



# A comparative approach to beast fables in Greek songmaking, Part 2: The case of a story about Aesop and a barking dog in the Wasps of Aristophanes

## Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2019.06.07. "A comparative approach to beast fables in Greek songmaking, Part 2: The case of a story about Aesop and a barking dog in the Wasps of Aristophanes." Classical Inquiries. [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical\\_Inquiries](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries).

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## A comparative approach to beast fables in Greek songmaking, Part 2: The case of a story about Aesop and a barking dog in the Wasps of Aristophanes

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§0. In Part 2 here, I pick up from where I left off in Part 1, where I studied the possibilities of convergence as well as divergence between fables that focus primarily on beasts as talking characters and other fables where the only talking characters are humans. Here I extend the study, analyzing a special kind of convergence that we find in a fable retold by a character featured in a comedy of Aristophanes. The fable involves Aesop himself as one of the only two characters featured in the story, and he is actually the only talking character in this particular case, since the other character does not talk at all but only barks: she is a nasty beast of a dog who threatens to attack Aesop, barking at him furiously. It is as if Aesop were some devious thief—the kind we see in the illustration for this posting.



The dog and the thief (n.d.). Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–1677). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. Two questions arise about the fable under study here: first, can we say that the story being told is really a beast fable if the beast is not a talking character, and, second, can we say that this story is really an Aesopic fable if Aesop himself happens to play the role of a featured character in the story? The answer to both these questions is positive—but only if we approach the existing evidence from a comparative point of view. And a vital aspect of that evidence is what the text of a comedy by Aristophanes can tell us about a primary historical context for the practice of retelling fables. As we will see, such a context is the symposium—by which I mean the kind of elite symposium where aristocrats perform fables as a specialized aspect of what can most generally be described as verbal art derivable from songmaking.

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§2. From now on, I will refer to the fable under study here as “Aesop and the Bitch,” printed as Aesop Fable 423 in the edition of Perry (1952). This fable is attested only in the Wasps of Aristophanes, a comedy originally produced in 422 BCE as a one-time performance at the seasonally recurring Athenian festival known as the Lenaia. Before I analyze the context of the fable, I start by simply quoting the text, together with my working translation (Aristophanes Wasps 1401–1405):

ἰ<sub>1401</sub> Αἴσωπον ἀπὸ δειννοῦ βαδίζονθ’ ἑσπέρας ἰ<sub>1402</sub> θρασεῖα καὶ μεθύση τις ὑλάκει κύων.  
ἰ<sub>1403</sub> κάπειτ’ ἐκεῖνος εἶπεν· ὦ κύων κύων, ἰ<sub>1404</sub> εἰ νῆ Δί’ ἀντὶ τῆς κακῆς γλώττης ποθὲν  
ἰ<sub>1405</sub> πυρούς πρίαο, σωφρονεῖν ἄν μοι δοκεῖς.”

ἰ<sub>1401</sub> One evening, when Aesop was walking along after having taken his leave from a dinner, ἰ<sub>1402</sub> a bitch, audacious drunkard, started barking at him. ἰ<sub>1403</sub> And that famous man said: “Bitch, bitch, ἰ<sub>1404</sub> I swear by Zeus, if you could somehow use that nasty tongue of yours ἰ<sub>1405</sub> to get paid off in wheat, then I think you would be sensible.”

§3. Starting at §5, I will proceed to analyze what this fable ultimately means. My analysis will include restatements from an earlier work of mine, “A closer look at Aesopic fables in Aristophanes,” which was part of a lengthy online essay, “Diachrony and the Case of Aesop,” listed as Nagy 2011 in the Bibliography below.

§3a. In what follows from this point at §3a all the way until the end of §3c, I offer some bibliographical background that readers may wish to skip for now.

§3b. My online essay “Diachrony and the Case of Aesop,” to which I refer as Nagy 2011, reappeared in a printed version, Nagy 2015, published in a collection of essays dealing with the important matter of applying diachronic perspectives in classical studies (ed. González 2015). In the printed version (Nagy 2015), the content of the original paragraphs §§99–120 of the online version (Nagy 2011) is repeated only in abridged form, and without quotations from the relevant Greek texts. From the original sequence in the online version (Nagy 2011), §§99–120, the only paragraphs still represented in the printed version (Nagy 2015) are §§99–100, §105, §§116–117, and §§119–120.

