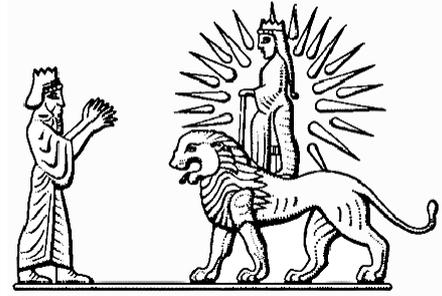


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“Fable and Disputation”

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M. L. WEST Oxford

Fable and Disputation

In my recent book *The East Face of Helicon* I considered Mesopotamian and other West Asiatic influences on Greek literature of the Archaic and early Classical periods, down to the time of Aeschylus. In a much shorter study published thirty years ago I discussed oriental material in Hellenistic and Roman literature.¹ In the present brief paper I shall range more freely across the whole time-span. The material is not new, but a clearer perspective may emerge from the use of a wide-angle lens.

The two genres named in my title, fable and disputation, are distinct, though they can be placed in the same general category of entertaining, potentially popular narrative with thought-provoking content, and as we shall see, they have sometimes been assimilated to one another. Both remained productive in the Middle Ages; indeed, the disputation, by which I mean the argument between two non-human interlocutors as to which of them is superior, has remained productive in the Arab world into the present century.

By 'fable' I mean primarily the animal fable, though it is not essential that the participants are (all) animals. A story in which animals speak and interact does not in itself constitute a fable: the essential thing is that it should be a story constructed to make a point. Perhaps the oldest example is the one in the Sumerian *Instructions of Šuruppak* about the man who took a great ox by the neck and then found that he could not cross

the river; the sage spells out the meaning of the story to his son Ziusudra. In this case the fable is used as one element in a wisdom text, something that we find later in the Hurro-Hittite *Song of Emancipation* and in the Aramaic *Aḥiqar*. More typically, the Mesopotamian fable resides in the so-called proverb collections or commonplace books.

In Graeco-Roman antiquity the fable form is especially associated with the legendary figure of Aesop, an ugly but eloquent Thracian supposed to have lived as a slave on Samos around 600 BC and to have been unjustly put to death at Delphi. But fables had already appeared in Greek poetry before that time: not in the Homeric epics, but in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and in the seventh-century Ionian iambographers Archilochus of Paros and Semonides of Amorgos. Archilochus introduces one of his fables with the words "this is a fable that men tell," αἰνός τις ἀνθρώπων ὄδε, indicating that it is material in oral currency, not derived from a specific source. In the fifth century, while fables were beginning to be attributed to Aesop, they were more often referred to by such terms as 'Libyan stories,' 'Carian stories,' or 'tales from Sybaris'; in other words, stories of a special sort originating from somewhere overseas, it was not too important where.²

There can be no doubt that the Greek tradition derives from the Near East. Independent origin is virtually excluded, because the fable is not a universal element of

¹ M. L. West, "Near Eastern material in Hellenistic and Roman literature," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 73 (1968), 13-34.

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² See M. L. West, "The Ascription of Fables to Aesop in Archaic and Classical Greece," in *La Fable* (Fondation Hardt Entretiens 30, Vandœuvre, 1984), 114-16.

human culture. It is found only in cultures that are historically indebted to Mesopotamia, and it evidently had a single historical point of origin there. The ways in which fables are used in the oriental and Greek traditions are parallel: as a pointed lesson for a particular addressee in a given situation; as an ingredient in a wisdom text; and in the mass in collections.³

What is more, many of the individual fables found in Greek have counterparts in oriental texts. Hesiod's fable of the hawk and the nightingale – a hawk, carrying off a nightingale in its talons, asked why she was screaming, and pointed out that it was foolish to struggle against one much stronger – is not known from oriental sources, though there are a couple of Sumerian ones which are similar in tenor.⁴ However, Archilochus' fable of the eagle and the fox (or rather vixen) has a very similar plot to the story of the eagle and the snake in the Babylonian narrative poem *Etana*, and cannot be unrelated to it.⁵ Other fables in the later Aesopic collections also have oriental counterparts.

