

Leslie Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose*, ser. Martin Classical Lectures (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), XXI + 495 pp.

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“I began with a desire to speak with the dead” was Stephen Greenblatt’s famous opening to *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), and a similar extravagant wish animates Leslie Kurke’s new book, a desire to give ear to the non-elite Greeks of antiquity. “I started out looking for Greek popular culture,” she tells us in her introduction, “or at least for difference and diversity within the tradition” (p. 3). Kurke’s earlier work read canonical texts such as Pindar and Herodotus against the grain to bring out the tensions between elite and civic ideologies. Now she takes inspiration in part from James Scott’s *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), which looked beyond the “public transcripts” in which elites represent themselves and discovered in such popular media as anecdote, folktale, song, and jokes a “hidden transcript” critiquing their power on the part of the economically dependent. But where is early Greek popular tradition to be found? One might think in the plays of Aristophanes, except that Kurke rigorously excludes any written text from being “popular” in an authentic and unmediated way (p. 22, citing, among other factors, the expense involved in textual production: p. 6). And so it is that her search for a non-elite voice settles on the traditions about Aesop, late and unfocused though they be.

John J. Winkler already saw in the Aesop tradition a critique of culture in the second century CE (*Auctor & Actor* [Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985], pp. 279-91), and Annabel Patterson’s *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991) showed how the story of an abject outsider winning freedom by his wit appealed to the politically powerless in early modern England. Building on these lines, Kurke’s main argument is that even in the earliest manifestations of the Aesopic tradition, in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Aesop was already “a mask or an alibi for critique, parody, or cunning resistance by any

who felt themselves disempowered in the face of some kind of unjust or inequitable institutional authority" (p. 12).

Once this agenda is set, a formidable problem of evidence arises. How to get to Aesop? Precisely because he was an authentically popular figure—mobile, adaptable, "anybody's property" (p. 10)—the tradition about him has no real center; we know him not through a definite text or authorized *Vita* but rather through "A Series of Texts Relating to Aesop or Ascribed to Him or Closely Connected with the Literary Tradition that Bears his Name" (to quote the ungainly but accurate subtitle of Ben Edwin Perry's monumental *Aesopica* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952]). As a red thread through this material Kurke cleaves to the prose lives of Aesop, and specifically the earliest, longest and most demotic version we have, Perry's *Vita G* from the second century CE. She argues that *Vita G* best lets us glimpse the other side of Aesop, the archaic critic and parodist of institutionalized wisdom and not the cunning slave condescended to by Aristotle or Plutarch. This text and its congeners certainly incorporate older material and so Kurke's challenge is to eke out from them a sense of the tradition a half a millennium earlier. To do so she adopts a structuralist "regressive method" (p. 23) that is less concerned to assign details to a specific time and place than to read them as elements of a system that "motivates" (in the linguistic sense) their appearance. In addition, Kurke tunes her structuralism to pick up ideological motivations, always asking what social work a story is doing and in whose interests it was for it to be told or re-told (in this distinguishing her interests from the abundant recent work in Aesopic *Quellenforschung*).

It follows that Kurke is less interested in *Vita G* as the product of a determinate author or epoch (though she ventures it may have been the work of someone clinging to the lower end of the rhetorical-educational complex) than as a "sedimented" repository of clues as to "what the Aesop legend may have contained." The people's Aesop can only be encountered in "an ongoing conversation of traditions" that often tried to suppress him (p. 35). And so, even as Kurke works through detailed concatenations of specific texts, her ultimate object is an Aesop who hovers between "ambient oral traditions and written instantiations" (p. 39). Hence the "conversations" of her title (p. 15).

The method yields two broad claims dividing the book into two parts. Part I, "Competitive Wisdom and Popular Culture" (pp. 51-237), tries to recover Aesop as a figure of non- or anti-philosophic wisdom already in his first apparitions. Kurke presents him as a candidate for inclusion among the Seven Sages (p. 135) and as a critic of the sort of official wisdom purveyed in Hesiod or Theognis. The second part, "Aesop and the Invention of Greek Prose" (pp. 239-431), turns to literary responses to Aesop from around 450-350 to argue that the Aesopic style of critique was foundational for the development of sophistic, Herodotean and Platonic prose forms.