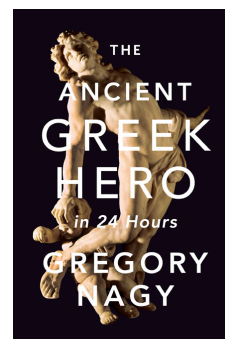
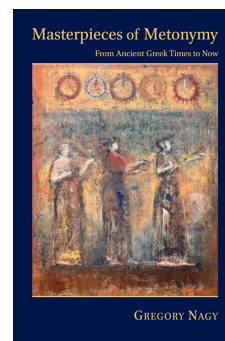
§3c. In what follows further below here at the new paragraphs numbered §§9–14, I will restore some parts of the content that is missing from the printed version. For logistical reasons, however, the restoration at this point will extend from §109 (Nagy 2011) only through §114, thus excluding for now what follows from §115 (Nagy 2011) through §120. Then, in what follows even further below here at the new paragraphs numbered §§15–19, I will redeploy a rewritten version of what I argued in (Nagy 2011) §§105–107 and §101.

§4. Before I have anything more to say about the Wasps of Aristophanes, I should note in advance that I have on a few rare occasions reworded the relevant wordings in the online version as found in Nagy 2011. I highlight here only two examples. First, my translation ‘an audacious and drunken bitch’ at line 1402 of the Wasps in the original online version and in the printed version has been redone as ‘a bitch, audacious drunkard’. Second, in my analysis of references being made in the Wasps to the fifth-century politician Cleon of Athens, I have stopped using the term populist as a synonym for demagogue with reference to this historical figure. Back in 2011, when I was using this term populist in my analysis, I never imagined how it would get to be reused and even abused nowadays, at the time of my writing now, in 2019. It seems that the term populist has by now been claimed as a positive attribute by nationalist demagogues who manipulate local populations in their nations by inciting them to fear and hate extra-nationals. Well, Cleon may have been a demagogue, but he was no populist in the current sense that I have just described. In any case, I choose to consider only in historical terms the ridiculing of Cleon as a demagogue in the comedies of Aristophanes.

§5. That said, I can now proceed to analyze the context of Aesop Fable 423, “Aesop and the Bitch,” as retold at lines 1401–1405 in the Wasps of Aristophanes. And I start by highlighting a fact that has become for me a cornerstone of my overall argumentation. It concerns a detail that emerges from an overall reading of this comedy. The fact is, the character who is now retelling the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch” has learned how to perform such a retelling only because he had participated, the evening before, in a symposium.

§6. There is a back story that tells about what happened at this symposium. The story is told at lines 1299–1321 of the Wasps, and it involves the same character who later on retells the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch” at lines 1401–1405. But the teller of the back story at lines 1299–1321 is a different character: he is a slave who belonged to the family of the man who went to the symposium. The slave had accompanied his master, and thus he became a witness to everything that happened at this symposium, which took place on the evening that preceded his master’s performance, the day after, of the fable at lines 1401–1405. And it is evident from the slave’s story that his master had attended this symposium with the expectation of learning there, as a newcomer to the ways of symposia, the art of retelling fables.

§7. From our reading of the comic story told by the eyewitness at lines 1299–1321 of the Wasps, we can see that this symposium, organized and attended by elite Athenians who evidently prided themselves on their cultural sophistication, turned out to be too much for our newcomer. He failed to control his sympotic drinking, and his drunkenness severely impaired his sympotic discourse, thus revealing all the more his lack of sophistication, which was bound to offend his fellow symposiasts. The more this character tried to blend in with the other characters attending, the more offensive he became. As the story proceeds, we see that our newcomer utterly failed as a symposiast.