What can we say or surmise about the transmission of this type of material from east to west? By the seventh century BC there must have been quite a number of these fables known in Greece. Besides the Hesiodic and Archilochean examples already mentioned, we know of at least one other fable that appeared in Archilochus' Epodes (the story of the fox and the monkey, frs. 185-87 West ≈ Aesop. 81 Perry), and of another related by Semonides (the heron and the buzzard, fr. 9 W.). As our evidence for the Ionian iambographers is so

fragmentary, it is surely likely that other fables appeared in their work, to say nothing of all those that circulated orally but were never used by the poets.

Hesiod uses his fable as an element in a wisdom poem, and as that is a genuine oriental usage, it is natural to infer that he made the acquaintance of fable in this connection, in the tradition of wisdom poetry. It is less easy to say how the iambographers came to know the fables that they retold. Archilochus, at least, used fables in order to criticize the conduct or pretensions of the person to whom his poem (or rather song) was addressed. This again is a genuine oriental usage. But must we infer the existence of some oriental tradition of satirical poetry that used fables and that somehow influenced the Greek poets? Were there stories of some wise man, a proto-Aesop or proto-Aḥiqar, who had responded with fables to various situations in which he found himself? Or could the fables have been transmitted by themselves, without being made to refer to any (actual or fictional) human situation? A brief versified fable appears in the collection of old Attic drinking songs preserved by Athenaeus, apparently as a self-sufficient, free-standing item:

Now this is what the crab said
as the snake in his claw he caught:
"A friend should be straightforward
and think no devious thought."⁶

Certainly the fable, like the folktale, is something that was not bound to any one literary form but could easily cross generic boundaries, be adapted from prose into verse, and so on. Already in the Old Baby-

³ See K. Meuli, *Herkunft und Wesen der Fabel* (Basel, 1954) = *Gesammelte Schriften* (Basel, 1975), ii, 731-56; M. Nøjgaard, *La fable antique* (Copenhagen, 1964), i, 431-41; B. E. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA & London, 1965), xi-xxxiv; T. Karadagli, *Fabel und Ainos. Studien zur griechischen Fabel* (Beiträge zur Klassischen Philologie 135, König-

stein, 1981), 6-52.

⁴ See *The East Face of Helicon* (Oxford, 1997), 320.

⁵ See *The East Face of Helicon*, 502-504.

⁶ *Carmina convivalia* 892 Page; trans. M. L. West, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford, 1993), 177. A fuller prose version of the fable appears in Aesop. 196 Perry.

lonian *Etana* the fable of the eagle and the snake, which must originally have been a self-contained moral story, was incorporated into the tale of Etana, King of Kish, and the eagle became identified with the one that carried Etana to heaven. Aeschylus put a fable in Achilles' mouth in one of his tragedies, probably as a comment on the hero's own predicament.⁷ In Hellenistic times and later, epigrammatists and other poets versified Aesopic fables, just for the satisfaction of producing a neat little poem.

In two cases we can trace the substance of these later Greek poems back to oriental texts written centuries earlier. In the story of Aḥīqar – I quote here from the Arabic version, as the Aramaic is not preserved – the sage says, "O my boy! thou art like the gazelle [in the Armenian version it is a goat] who was eating the roots of the madder, and it said to her, 'Eat of me today and take thy fill, and tomorrow they will tan thy hide in

my roots.'" In the Aesopic tradition it is a goat eating vine-shoots, and the vine says that it will still produce wine enough to pour as a libation when the goat is sacrificed. Leonidas of Tarentum made this into an epigram in the third century BC, and a neater one is transmitted under the name of Euenus.⁸ The second case is that of the little anecdote preserved on an Assyrian tablet from the year 716:⁹

A wren, as it settled on an elephant,
said, "Brother, am I pressing your side? I
will remove myself at the watering-place."
The elephant answered the wren:
"When you settled, I didn't know it – what
do you amount to? –
and when you arise I shan't know it."

We have three Greek versions of this, all dating from the Roman period: one in prose, in the so-called Augustana collection of Aesopic fables, and two in verse, from Babrius and Mesomedes.¹⁰

Augustana	Babrius	Mesomedes
A mosquito alighted on a bull's horn and sat there for a while. When it was ready to leave, it asked the bull whether it now wanted it to go. The bull said, "I neither knew it when you came, nor will know it if you depart."	A mosquito alighted on a bull's curly horn and after a short stay whined, "If I'm a weight and a pain on your neck, I'll get off and sit on a poplar by the river." But he said, "I don't care whether you stay or go; I didn't even notice when you came."	On an elephant's ear a mosquito with wings all aflutter alighted and foolishly said, "I will fly away, for my weight you cannot support." But he smiled in amusement and said, "But I neither knew when you flew down, nor when you fly off, O mosquito."