The whole is a demanding read, although the plot of its ten long chapters is laid out in a meaty theoretical introduction. Kurke's argument is complex and unfolds progressively: Ch. 1, for example, sifts through accounts of Aesop's adventures in Delphi, while their significance in his *Vita* is only detailed in Ch. 4; Ch. 2 argues for Aesop as an "occluded" presence in Herodotus, while his deepest significance for the historian only emerges in Chh. 10-11. Throughout there are close readings of thorny texts, from hard-to-

source Aesopic ones to bits of early Greek poetry and philosophy (such as Aristotle's history of *sophia* in *Met. a*: pp. 121 ff.). A study that is at once so sweeping in scope and so rooted in textual exegesis is hard to summarize, but Kurke's procedures may be indicated by outlining a central theme from each part.

A main concern of Part I is to bring out the "double relation" Aesop has to the tradition, both as a candidate for Sagehood himself and as the relentless assailant of official wisdom from below. Although it has been thought that Aesop was only connected with the Sages after the fifth century (pp. 31-32), Kurke extracts from *Vita G* and other sources an Aesop who was an archaic "performer of wisdom," a competitive improviser and mischievous verbal specialist on the pattern of Richard Martin's "Seven Sages as Performers of Wisdom" (in Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke, eds., *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], pp. 108-128). To discern this figure at work in the fifth century requires some subtle readings of the evidence. In the visual arts, for example, Kurke argues that a fifth-century tondo of a big-headed Aesop (?) talking to a fox parodies the type-scene of wise Oedipus confronting the sphinx. In the realm of text, she finds Aesop influencing Herodotus' account of the unspecified Greek Sage ("some say Bias, others Pittacus") who wittily and obliquely shows Croesus the folly of his plan to build a navy and attack the Ionian islands (1.27). Noting that Aesop tells a fable to the same effect in the *Vitae*, Kurke discerns his "voiceprint" (p. 15) in Herodotus' marking the "moral" (*epimuthion*) of the fable and in his use of the lexeme (which seems pretty neutral to me) "he took him up and replied" (*hupolabôn ephê/eipe*, etc., pp. 128-9).

From such traces Kurke reconstructs a distinctive style of Aesopic *sophia*, typically a pleasurable, low and demystifying wisdom that contrasted with the more blunt, gnomic advice of the Sages. The tradition that Aesop invented the fable is a way of recognizing this distinctive style of performing and allows her to suggest an Aesopic substrate when fables are used in scenes of political dispute by the likes of Stesichorus or Solon (pp. 150-4).

The *Tendenz* of Aesop's political critique can be seen in Kurke's analysis of the early (Hdt. 2.134) tradition of his murder at Delphi alongside Pindar's accounts of Neoptolemus' murder there. Rejecting Weichers' attempt to trace these stories to a garbled tradition from the First Sacred war or Nagy's reconstruction of an archetypal *pharmakos* rite in which Aesop was Apollo's ritual antagonist, Kurke holds that Aesopic lore "preserve[s] an historically specific, popular or civic critique of a unique constellation of practices at Apollo's sanctuary" (p. 75). She argues that the peculiar Delphic customs for sacrificing and consulting the oracle expose a tension between "the generally egalitarian ideology of the Greek cities and the Delphians' inequitable distribution of scarce symbolic resources" (p. 59). Hence the Aesopic-Apolline hostility surfacing in the tradition should be seen as fragments of an archaic competitive performance (p. 86), with Aesop lampooning Delphic stinginess and parasitism while the Delphians try to scapegoat him in return. In brief, *Vita G* got it right: Delphic priests killed Aesop, with Apollo's collusion, for denouncing their greed and the inequitable power relations inscribed in their sacred codes (p. 211).

Part II makes very ambitious claims for Aesop's influence on Herodotus and Plato (and ultimately on the novel) at a time when extended narrative and mimetic prose were still securing their generic boundaries. Kurke thus extends into the fourth century her characteristic attention to the "sociopolitics of literary form," with Aesop ever ready to overturn hierarchies of genre and decorum.