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§8. This is not to say that the elites attending this symposium were by contrast successful symposiasts. In the end, not a single one of the characters in this story about the symposium—neither the unsophisticated outsider nor the ultra-sophisticated insiders—escape the ridicule created by the story itself. But, in any case, it is the story of the slave at lines 1299–1321 of the Wasps that contextualizes the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch” as retold at lines 1401–1405 of the comedy.

§9 (via old §109 in Nagy 2011). The person who is retelling the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch” is the main character in the Wasps of Aristophanes. And this same person, as we have just seen, had been the unsophisticated character in the comic story told by the slave about the symposium attended by his master. Our main character has a comic name, Philocleon, which means ‘the one who loves Cleon’, and he is the antithesis of a sophisticated character by the name of Bdelycleon, who is the son of Philocleon and whose own comic name means ‘the one who is disgusted with Cleon’. The unsophisticated father Philocleon is a partisan of the radical democrat Cleon, while the sophisticated son Bdelycleon is an elitist reactionary who takes the side of anyone opposed to Cleon. In this comedy of Aristophanes, produced in the year 422 BCE, a prime political target for elitist reactionaries like the character Bdelycleon is the Athenian system of jury duty, which had been radically reshaped by Cleon in his role as the self-declared champion of common people.

§10 (via old §110). As the comedy progresses, the elitist son manages to persuade the anti-elitist father to abandon his democratic addiction. From now on, the father will no longer spend all his time as a juror in Cleon’s jury system. Now the father will become an elitist reactionary, like his son. But once Philocleon is persuaded to go over to the side of the elites, he becomes even more elitist than Bdelycleon. In a comic reversal of roles, the father Philocleon can now take on the role of a childish son while the son Bdelycleon can now take on the role of a somewhat more sensible father. Whereas Philocleon as a juror had been an advocate of common people, he can now become a noisy parody of the elitist reactionaries.

§11 (via old §111). In the story told by the slave (Wasps 1299–1321), we see how Philocleon gets drunk and rowdy while attending the symposium. And then, on his way back home, he gets into violent fights with common people he happens to encounter along the way (1322–1323). Then, the day after, Philocleon is confronted by the same common people he had assaulted during his nighttime rampage, and he is being served summonses by these people. So Philocleon is now faced with the prospect of having to appear in court to answer charges and be judged by the same kinds of jurors he once had been himself before he went over to the other side.

§12 (via old §112). The first claimant to confront Philocleon with legal threats is a woman whose profession is selling bread, and she accuses him of violently knocking to the ground the loaves of bread she was carrying in her breadbasket. The alleged deed was committed by Philocleon in his drunken state of wanton violence as he was making his way home after attending the symposium (Wasps 1388–1391, 1396–1398). Philocleon, now hoping to avoid being taken to court for damages, tries to assuage the angry woman (1393–1395). He does so by using, as he describes them, *logoi dexioi* ‘dexterous words’ (1394 *λόγοι ... δέξιοι*). He announces to her that he will now deliver a discourse, a *logos*, that is *kharieis* ‘graceful, elegant’ (1398–1399 *λόγον ... χαρίεντα*). This word *kharieis* was used in the classical era with reference to measuring various different degrees of sophistication in the practice and understanding of the verbal arts by *sophistai* ‘sophists’, as we see for example from the context of Isocrates [12] *Panathenaicus* 18–19. And the same word is applied by the figure of Protagoras in Plato’s *Protagoras* 320c to his telling of a fable at a symposium attended by elites, including a youthful Socrates. In the present context as well, the character of Philocleon is trying to act like a sophisticated member of elite society by retelling a fable. And it is at this point that Philocleon narrates the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch,” which I have already quoted. Of course the fable as he tells it is not at all ‘dexterous’, not at all ‘graceful’ or ‘elegant’. Just the opposite. And that is because the application of the fable is disastrously inappropriate and even malaprop. It is bad enough for the words of Philocleon to set up a parallelism between an angry bitch and the angry woman who had lost the bread she was selling, but the drawing of parallels gets even worse, since the angry bitch is now described further as *methusē*, a ‘drunkard’ (1402).

