

BOOK REVIEW

Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose. By Leslie KURKE. Martin Classical Lectures. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. Pp. xxiv + 495. Hardcover, \$78.50/£55.00. ISBN 978-0-691-14457-3. Paper, \$29.95/£24.95. ISBN 978-0-691-14458-0.

This book is a monumental achievement, and a great pleasure to read as well. The author painstakingly shepherds the argument—forecasting what is to come, then proving what is to be proven, then recapitulating and moving forward, generously leading the reader onward.

The first, diachronic, half of the book focuses on the figure of Aesop himself, and demonstrates with great care and convincing attention to detail that much of the Life of Aesop called Vita G, of uncertain late date, not only preserves very ancient traditions, but can be read backwards into moments of the classical period, to confirm or illuminate insights Kurke untangles from the welter of material concerning Aesop. She considers the story of his engagement with the Delphic oracle and the Delphians, and shows how an opposition between Apollo and Aesop serves to demystify the claims and privileges of the oracular site. She lays out the characteristics of a prephilosophical or even antiphilosophical, popular tradition of *sophia* that includes the Seven Sages, some preSocratics, and religious figures such as Epimenides. This enduring system features forms of competition, a typical life trajectory that moves from rhetorical and verbal skill deployed for political effects, often in a competitive context, to religious expertise and to journeys of *theoria*. Aesop emerges as a critical or parodic figure in relation to the high wisdom traditions, moving between sage and parodist, and this ambiguity persists even into the late biography of Vita G, which reveals many historical strata.

The second, synchronic half of the book concerns the role of an Aesopic element at the beginnings of Greek prose. Here we encounter the paradoxical deployment and disavowal of Aesopic techniques of fabulation and refutation, especially in Kurke's brilliant and convincing argument for the *Hippias Major* as an atypical but canonical and revelatory Platonic dialogue. She then moves to Herodotus, and makes the claim, after carefully preparing for this dénouement, that the *Histories* are "a bouletic fable writ large." Throughout this section, she

reminds the reader that both Plato and Herodotus have been familiarized, made inevitable as philosopher and historian, as writers of prose, and that we need to awaken to the strangeness of their writerly strategies.

Kurke's theory and method draw on a complex synthesis. She relies on the work of the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, especially *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). Although Jameson has moved on to analyses of postmodernism and contemporary culture, this early text served as a manifesto for a politically engaged, historicizing analysis of formal and aesthetic questions. Following Julia Kristeva's use of the term, he described the *ideologeme*, or "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes," and this notion serves Kurke well in her analysis of Aesop. Kurke also relies on Claude Lévi-Strauss' use of the term "bricolage," to characterize cultural production. And she follows the fascinating comparative work of Mary Helms, in *Ulysses' Sail*, and *Craft and the Kingly Ideal*, to give shape to the archaic sage's life trajectory. She also draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, and his recognition of the political potency of the textualized low, obscene, unruly body: the book unflinchingly confronts, and relishes, Aesopic vomit, urine and other bodily emissions. In every section of the book, Kurke demonstrates an impressive command of the scholarship underpinning specific debates in which she engages. One of the compelling and convincing undercurrents throughout the book is an ongoing critique of the field of classics, especially of the narrowness and hermeticism of subdisciplines that can hinder the sort of sweeping and exemplary study this is. She also calls out classical scholars too focused on continuity, insufficiently aware of historicity and change, insensitive to conflict.

Kurke does "deconstruct," but for her deconstruction means taking apart a text, or a tradition, to see what makes it tick, with no Derridean implications. There are moments when the author's commitment to detail may frustrate, as when she rehearses a disagreement between M. L. West and Noel Robertson concerning the translation of a passage from the *Works and Days* where their differing interpretations have no effect on Kurke's point concerning the prohibition on criticizing diversity in local sacrificial rites. It may be too that her arguments might have been better served with two books, one building on the other's insights, since the second half especially leaves one wanting more. Furthermore, I continue to believe that the beast fable, rather than undermining hierarchy, reinforces aristocratic domination, reifying and naturalizing class difference. And

here Hegel's insight "*im Sklaven fängt die Prosa an*" recedes from view. I would have liked an epilogue to the whole.

Yet Kurke's arguments make the reader want to re-read Plato and Herodotus from new perspectives; she gives these texts a three-dimensionality, a dynamism that only these exhaustively intricate close readings can unleash. Implicating dialectically both diachronic and synchronic, popular oral tradition and elite written text, this is a ground-breaking work about Aesop, about the fable, about Plato, about Herodotus, the inventions of philosophy and history, about popular culture and the class struggle, and should be read by everyone interested in Greek antiquity, even by philosophers.

The ambition of the book is arresting; its audacity and risk-taking are firmly supported by the great density and detail of its readings and argumentation. Although its aims may seem hubristic, in fact its consequences may be understated by the author. With its historical sweep, from the works of Homer and Hesiod to the *Life of Aesop*, its bringing to all this stretch of time a dynamism and sense of class struggle, and with its subtle claims for the necessity to read differently canonical texts, all the while considering genre hierarchy and its sociopolitical implications, this is a bold and admirable recasting of all of Greek cultural history.

μέγα βιβλίον, μέγα καλόν.

PAGE DUBOIS

University of California at San Diego, pdubois@ucsd.edu