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Introduction: Ancient Fables – Sour Grapes? New Approaches

Sour grapes, who doesn't know them? Everyone has heard of the fox who calls the grapes he cannot reach sour, i.e. something that is not desirable at all. It is impossible to imagine modern literature without fables, which often go back to ancient models. This makes all the more astonishing the fact that for a long time scholarly research evidently regarded ancient fables as sour grapes and neglected them; when they were studied, the focus was on questions regarding the history of certain motifs or on socio-cultural approaches. Only recently have scholars begun to appreciate their cultural value and to perceive them as literary gems embedded in the poetological and literary-critical as well as social discourse of their time. It is precisely in their imagery that they become projections of the values and ideals of a society, or a means of critically observing them, and so stand in a continuously redefined tension with the everyday world; this is all the more interesting because the recontextualizations of traditional fable motifs contribute to this tension. Known fables thus always provide new insights into the literary selfunderstanding of the respective authors (or collections) as well as into religion, intellectual, social, and economic history. Since most fables are animal fables, cultural animal studies may also provide new impulses for fable research.

The aim of this first major international conference on ancient fables was to bring together acknowledged experts, to gather new approaches and results, to examine them critically, and to make them visible by establishing an international network of specialists in the field. In addition to traditional questions about text, tradition, and reception, the focus of the conference was on questions regarding the function of ancient fables, their re-/de-/con-textualization, poetological aspects, the significance of intertextual references, self-reflexivity, the author-persona and the recipient, and much more. While the different sections of the conference were structured according to such general questions, the

contributions in this volume, which take up the questions through examples as well as in a general way, are divided into three broad thematic sections and an appendix; these at the same time reflect to a certain extent the current research priorities.

1. Fables as a (self-)referential genre from Hesiod to Avianus

In what way do ancient texts talk about the fable? How do fables reflect on their own genre? Do sub-texts and parallel texts allow a placement within a literary tradition? Can parallels to other literary genres and/or trends be found? Recent studies on intertextuality and poetology have given more significance to the questions of the (self-)representation and reflexion of the genre. The following papers will shed light on this by looking at different collections of fables:

Jeremy B. **Lefkowitz** (Swarthmore College) opens the volume with an innovative contribution that covers a wide range of fundamental questions. He uses Susan Stewart's concept of distressed genres to explore some ways in which Greek and Latin authors represent fable-telling as an older, dynamic form of oral discourse and adopt a style that invokes the simplicity, purity, and rusticity of the fable's imagined past. After general considerations, this is demonstrated with texts by Hesiod, Archilochus, Plato, Horace, the Progymnasmata and finally Phaedrus and Babrius.

Ursula **Gärtner** (Graz) further elaborates her approach, namely that Phaedrus elevates fables to an independent genre of poetry, and that he simultaneously takes up the high standards of late Republican and Augustan poetry and also reduces them to absurdity; he does this by using a despised literary form in a humorous manner and by including many sophisticated allusions; he also plays a game with the empirical author, the author persona, and the author functions. In her contribution Gärtner asks whether there are hints in the texts themselves that question fable and fable reading in general and so deconstruct both individual fables and the genre itself. She explores this through an analysis of individual 'first' fables by Avianus, Phaedrus, and Babrius, and finally asks whether we can find general reading instructions that seem to deconstruct the fables themselves.

Quite a lot has been published on Phaedrus in recent years. Therefore, no separate chapter is dedicated to him here; nevertheless, substantial reflexions on his fables are not lacking in this volume. In addition to Gärtner's remarks, Silvia **Mattiaci** (Siena) draws attention to his engagement with other 'low' genres of his time such as epigram, satire, and the novel. In his project for the renewal of the Aesopic fable, Phaedrus' self-reflective approach is also evident in his choice of themes, which are characteristic of these genres. Mattiaci demonstrates this through the figures of the *tribas* and the *cinaedus* (4,16 [=5,15 Z.]; 5,1 [=4,2 Z.]; *app.* 10 [= *app.* 8 Z.]), which become examples of gender and genre interactions. Through this, the unusual treatment of the stereotypical characters reveals the specific literary identity of Phaedrus' fables.

2. Fable in the Second Sophistic

After Phaedrus, Babrius is now increasingly becoming the focus of research. In this, his placement in the literary context of his time also plays an important role. It is therefore not surprising that a whole chapter should be dedicated to the topic of fables in the Second Sophistic.

Sonia **Pertsinidis** (Canberra) deals with the contextualization of Babrius as a Second Sophistic poet; in doing so, she examines the aspects that seem to be particularly characteristic of a Second Sophistic writer, such as the sense of nostalgia for an idealized (Athenian) classical past, the concern with archaism and purity of language, the sophistic performance and contest and display, and finally *paideia* and erudition. For this purpose, she analyzes the message, meter, (moral) instruction, rhetorical form, and structure of the fables as well as the collection, the role of their use in school, and the popularity of Babrius' fables.