§13 (via old §113). Though Philocleon would have no motive here for insulting the woman, he manages to insult her anyway. In his pretentious attempt to assuage her by resorting to the sophisticated discourse of telling fables, he is stuck with using words that are typical of that discourse, and those words will only get him into further trouble. I now give three examples of such wording, which are all typical of the fable.

§13a (via old §113a). We know for a fact from other Aesopic fables that the word *methusos* ‘drunkard’ used here to describe the bitch who barks angrily at Aesop is part of the vocabulary of fables (as in Fable 246 ed. Perry, “The Woman and her Drunkard [*methusos*] Husband”) as also of comedy (Aristophanes *Clouds* 555).

§13b (via §113b). And we also know from the evidence of Aesopic fables that the barking of dogs is associated primarily with anger: in the fable “The Years of Humans” (Fable 105.13 ed. Perry), the words used to describe dogs, *ὀργίλους καὶ ὑλακτικούς* ‘angry and barking’, highlight such an association. Further, as we read in traditional descriptions of potentially comic situations, aristocrats are prone to experiencing flashes of anger in public spaces whenever they experience chance encounters there with drunkards or barking dogs or other such annoyances (Plutarch *On the controlling of anger* 460f): *ἀλλὰ καὶ πανδοκεῦσι καὶ ναύταις καὶ ὀρεωκόμοις μεθύουσι πολλάκις ὑπ’ ὀργῆς συμπίπτοντες οἰόμενοι καταφρονεῖσθαι, καὶ κυσὶν ὑλακτοῦσι καὶ ὄνοις ἐμβάλλουσι χαλεπαίνοντες* ‘we often get angry, feeling that we are being disrespected, whenever we get into nasty encounters with beggars or sailors or drunkard mule-drivers, and we are similarly irked by barking dogs or by donkeys that bump into us’.

§13c (via §113c). Finally, we can see that barking and getting drunk go together in comic descriptions of drunkards: for example, the comically drunken Herakles in the *Alcestis* of Euripides barks (760 *ὑλακτῶν*)



rather than sings as he guzzles vast quantities of intoxicating wine (757 μέθυ).

§14 (via old §114). In short, the words used by the character of Philocleon in the Wasps (1401–1405) when he narrates the fable about ‘an audacious and drunkard bitch’ who barks at Aesop are all compatible with the world of fable, but they are comically incompatible with the situation of Philocleon himself. The only part of the fable that can be made compatible with his situation is where Aesop says that the bitch would be well advised to use her barking to get wheat. At least, this part is compatible to the extent that Aesop recommends wheat as a form of compensation. After all, wheat would be a suitable compensation for the woman who is suing Philocleon, since wheat is presumably the primary ingredient of the bread that she sells for a living. But the problem is, the intended parallel brings with it an unintended parallel. The intended parallelism between the need for wheat in the fable and the need for wheat in the present situation brings with it an unintended parallelism between the bitch in the fable and the woman in the present situation. The woman is of course outraged when she hears that a parallel has been drawn between her and the angry bitch. So she responds to Philocleon by saying in effect: “This is adding insult to injury ... so now you are saying I’m an angry bitch!” And so, instead of succeeding in his attempts at assuaging the woman who is angrily threatening to take him to court, Philocleon has by now unintentionally guaranteed the certainty of his being sued for damages.

§15 (via old §104). I emphasized a moment ago that there is an obvious reason, in the retelling of the fable, for mentioning wheat in the present situation. But now I must emphasize that there is also a reason, a far less obvious reason, for mentioning wheat in the story of the fable “Aesop and the Bitch.” The scholia for the Wasps of Aristophanes (at 1446) preserve a relevant detail from the Life of Aesop tradition: it was said that the people of Delphi had resolved to kill Aesop because he insulted them by ridiculing (ἀνοσκόπων) the fact that they had no land of their own for growing their own produce. Because they had no land for agriculture, according to the scholia here, the people of Delphi had to depend for their sustenance on the meat they obtained from the sacrifices made by visiting sacrificers. This insult, I think, is built into the fable of “Aesop and the Bitch,” where the dog who angrily barks to get meat is like the people of Delphi, who would be well advised to use their barking to get wheat instead of meat.

