of Aesop* (and of Aesopica in general) in order to generate larger questions pertaining to culture and ideology. In Chapter One, “Aesop and the Contestation of Delphic Authority” (53–94),⁴ for example, Kurke is critical of Anton Wiechers’s (1961) influential reading of Aesop’s legendary confrontation with the Delphians (*Life of Aesop* [Vitae G and W] chs. 124–142) on the grounds that Wiechers focused too narrowly on the narrative’s apparent links to *pharmakos* ritual and to the First Sacred War. Kurke instead urges us to read the *Life* as engaged in a more broadly-constructed and mobile “popular” (85) critique of the Delphians and their religious institutions. Drawing on Richard Martin’s study of the traditions surrounding the Seven Sages in Archaic Greece,⁵ Kurke argues persuasively that Aesop in Delphi is a particular type of “performer of wisdom,” a populist “bricoleur” (330–343), whose improvisational and damning attacks on the Delphians—and, by extension, on Apollo himself—reflect popular disdain of elite religious institutions and cultural practices.

In Chapters Two to Five (95–237), Kurke builds upon this central claim to describe a larger system of Aesopic engagement with the “high wisdom tradition” (*passim*), a category in which Kurke includes not only Delphic Apollo but also the poetry of Hesiod, Theognis, and Solon, as well as material associated with the Seven Sages and pre-Socratic philosophers. On the one hand, there are a number of ways in which the life and adventures of the fabulist can be shown to resemble those of a traditional sage, particularly in Aesop’s progression from casual advisor (to his master Xanthus) to consequential

³ See, for example, A. Wiechers, *Aesop in Delphi* (Meisenheim am Glan 1961) on the period of the Sacred Wars; G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore 1979) on archaic Greek poetics; Hopkins (above, n. 3) on imperial Rome; Winkler (above, n. 3) on Apuleius; and N. Holzberg (ed.), *Der Äsop-Roman: Motivgeschichte und Erzählstruktur* (Tübingen 1992) on the novel.

⁴ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in C. Dougherty and L. Kurke (eds.), *The Cultures within Ancient Greek Culture: Contact, Conflict, Collaboration* (Cambridge 2003).

⁵ R. Martin, “The Seven Sages as Performers of Wisdom,” in C. Dougherty and L. Kurke (eds.), *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics* (Cambridge 1993) 108–128.

political activity (e.g., on Samos) to *theoria* (the ultimate journey to Delphi). On the other hand, Aesop stands outside the culture of elite *sophia* as simultaneously a serious critic and grotesque parody of it. Thus—and this is the main point of Part I—Aesop’s “double relation” (135) to the Greek wisdom tradition: as a “nonphilosophical” and “parodic” version of a sage, the lowly Aesop is both a competitor within and a debunker of the high-*sophia* tradition.

Part II (Chapters Six to Eleven) is at once more conventional and more difficult to assess. On one level, what Kurke is doing in these chapters looks very much like a traditional study of “influence”: the task is to show how Greek prose-writers (especially Xenophon, Plato, and Herodotus) refer to Aesop and make use of fable motifs. But the project is more interesting than that in several ways. First, in tracing Aesopic elements in these authors, Kurke is attempting to “defamiliarize” (244) the conventional account of the early development of Greek prose—especially its facile and hyper-teleological “triumphal march from *muthos*-to-*logos*” (15)—by drawing attention to prose-writing’s messier and riskier affiliations with the type of low-brow storytelling embodied by Aesop. Second, Kurke is as interested in the marked absence of Aesopic fable in these authors as she is in what we would usually call “allusions” or “adaptations.” Finally, Kurke here develops and deploys a dramatically expanded notion of what counts as Aesopica, with the result that the authors she studies can engage with the “Aesopic” even when there is no mention of the fabulist or the fables.

According to Kurke’s argument, Greek authors are simultaneously dependent upon an Aesopic model of prose production and eager to distance themselves from traces of Aesopic storytelling in their works. The reason for this is that Aesop carried a “status taint” (15, 48, 358, 381, 431) within what Kurke has termed the “strict system of Greek literary decorum” (244), a vision of stylistic and generic hierarchy very close to Auerbach’s classic treatment of the “strict separation of styles” (cf. 243, n. 4). Thus the argument turns on the influence of Aesop by means of his absence, an unconventional and difficult line to pursue. Insofar as Aesop is present at the invention of Greek prose, he is there only in oblique and complex ways, which occasionally puts the reader in an uncomfortable position. When, for example, Kurke makes much of the seemingly inconspicuous phrase *hupolabonta phanai* at Herodotus *Histories* 1.27 (128–130), for which she claims a distinct Aesopic resonance, it is difficult not to feel that the evidence is too thin. But to read *Aesopic Conversations* and note only the thinness of the evidence to which Kurke attends is to miss the point: if the claim is that Herodotus, Plato, and Xenophon each had a “problem with Aesop” (135)—because of Aesop’s essential lowness—then the strength of the book’s overall argument is not weakened by the faintness of the traces of Aesopic fable that remain in their works.