The tension between the image of the Golden Age of the fables drawn in the first prologue and the cruel world that the reader encounters from the first fable of Babrius' collection onwards has been pointed out recently. Benjamin **Allgaier** (Heidelberg) takes up this point and shows how verbal communication is presented in the first fable of the hunter, his arrow, and the lion, and how the fable thus has metapoetic potential. Less the arrow than the speech turns out to be an efficient weapon against a physically superior antagonist. This use of language

contrasts with the peaceful Golden-Age world of the first prologue, which suggested a distancing from traditional iambic bitterness. The notion that words are like arrows constitutes an intriguing parallel to the portrayal of the notoriously aggressive choliambist Hipponax in *AP* 7,405.

Lukas **Spielhofer** (Graz) demonstrates that not only can poetological statements be found in the programmatic prologues of Babrius, but the fables themselves also possess a certain poetological quality. To this end, he examines the fisherman fables, Babr. 4, 6, and 9, and achieves a more abstract reading of these texts, which goes beyond traditional philosophical or sociocritical interpretations. These fables echo statements made in the prologues and thereby interact with common poetological discourses of antiquity through the use of semantically charged expressions cleverly placed in key positions of the texts. They shed light on the creation and reception of poetry from different perspectives and invite the readers to discover their poetological meaning.

Marine **Glénisson** (Paris) opens up a perspective towards other genres of the Second Sophistic, and discusses the role fables played in the development of new genres, especially the novel. In her analysis, she investigates the adoption of Aesop as a character in fictional texts, discusses examples of fables embedded in novelistic texts, and explains how fables became the basis for new narratives and innovations in the development of literary genres.

3. Fable in Late Antiquity and the reception of fables

The reception of ancient fables in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times is a broad field and accordingly much dealt with. The essays in this section show the breadth of the topics and demonstrate in different ways where innovative approaches are possible.

Caterina **Mordeglia** (Trento) opens this section with an article that spans Antiquity to the present. In her essay on the reception of the fable of the “Lion King”, she combines a traditional approach with an impressive spectrum of texts ranging from Aesop up to the adaptation by Disney. In doing so, she shows how the “sick lion” motif partly gained influence and how the respective contemporary discourses realigned the interpretation in each case.

The following papers take up specific aspects of the reception of ancient fables. Federica **Scognamiglio**'s (Pisa) contribution leads into the Greek field, with the *Paraphrasis Bodleiana*, the collection of later prose paraphrases of Babrius' fables. She shows that the manuscript tradition of this collection offers examples of how Aesopic material was preserved over centuries and at the same time underwent a process of moralization.

In the field of Latin fables Christopher **Poms** (Graz) takes us on a journey from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, starting from Avianus' fable about the camel complaining to Iuppiter (Avian. 8). The transmitted promythium of this fable has often been regarded as spurious. After a comparison with possible Greek predecessors Poms demonstrates that the promythium is indeed spurious. Moreover, he convincingly shows that the *rota Fortunae* motif of the promythium refers to Boethius and that one can even assume the 9th century as a date of origin for the spurious promythium.

Simona **Martorana** (Kiel/Hamburg) deals with the late collection of prose fables that bears the name *Romulus* and brings together various kinds of sources, including Phaedrus, the Latin tradition of Aesop and Babrius, and pseudo-Dositheus. For one of the three *recensiones* of this collection, the *recensio Gallicana* (RG), she is preparing a new critical edition. Here, she presents the most recent discoveries concerning the manuscript tradition of this text and explores its relationship to the ancient sources. She also deals with the dialectical relationship between the *Romulus Gallicanus* and Phaedrus. By showing how the Medieval collection modifies its classical model, this chapter also resituates the *recensio Gallicana* within its historical and cultural context.

Giovanni **Zago** (Florence) concludes with a view ranging from Antiquity to the Renaissance. In his new edition of Phaedrus, he has already offered numerous references to the reception of Phaedrus' fables. In this paper, he is able to prove that even before the *editio princeps* (1596) Phaedrus' *Fables* exerted a much wider direct influence on later literature than is commonly thought. Among the examples of Phaedrus' readers, he lists the author of the Pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, Tacitus, Paulinus of Nola, Ariosto, and Politian.

Appendix: Fables in other literary genres

While most of the papers described above deal with fables from fable collections, Gert-Jan **van Dijk** (Leiden) provides a compilation of fables and allusions to fables outside fable collections, i.e., in other literary genres (*exemplum* fables; both in verse and in prose) from the beginnings of Latin literature to Late Antiquity, which have never before been completely listed. The present contribution aims to fill this gap.

This brief overview reflects fairly clearly which texts and which topics are currently the focus of research on ancient fable, and where there are still desiderata. We hope the introduction may encourage readers to explore the rest of the volume, and that the volume in turn may encourage them to address the many desiderata that still exist in research on ancient fable.