§16 (via old §105). Some think, however, that this fable “Aesop and the Bitch” is not a genuine Aesopic fable, understanding it instead as an ad hoc invention by Aristophanes (MacDowell 1971:312; Sommerstein 1983:240; taking a neutral stance is the commentary of Biles and Olson 2015 on Wasps 1401–1405). One reason given for such an understanding is that Aesop himself is featured here as a character inside the narrative of the fable. But that is not a good reason, I think, for doubting that this fable is genuinely Aesopic. I can cite other examples of Aesopic fables where Aesop himself is featured as a character inside the narrative of the fable, as in the case of “Aesop and the Shipbuilders” (Fable 8 ed. Perry). Another example is “Aesop and the Corinthians” (Fable 424 ed. Perry), where we see two verses of an elegiac couplet being spoken by Aesop himself to the people of Corinth: according to Diogenes Laertius (2.5.42), who is our source here, Socrates himself had composed those verses.

§17 (via old §106). I should add, in arguing that this story of “Aesop and the Bitch” is a genuine Aesopic fable, that there is in the Life of Aesop narratives an attestation of another story about Aesop and a bitch. In this case, the action takes place on the island of Samos, and the dog is described as a purebred female house pet living in the residence of a philosopher named Xanthos, who is at the time the master of the slave Aesop (Vita G+W 44–46). Summoning the bitch by calling out her name, Lukaina ‘She-Wolf’ (Vita G+W 45), Aesop proceeds to feed her a basketful of food that he had been instructed by Xanthos to give as a dinner gift ‘to her who loves me’. By giving the whole dinner to the bitch and not to the wife of Xanthos, Aesop has his revenge on a nasty aristocratic woman who had been tormenting him with her insults. In terms of this fable, then, Aesop has something of a reputation for giving generous handouts to bitches.

§18 (via old §107). Even if the story of “Aesop and the Bitch” as narrated in the Wasps of Aristophanes is a genuine Aesopic fable, as I think it is, this fable is a failure in the context of this comedy. What makes it a failure is the fact that it is badly applied. But that is actually good for comedy. The bad application is exactly what makes the fable work successfully in the comedy. The fact that the fable is badly applied is what gives the fable a comic twist. The narrator of the fable here has actually botched the application of his narrative to his own circumstances. And that is what makes the fable a failure in this context, since the narration of a fable can succeed only if its narrators are successful in applying it to suit their own intentions. As I have argued at length in an earlier project (Nagy 1979|1999:282§5n4), the moral of a fable must be applicable to the circumstances of the narrator of the fable. That is the synchronic reality of applying fables.

§19 (via old §101). By why does Aesop tell the bitch to bark for wheat and not meat? In terms of the convoluted logic of the narrative, it is because it would not make any sense for the bitch to be barking so furiously at Aesop unless it was wheat that she wanted as payment for putting a stop to her angry barking. I think it is the convolutedness of the logic here that makes the narrative amusing. The premise that is built into the narrative, I further think, is that dogs crave to eat meat, not wheat, and, presumably, there was meat to be eaten at the ‘dinner’ that Aesop had just attended. But the bitch is barking up the wrong tree, as it were, if what she really wants to get from Aesop is a cut of meat as a payoff for stopping her furious barking. Aesop has no meat to give to the bitch. And so the dog deserves to get nothing to eat by barking so angrily. In terms of such a convoluted logic, I think, the moral of the fable would be something like this: you can’t always get what you want, no matter how hard you try.

§20. In Part 3, however, we will see that Aesop himself in the Life of Aesop traditions could be pictured—falsely—in the act of carrying off thievishly some cooked meat left over from a feast that he had attended.

To put it more accurately, there was a story that told how Aesop was accused, falsely and slanderously, of behaving like a thief in the night. And the accusers were the priests of Delphi. In terms of such a story, as we will also see, the drunkard bitch barking with her evil tongue could be a substitute, as it were, for speaking characters comparable to the slanderous priests of Delphi.

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