

BOOK REVIEWS



LESLIE KURKE. *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose*. Martin Classical Lectures. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011. xxiii + 495 pp. 7 black-and-white ills. Cloth, \$75; paper, \$29.95.

Leslie Kurke's study of Aesopic traditions is a masterpiece. For a work that may well emerge as one of the great achievements of classical scholarship in our era, it is fitting that she has chosen a marginal, non-canonical figure in order to trace a "voiceprint" (15) across a vast swath of ancient culture. Even though the combination of vision and voice in these pages may be too personal to provide a simple template for others to follow, I nevertheless hope that everyone who reads this book will take up the implicit challenge of crafting engaged scholarship that harnesses the strengths of classical *Altertumswissenschaft* to a broader agenda of literary, social, and cultural commentary. The "almost unique and mysterious status" (6) of some of Kurke's most important evidence casts *Aesopic Conversations* (rather like Aesop himself) as something of a rogue wave rather than a turning of the tide, yet I am optimistic that Aesop's unusual place in classical culture will not prevent others from emulating Kurke's example of rethinking how we can speak both about antiquity and to our modern audiences.

In the introduction, Kurke shows what is different about both her subject and her book. The bulk of our information about Aesop emerges from a combination of three sources: references to Aesop by canonical authors, such as Aristophanes and Herodotus; the written *Lives*, especially the fullest version regularly known as *Vita G*; and ongoing oral and popular traditions about Aesop that lurk behind and inform the literary evidence. The triangulation of these three types of evidence represents the critical breakthrough that allows Kurke to construct the majority of her most powerful arguments. As she explains, even though a text like *Vita G* has something of the feel of a popular story, various factors virtually ensure that its author was a member of the educated elite. But the early (i.e., fifth-century) references to Aesop, which closely parallel certain details in the later *Lives* (e.g., Aesop's death at Delphi), confirm the existence of a long-standing sub-literary, oral, and popular tradition of stories about Aesop. Thus, *Vita G* is something like the periscope of a submarine that extends above the surface of the water. We can scrutinize it on its own, but we also need to recognize that it attests to a larger and mobile reality of popular tradition beneath the surface that we can access only indirectly.

As such, *Vita G* represents an odd example of a high literary text that emerges from and elaborates on popular traditions. The recognition of *Vita*

G as a point of intersection between these two worlds provides the starting point for everything that follows. In arriving at this perspective on the braided strands of Aesopic tradition, Kurke engages with a colorful palette of theoretical models. I mention this less for her eclectic approach itself and more because she herself emphasizes how her subject matter provides a model for her book. Aesop constantly demands that we defamiliarize our world: Do not assume that ugly means dumb; do not assume that philosophers have all the answers; do not assume that the Delphic priests (or even Apollo himself!) facilitate an equitable access to the oracle out of some high-minded idealism or piety. So, too, we need to understand that popular culture likely marched to its own drummer (part 1) and that the birth of prose writing, especially hybrid generic experiments such as Herodotus' *Histories* and Platonic literature, involved daring risks (part 2). And if it is wrong-headed of us to think of prose as obvious and unsurprising, because history-after-Herodotus and philosophy-after-Plato have always been in prose, then we should also realize that our modern disciplinary divisions (based in large part, of course, on administrative departmentalizations like "History" and "Philosophy") can also get in our way. Thus, Kurke blends all manner of theoretical and methodological perspectives and urges us to do the same.

The result is messy. But rather than apologizing, Kurke takes unusual care to prepare us for what is to come. She offers alternate introductions that her readers can choose based on their interests, she outlines four different maps for how to read her book to fit different intellectual orientations, and she refuses to give a set of formal conclusions, since the story she has to tell resists any such tidying up. I dwell upon these introductory issues because they underscore the creativity of Kurke's project. Her approach to the Aesopic material, the bricolage of her methodological orientation, and, perhaps above all, the passion and power with which she writes stand tall among the signal successes of this work.