In Kurke's view, Aesop was a problematic precursor to formal prose, entailing "status taint"; and yet, both Herodotus and Plato acknowledged him in their *oeuvre*s because, in different ways, he was key to their realizing certain powers in prose. Kurke also argues for an Aesopic element in aetiological or moralizing sophistic texts, such as Protagoras' great *muthos* in Plato or Prodicus' *Choice of Heracles* (p. 268). Their discourses "domesticated" Aesop to the high style and installed fable-making as a standard exercise in elementary rhetorical instruction (p. 271). Plato incorporated Aesopic themes and aspects of the Aesopic persona in his complex portrait of Socrates and his subversive stance toward rival wisdom traditions (cf. p. 35 n. 106); indeed, the Socratic elenchus is seen as a development of Aesopic-style speech (p. 344.). Herodotus is also subtle in his appropriation of Aesop: although there is only one fable explicitly narrated in the *Histories*—Cyrus telling the Greek envoys the fable of the flute player and the talking fish (1.141)—Kurke notes that Herodotus puts it in the mouth of "the barbarian—and former slave—Cyrus" (p. 404). The historian thereby not only borrows the disruptive power of the low fable-maker but opens his history as a whole to Aesop's strategy of offering coded advice to a powerful audience; Herodotus' invocation of Aesop is a meta-fable about how to construe his own work.

As said above, Kurke's aim is less to document the Aesopic tradition in the classical age than to detect the shimmering interference it creates in the smooth surfaces of our canonical texts. In defining truly "popular" tradition so rigorously, she does not make things easy on herself, with the result that the voiceprint of Aesop can at times be very faint, almost abstract. This gives the work extra intellectual excitement and daring but weakens it as well by making its claims more elusive. Kurke allows that trying to delineate "a penumbra of traditions through a patchwork of textual fragments" often leads to interpretations that are "sketchy or schematic" (p. 13); but it seems possible to me to be charitable toward the connections and interpretations Kurke proposes while yet feeling that the main theses are overstated. The heavy stress in Part I, for example, on Aesop as a subversive figure only gives one side of his multi-faceted cultural role; Part II gives Aesopic *logoi* undue primacy among the forces contributing to the development of classical Greek prose.

In search of an "occluded" figure, Kurke is bound to press the evidence hard, and some may find her resourcefulness alarming (there can be "Aesopic parody without Aesop," as in the Ostia tavern paintings: p. 236). But the material she assembles strongly suggests that the early Aesop tradition was especially hospitable to stories in which Sages were up-ended. Clearly Aesop could be a vehicle for cultural critique, but there remains room for debate about how far such a posture dominated his persona. If, as I think is implied by Aristophanes' *Birds* 471 (*pace* Kurke p. 21), Aesop was already a basic school text in 411 BCE, we must allow that the archaic critic of institutions was "domesticated" rather early. Kurke would be within her rights to deny the in-

nocuous Aesop of school-books authentic “popular” status, but his presence at the entry-level of the proliferating schools of writing must have at least diluted any threats that popular Aesop posed to institutional authority.

Part II has as a hook the intriguing fact that both Herodotus and Plato work Aesop into their *oeuvres*. And Plato’s famous *ainos* of the philosopher as civic gadfly, for example, resonates with an Aesopic flavor if we consider Aesop’s depiction (preserved in Aristotle *Rh.* 1393b) of demagogues as fleas besetting a city. But to sustain her claim that Aesop’s influence was central requires a more robust history of the “invention of prose” (scare quotes hers, p. 47) than Kurke gives. Her reconstruction invokes, without exactly vouching for it, the widespread notion (discernible in Guthrie’s *History of Greek Philosophy*, for example) that wrestling philosophy from poetry into prose was a slow and hard-won achievement. To my mind, this kind of story uses a simplistic idea of prose (somewhat like M. Jourdain’s) and a rather unrefined one of “poetry” (that would put the vastly different discursive manners of Empedocles and Xenophanes in the same box). However this may be, Aesop’s influence should be weighed against all competitors: on Plato, for example, there is only the briefest mention of mime (p. 258) or of earlier writers of Socratic *logoi* (p. 247 n. 16); on Herodotus one must consider his “mythographic” predecessors, whose *historiai* must have included quite a few narratives.

With her keen eye for symbolic expressions of ideological conflict, Kurke has thrust Aesop into the center of major political, philosophical and literary developments of the fifth and fourth centuries. Precisely because of its ambitions, many of the claims this book makes want weighing. But let it be said that if Kurke sometimes pushes the evidence, she never forces it, and she always gives space to alternative views in substantial footnotes. Whether in any given case she has restored Aesop’s lost voice or has made one up for him in behalf of the powerless is a question readers will decide by taking up her invitation to join the conversation.

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