The Assyrian anecdote is preserved with extraordinary fidelity across eight or nine centuries during which attestation of it is lacking. The wren becomes a mosquito; the elephant becomes a bull in two of the versions, but remains an elephant in the third. The place where the wren proposes to de-

part, *ina šiqi mē*, is reflected in Babrius' poplar by the river. And the big animal's reply, especially in the Aesopic version, is virtually a translation of the Akkadian: I didn't know it when you came, and I shan't know it when you depart. How are we to explain this survival? Presumably oral

⁷ *Myrmidones*, fr. 139 Radt.

⁸ Arabic Aḥīqar 8.4, trans. J. Rendel Harris in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913), ii.769; Aesop. 374 P.; Leonidas epigr. 32 Gow-Page (*Anth. Pal.* 9.99); Euenus epigr. 3 G.-P. (*Anth. Pal.* 9.75).

⁹ VAT 8807 rev. iii 50-54, ed. W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford, 1960), 216f (with the false reading *ni-ni-qu* for *diq-diq-qu*).

¹⁰ Aesop. 137 Perry; Babrius *Fab.* 84; Mesomedes poem 11 Heitsch.

transmission; but in what context?

From fable I turn to a genre that may loosely be called dialectical. This is the disputation, in which two animals, two trees, or some other pair of (usually) non-human rivals, argue with one another about their respective merits. The type was well established in Sumerian tradition, perhaps originally as a court entertainment, and seems to have existed from the time of Shulgi. Herman Vanstiphout lists ten Sumerian texts of this category: Hoe vs. Plough; Summer vs. Winter; Tree vs. Reed; Heron vs. Turtle; Goose vs. Raven; Ewe vs. Wheat; Bird vs. Fish; Herdsman vs. Farmer; Upper vs. Lower Millstone; Copper vs. Silver.¹¹ The Akkadian examples include disputes between a tamarisk and a palm, a poplar and a laurel, and an ox and a horse.¹²

This type of composition in Mesopotamian and other literatures formed the subject of a Symposium and Workshop at the University of Groningen in 1989, and the proceedings were published in a most instructive volume.¹³ In it we see how the form was taken up and re-infused with vigorous life in Syriac (from at least the fourth century) and in the medieval Hebrew and Arabic traditions. Passing reference is made too to the Latin and West European vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages, where the type is also represented; there is a well-known Middle English example, *The Owl and the Nightingale*.

The Classical Greek and Latin literatures are conspicuously absent from the Groningen volume, and the disputation of the sort

we are considering was not at home in them. Yet there are a small number of relevant texts, all the more significant for the question of oriental origins from the fact of their isolation, their not representing an established genre. The most extended is the fourth *Iambos* of Callimachus, in which the poet relates what he says is an old Lydian story of a dispute between two trees, the Bay and the Olive, about which of them was the more important. The subject matter is closely comparable with that of the Babylonian dispute between the Tamarisk and the Palm. Formally too the narrative follows Mesopotamian schemata. It begins with the simple statement that one day the two trees had a dispute, just as the Sumerian disputation between the Hoe and the Plough begins with such a statement. The rivals speak in turn, each citing the uses to which men put it, and denigrating the other. The procedure in *The Tamarisk and the Palm* is very similar.¹⁴

In calling it an old Lydian tale, Callimachus perhaps means to associate it with Aesop, whom he elsewhere referred to as a native of Sardis.¹⁵ In fact two or three cursory accounts of quarrels between trees occur among the Aesopic collections;¹⁶ and Callimachus uses the story as he might have used an Aesopic fable, as a tale with a moral relevant to his own situation with regard to a poetic rival.

Another Aesopic narrative concerns a dispute between Winter and Spring.¹⁷ Once again we can refer to a close Mesopotamian antecedent in the Sumerian dialogue be-

¹¹ In G. J. Reinink and H. L. J. Vanstiphout (eds.), *Dispute Poems and Dialogues in the Ancient and Medieval Near East* (Leuven, 1991), 25f.