The first five chapters essentially look into *Vita G* and ferret out what we can know about the popular traditions surrounding Aesop, whereas the latter six effectively read through that material as a lens for defamiliarizing the literary undertakings of Plato (chaps. 6–9) and Herodotus (chaps. 10–11). These pages are persuasive and invigorating as Kurke draws together diffuse bits of evidence into stunning conclusions. It is all too rare a treat to read the work of a scholar in such control of her material who also writes with elegant force about subjects that continue to impinge upon our world. The sociopolitical implications of the tension between high and low registers allow Kurke to follow Aesop into cultural conversations typically debarred to modern scholars by the nature of our surviving evidence.

The early chapters establish Aesop as both a competitor within, and a critic of, a sprawling system of *sophia*. More than proto-philosophy, this *sophia* encompasses a network of activities, which Kurke gathers under the rubric of "skilled crafting," a term she takes from anthropologist Mary Helm and which designates all sorts of undertakings that transform the chaotic or unmade into the acculturated or ordered (e.g., building a ship, composing a song, healing an invalid, organizing a law code). Philosophy ends up being the high-end distillate

of this *sophia*, but Kurke argues effectively that not only did the sophists too vie for control (through professional narrowing) of this *sophia* but also that popular non-philosophical strands of *sophia* continued to thrive throughout antiquity. Aesop figured as a champion of this pre- and non-philosophical *sophia*, and his mastery in this arena is what affords him his dual status. He can, when cleaned up a bit, advise kings just like a more elite sage or, when given his reins, he can parody such sophisticates by demonstrating his *sophia* through low-register stories and performances that focus on the coarse and the bodily.

This competitive system of *sophia* in which Aesop is both a contestant and critic is laid out most clearly in chapters 2 and 3. This elaboration is provoked by the stunning first chapter, in which Kurke uncovers a deep connection between the end of *Vita G* (Aesop's fateful trip to Delphi) and a longstanding popular tradition aimed at the privileged workings of Delphi. From this perspective, the god and his minions appear as rapacious gate-keepers to the divine knowledge that supposedly lay open to all Greeks. Once we understand Aesop's role in the system of non-philosophical *sophia*, we can recognize that *Vita G* is structured around the pattern of a typical sage whose career builds toward significant political activity followed by *theōria* and death or assimilation to the divine (a pattern developed in chap. 4). The Delphic scene thus constitutes both the culmination of that narrative and a contest of scapegoating in which Aesop dies but recasts the Delphians as ugly, greedy butchers, irreligious thieves, and violators of the sexual taboos against bestiality and incest.

In chapter 5, this theme explodes beyond the pairing of the popular anti-Delphic tradition and the final scenes of *Vita G* as Kurke demonstrates how this text manipulates Aesop within the system of non-philosophical *sophia* to reassess elite decorum. Here again, Kurke's insights force us to rethink many preconceptions about ancient Greek culture by using the Aesopic end of this cultural dialectic to excavate social tensions that most often leave no trace in our sources. For example, when the *Life* picks up on and overthrows religious prescriptions such as those in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Kurke finds a commentary about how "society's powerless and abjected cannot afford the luxury of such ritual punctiliousness" (208); an evocation of a bit of Theognis, in which a boy is advised to associate only with the best people, ends up "challeng[ing] from below the pederastic foundation of Theognidean didactic" (215); and the Aesopic parody of sacrificial scenes variously attributed to the Seven Sages "demystifies that sacrificial exchange" (221) that serves as the symbolic foundation of elite society's relationship with the divine world.

After reconstructing such potent social critiques, chapter 5 wraps up with a delightful discussion of Aesop's influence on visual art, especially in relationship to images of Oedipus and the Seven Sages. This section offers a compelling reminder to literary scholars of the important role of such images. Kurke keeps things fairly brief here, which is certainly appropriate, but I do feel that as she contrasts the cup depicting (what most take to be) Aesop and Fox against images of Oedipus confronting the Sphinx we would have benefitted from a clearer statement (or even an image) of the parodic versions of the latter scene. She

does have a footnote pointing to bibliography on this topic (229, n. 65), but this does not do enough to show how the hero's body, frequently a paragon of physical and intellectual perfection in "straight" depictions, becomes as hideous and even bestial as Aesop in these humorous distortions (now conveniently collected and discussed by D. Walsh, *Distorted Ideals in Greek Vase-Painting* [Cambridge 2009]:204–12). The final bit about the Seven Sages in the tavern/latrine from Ostia is as fun as it is provocative and enlightening.