We have too often missed these Aesopic soundings in part, as Kurke sees it, because of excessive specialization in the field of classics (49), but also because the prosaic fable’s essential lowness has compelled scholars to keep it at arm’s length. Thus, in a series of moves that Kurke does not explicitly acknowledge as interconnected, *Aesopic Conversations* reveals a similar dynamic of marginalization and occlusion at work in antiquity and in the world of modern scholarship, with the result that Plato and twenty-first-century hellenists can both be described as “occluding” the version(s) of the history of fable Kurke is trying to tell. The great triumph of Kurke’s book is to have shown so effectively how we classicists, by adopting some “Aesopic” behaviors in our own approach to antiquity (such as an insistence on the existence of hierarchies, an attentiveness to bodiliness and

materiality, and a desire to reconcile otherwise opposed or estranged parties), may be able to excavate the “popular” voices that have been so efficiently muted by our elite texts.

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

JEREMY B. LEFKOWITZ

ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL GREEK EPIGRAM. Edited by MANUEL BAUMBACH, ANDREJ PETROVIC, and IVANA PETROVIC. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. 2010. Pp. xiv, 439.

ANCIENT EPIGRAM is a “hot topic,” the subject of an APA panel in 2011, a symposium at ENS-Lyon in 2010, several monographs since 2005, recent and forthcoming work on Poseidippos and Simonides, and surveys by N. Livingstone and G. Nisbet (*Epigram* [Cambridge 2010]) and P. Bing and J. Bruss (*Brill's Companion to Hellenistic Epigram* [Leiden 2007]), as well as Bing's *The Scroll and the Marble* (Michigan 2009). The present excellent volume, stemming from a 2005 conference, serves as a companion for earlier, mostly inscribed Greek epigram. The highlights of the volume are chapters by, in order of appearance, T. Schmitz, C. Keesling, W. Furley, C. Higbie, K. Gutzwiller, M. Fantuzzi, E. Bowie, and J. Bruss. All the pieces, however, repay one's attention, and all contribute, as R. Hunter says of epigram collections in his chapter, “like stones in a mosaic, to a whole greater than its individual parts” (286), because the topics covered include most of those that demand attention.

In Chapter One, the editors articulate the book's conceptual unity around twin themes of “contextualisation” and “literarisation.” Twelve chapters in Part I explore the former, “the historical reception” of epigrams, i.e., their “‘meaning’ . . . decoded” from the situational, material, religious, political, and literary-generic contexts “which are in dialogue with the epigram.” Four chapters in Part II consider literarisation, “the place of archaic and classical Greek epigram in the epigrammatic genre as well as its role in the genre's development from stone to book” (8).

T. Schmitz (25–41) sets the stage for the first section of Part I by analyzing “strategies of incorporating the act of communication” (among imaginary speakers and addressees and real readers) “into the text, thus creating a special space for communication that is clearly demarcated from pragmatic, everyday discourse” (27); M. Tueller (42–60) on the passer-by, including the “stranger” motif, and G. Vestrheim (61–78) on “I” and “you” deixis, and the rhetorical efficacy of sentiments reflecting community values, treat specific issues along similar lines. Little attention is paid here or elsewhere to the thorny question (mentioned at 7) of whether these contexts of reception were activated in real encounters with inscribed monuments. Rather, these authors explicate epigraphic deixis, voice, and other authorial techniques for imagining readings in ways consistent with potential readers' expectations. Those expectations were shaped in part by exposure to archaic lyric poetry, which, as Schmitz points out, employed similar strategies of constructing performances as fictional situations where, for instance, audience and addressee were not necessarily identical, as they were not in epigrams with prayers like *CEG* 326 (Mantiklos). Schmitz might have compared poets composing simultaneously for premieres and re-performances (cf. Vestrheim 75–77).

The papers in the next section, on material and spatial contexts, give the visual equal billing with the verbal in their reconstruction of ancient encounters with inscribed monu-