¹² Lambert, *BWL* (above, n. 9), 150-85, where these works are inappropriately assigned to the category 'fable.'

¹³ Reinink and Vanstiphout, as n. 11.

¹⁴ Call. fr. 194. 6ff; *The Tamarisk and the Palm* in Lambert, *BWL* (above, n. 9), 151-64. The two works were first compared by H. Diels, *Internationale Wochenschrift*

für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik 4 (1910), 993-1002. I quoted some parallel passages from them in *Harvard Studies* 73 (above, n. 1), 118f.

¹⁵ Fr. 192. 16.

¹⁶ Aesop. 70, 213, 413 Perry; Babrius *Fab.* 64. The disputants in the first of these, an oak and a reed, recall the Tree and Reed of one of the Sumerian texts.

¹⁷ Aesop. 271 Perry.

tween Summer and Winter. The theme recurs again in the ninth or tenth century AD in one of the oldest of the extant Arabic disputations, where the interlocutors are Spring and Autumn.¹⁸

Ennius, who used Aesopic fables in two of his *Saturae*, devoted another to a dispute between Life and Death.¹⁹ This is interesting because, whereas in most of the disputations previously mentioned it is not immediately obvious which party should have the advantage, and the disputation serves as a reasoned exploration of the relative merits and deficiencies of the two contenders, it would seem paradoxical to consider Death as possessing any plausible claims to be better than Life. But arguing for such paradoxes, for the re-thinking of conventional values, was a specialty of Græco-Roman dialectic from the time of the fifth- and fourth-century Sophists. In fact one of these, Alcidamas, is recorded as having written an essay in praise of Death, in which he enumerated the evils that accompany life.²⁰

The older oriental writers of disputations did not, so far as I know, pursue such paradoxes. Nevertheless, their compositions were an invitation to reflect on the properties of things that one commonly takes for granted, an invitation to weigh pros and cons, to compare and contrast. Much of the pleasure in reading them lies in this stimulation of the intellect. They can be seen as proto-sophistic works, reflecting a level of

simple philosophical thinking that in the Greek environment could develop into a more enterprisingly ‘sophistic’ manner of argumentation.

The two genres that I have considered, fable and disputation, both have a compelling claim to be of Mesopotamian origin, and both have enjoyed enormous success in later cultures. The fable spread to India in the east, to Syria and Greece in the west; from Greece it passed on to the Romans, and from the Classical literatures it was inherited by Byzantium, the Arabs, and the whole of western Europe, where it remained productive at least down to La Fontaine. In the case of the disputation, the lines of transmission are not quite so obvious, as the form did not take proper root in the Classical literatures and they do not provide a convincing link with the Middle Ages. It seems clear, however, that the disputation has enjoyed continuous popularity in the Middle East. If we were to imagine a disputation between the Disputation and the Fable, the former could claim the advantage of being inexhaustible, there being no limit to the subjects, material or abstract, that can be evaluated against each other. So we hear of an early twentieth-century Arabic disputation between the Telephone and the Telegraph, and of a Chinese one between Wine and Tea.²¹ The Sumerians would have found such subject-matter unfamiliar, but they would have at once recognized the form as their own.

¹⁸ J. N. Mattock in Reinink and Vanstiphout (above n. 11), 155.

¹⁹ Quintilian 9.2.36 (Enn. *Sat.* 20 Vahlen²). The fables: Gellius 2.29 (Enn. *Sat.* 21ff, ≈ Babrius 88); Varro *De lingua Latina* 7.35 (Enn. *Sat.* 65, ≈ Hdt. 1.141, Aesop. 11 P., Babrius 9).

²⁰ Cic. *Tusc.* 1.116; Menander Rhetor *Epideiktika* p.

346.17 Sp. (Alcid. T14 Avezzù).

²¹ E. Littmann, “Neuarabische Streitgedichte”, in *Festschr. zur Feier des zweihundertjährigen Bestehens der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen*, ii (Phil.-hist. Klasse), 1951, 64f; J. Bottéro in Reinink and Vanstiphout (above, n. 11), 7 n.2.