The second half of the book circles around two core questions that now assume greater urgency: What were the sociopolitical implications of an early prose author's decision to write *in prose* and what role did Aesopic traditions play in the articulation of the prose projects of Plato and Herodotus? Kurke argues convincingly that Aesop figured so prominently because he is something of a berserker in the ongoing contestation of *sophia*. He is the upstart, the insurgent, who knows how to overcome the initial revulsion of his audience (always horrified at his hideous appearance), lure them in with the inherent sweetness of his tales, and then craftily put them in a position to either make an intellectual breakthrough on their own or to bear witness against themselves to their own pretensions and dirty secrets. But while Aesop offers an attractive pattern for literary innovators, he also cannot shake off (indeed does not want to shake off) his earthy ways. Thus, the crux: Aesop can help establish a new paradigm, but his presence also threatens to scuttle such undertakings and consign them to the bottom of the literary hierarchy.

Kurke begins this section by analyzing Plato's attacks on mimetic literature even as he "conjures the illusion that his own prose is nonmimetic" (250). Like much in these chapters, this quirk results from the vexed status of Aesop himself. On the one hand, he embodies the most degraded brand of *sophia* and trawls the benthic zone of literary decorum. Thus, both Plato and Herodotus work to elide his prominent influence on their own literary projects. On the other hand, Aesopic discourse strategies offered models for bolstering precisely the sorts of literary invention that Plato and Herodotus were undertaking.

Before getting to these canonical authors, however, Kurke explores the manner in which the sophists used Aesopic fables in their retrospectively unsuccessful bid for control of *sophia* (chap. 7). It seems that the sophists frequently used fables as preludes to high-style exegesis. The lowly associations of this form were embraced as both the first rung on a new system of education and as a starting point for sophisticated elaboration. In this dead-end attempt to manipulate the Aesopic for advantage in the arena of *sophia*, then, the sophists largely ignored Aesop himself while incorporating his typical narrative style into their own high-register performances.

Chapters 8 and 9 tease out Plato's response to this sophistic appropriation of fable and his own incorporation Aesopic influences. Kurke shows that, whereas the sophists seem to have largely ignored the person of Aesop, Plato recoups this powerful image through his characterization of Socrates. This subtle game can be seen most clearly in the contours of the *Symposium*, where we first hear

a traditional fable from Aristophanes; this tale is then capped by the sophistic response of Diotima; finally, Alcibiades returns to the low tone in his physical description of Socrates in terms that recall Aesop while paradoxically using this consummately terrestrial image as the vehicle for disembodied philosophical speculation. The Aesopic, which had always been so tied to the realm of the body, here surprisingly facilitates philosophical transcendence.

Plato's flirtation with the Aesopic dimension of his Socrates now becomes critical. Like Aesop, the Platonic Socrates is both associated with and a parody of high-register sages, and it is in this guise that the sociopolitical implications of prose become most clear: in order to maintain his credentials as a parodic outsider, Socrates must preserve not only his Aesopic appearance but also a certain Aesopic style. As Kurke puts it, "the subversive Aesopic challenge to the old *sophia needs* prose" (330, with original emphasis). More than this, she interprets the dialectical strategies of the Platonic Socrates as predicated on adaptations of two fundamentally Aesopic rhetorical moves. Positively, Socratic *epagōgē*, inducing the recognition of a principle from particulars, closely parallels the fabular discourse strategy in which the fabulist, rather than haranguing his audience as would a high-status sage, puts his listeners in position to draw the ultimate conclusion for themselves. Socratic *elenchus*, in which a speaker is lured into contradicting himself, takes its cue not from fables but from stories about how Aesop manipulated his interlocutors into undermining their own interests. After a careful reading of the *Hippias Major* as a demonstration of how this works, Kurke offers the following summary of her conclusions: "all this produces the permanently open space of philosophy, the provocation to continue the search for 'truth' in a privileged domain beyond competition. We might say that the genius of Aesop inheres in his success—his use of practical cunning to trounce his more powerful opponents, while the genius of Plato, contrariwise, resides in his recognition of the positive value of failure and *aporia*" (360).

Aesopic Conversations concludes with two chapters on Herodotus, whose life, according to biographical lore, closely paralleled that of Aesop in various ways. Again, the critical point of departure is to recognize that Herodotus did not necessarily need to write prose. By doing so, however, Kurke shows how he exploited a bevy of Aesopic rhetorical opportunities. On one level, Herodotus, like Aesop, embodied a node of personal contact between East and West, barbarian and Greek; on another, he deployed humble Aesopic elements against bloviated Homericism to translate the standard hierarchy of literary decorum into geopolitical opposition between the mighty empires of the East and the upstart, rag-tag forces of Greece (an issue that Kurke finds underscored in Plutarch's attack on Herodotus); from here, we can read the entirety of the *Histories* as a "fable writ large" (429) that offers advice to different audiences within the Greek world (e.g., Sparta as the hegemonic land-based powers of the East but also Athens as the increasingly tyrannical Croesus being advised by Solon).

Like all groundbreaking scholarship, *Aesopic Conversations* succeeds not so much because it is definitive in every detail but because it advances existing

dialogues and fosters new directions for critical thinking. Accordingly, there are plenty of opportunities to disagree with Kurke on specifics or to push her ideas in creative directions. I, for example, felt that she could have tied Aesop and Archilochus together more effectively as paired low influences on Plato. Indeed, Kurke has skillfully crafted her book to encourage such innovations, just as Aesop himself constantly stirred the pot of decorum in the interaction between high- and low-register society. And thus, the arguments laid out here and, perhaps more importantly, the careful attention to how such arguments are made and their implications for our wider thinking about classical antiquity combine to make these Aesopic conversations extraordinarily rewarding and timely for our field.

TOM HAWKINS

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
e-mail: hawkins.312@osu.edu

SIMON GOLDHILL AND EDITH HALL, eds. *Sophocles and the Greek Tragic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xvi + 336 pp. Cloth, \$99.

Just as Machiavelli argued that the successful ruler needs to be feared more than loved, one might say of modern academia that the truly successful scholar should be respected more than loved, though most of us would prefer to experience both. I doubt there is any figure in the study of Greek literature who has inspired more respect and love than the scholar to whom this volume is dedicated in honor, Pat Easterling. Indeed, I here openly acknowledge that I am a part of the group, well represented in this book, who has benefitted from Pat's advice and guidance, and I am thus somewhat relieved to be able to report that the collection as a whole is worthy of its object.

The editors' introductory chapter, "Sophocles: the state of play," uses Jebb as a springboard to dive into the changes and trends in the study of Sophocles over the past century, balancing Jebb's idealistic but staid Victorianism, with its stress on aesthetic beauty against the darker impulses of the *Elektra* of Hofmannstahl (and Strauss). The influences of anthropology and psychology on the Viennese poet's vision of Sophoclean tragedy would set the stage for much scholarly thought in later decades. This essay is particularly valuable because it sets Sophoclean criticism in historical and theoretical contexts and self-consciously addresses the cyclical nature of scholarly trends, as it offers a stimulating assessment of the contributions of such scholars as Reinhardt, Kitto, Bowra, Knox, Winnington-Ingram, Vernant (and his colleagues), Segal, and Zeitlin. One would hope that this essay would be read by every graduate student seriously engaged in the study of tragedy. Particularly valuable is the authors' concern with how the tradition of Sophoclean criticism has been constructed (18–20). They identify four main areas of particular current ferment from this tradition: first, the relationship between tragic drama and Athenian democracy and how and to what extent tragedy is political; second, performance, especially performance in the city of Athens; third,