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A Dung Beetle's Victory: The Moral of the *Life of Aesop* (*Vita G*)

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Abstract

The *Life of Aesop* is an entertaining yet profound account of Aesop's life dating from the first to second centuries AD. Although it is widely agreed that the *Life of Aesop* may be read as a 'metafable', there has been, in my view, a widespread and perversely negative interpretation of the supposed moral of this life story: that 'pride comes before a fall'. This supposed moral is not borne out by the ending, in which Aesop's prophecies of doom prove to be correct, the Delphians are thrice punished for executing Aesop, and Aesop himself achieves everlasting fame as a storyteller. In this paper, I will argue that a more fitting moral for the *Life of Aesop* is that 'even the weakest may find a means to avenge a wrong'. This is the moral that accompanies the quintessentially Aesopic fable of the dung beetle, the hare, and the eagle in which a tiny dung beetle triumphs over a powerful adversary. This fable is pointedly narrated by Aesop to the Delphians just before he is put to death. By reading the *Life of Aesop* as an exposition of this fable, I will demonstrate that Aesop, just like the dung beetle, is not the loser but the ultimate victor.

Keywords: Aesop, fables, biography, *Life of Aesop*, animals.

The *Life of Aesop* (the *Life*) is a fictional biography of Aesop.[1] It survives in three recensions of which the *Vita G* is the longest and thought to be closest to the original.[2] In the *Life*, we follow Aesop from his birth in Phrygia and his service as a slave on Samos to his adventures in the East and his death in Delphi. Aesop, who is physically deformed and unable to speak, initially

[1] It is also known as *The Aesop Romance*. I am using Ferrari's 1997 edition and the translation by Wills (1997). Several papyri fragments dating from the second to the seventh centuries AD establish the *terminus ante quem* as the late second century: see Holzberg (1996) 634 and Kurke (2011) 17. On the presumable date of the *Vita G* see Perry (1936) 24–6, La Penna (1962) 270–1, Adrados (1999) 647–52 and Karla (2001) 8–9.

[2] The *Vita G* is based on MS 397 of the Piermont Morgan Library, New York. There is also the *Vita W* (ed. A. Westermann, 1845) and the *Vita Pl.* (Maximus Planudes c. 1479). For a full account of the tradition of the text see Ruiz-Montero (2014). On the possibility of an ancient compilation including the *Life* and fables see Holzberg (2002) 72–6.

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works as a slave in the fields. After helping a lost priestess, Aesop miraculously receives the gift of speech from Isis and the Muses as a reward for his piety, thereby becoming a 'composer of fables' (ὁ λογοποιός[3]) and a 'great benefactor of humanity' (ὁ πάντα βιωφελέστατος[4]). Aesop then journeys to Samos where he is purchased by the philosopher Xanthus. In a hilarious set of episodes, Aesop repeatedly outwits, confounds, and humiliates Xanthus.[5] Eventually, Aesop is freed, whereupon he becomes a royal adviser in Lydia and Babylon. Finally, he journeys to Delphi where he is falsely accused of theft and meets his death. The Delphians are thrice punished for causing Aesop's death: they suffer a famine, military attack, and are required to pay compensation.

Several features of the *Life* are fable-like.[6] Firstly, there is the connection with Aesop: fables are often ascribed to Aesop or collected under his name, and the *Life* claims to be a biography of the fabulist himself. Secondly, there is the tripartite narrative structure of the *Life*, as represented by the early episodes, the Samian episodes, and the post-manumission and Delphic episodes. Thirdly, there is the 'moral' message of the *Life* which, as I shall argue, 'speaks truth to power' in the same manner as some notable Aesopic fables.[7] Thus, in *Fables of Power*, Patterson posited that the *Life* may be read as a 'complex fable' or 'metafable'.[8] Yet, if this is the case, how should we interpret the fable and what is its moral?

According to Holzberg, the moral of the *Life* is straightforward: a slave whom the gods endow with the gift of artful speech rises through the ranks until he is seized with hubris and pays with his life.[9] The 'hubris' that Aesop is guilty of is that '[i]n the temple which he has built for the Muses as a token of his gratitude for their gift of eloquence, he raises in the midst of their statues not a likeness of Apollo Musagetes, but of himself. This enrages the god of Delphi so greatly that he later supports his priests in the conspiracy against Aesop'.[10] Thus, the moral of the *Life* is that 'for the silver-tongued too, pride comes before a fall'.[11]

A number of scholars have expressed similar views. Marinčič regards Aesop as lacking in the necessary 'Socratic self-deprecation' and

[3] See Nøjgaard (1964) 454.

[4] Hägg (2012) 104 translates this phrase as 'most useful in all vicissitudes of life'.

[5] See Konstantakos (2010a).

[6] See Lefkowitz (2014) 5.

[7] A well-known example is Hesiod's fable of the Hawk and the Nightingale (*Op.* 213). See discussion in Nøjgaard (1984) 225–6, 244–5.

[8] Patterson (1991) 16, 37. Also Holzberg (1996) 637, 639 and Karla (2016) 59.

[9] Holzberg (1996) 637.

[10] Holzberg (1996) 637.

[11] Holzberg (1995) 16, (2002) 83, and (1993) 10–11.

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consequently being punished for his 'escalation of *hybris*'.[12] Robertson regards Aesop as falling victim to his anger;[13] Hopkins talks of Aesop's death as a necessary act of revenge;[14] and Merkle concludes that Aesop's death at Delphi is designed to show us that 'what goes (or is) up must come down'.[15] So, it would seem, Aesop must be, 'brought down' because he becomes a boastful fool,[16] 'a philosopher who collects fees, a pig who walks, an ex-slave who insults non-paying Delphians by calling them slaves'.[17] But must our reading of the *Life* be quite so negative and, more importantly, is it accurate?

I

The first problem with viewing Aesop as hubristic is that it glosses over the events that take place immediately after his death. Let us re-examine the last two sentences of the *Life*:

> λοιμῷ δὲ κατασχεθέντες οἱ Δέλφιοι χρησμὸν ἔλαβον παρὰ τοῦ Διὸς ἐξιλεώσασθαι <τὸν> τοῦ Αἰσώπου μόρον. μετὰ ταῦτα, ἀκούσαντες οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἑλλάδος καὶ οἱ ἀπὸ Βαβυλῶνος καὶ <οἱ> Σάμιοι, ἐξεδίκησαν τὸν τοῦ Αἰσώπου θάνατον.
>
> *Life of Aesop* §142

> But when the Delphians were afflicted with a plague, they consulted an oracle from Zeus, which stated that they should expiate the death of Aesop. And when the Greeks, Babylonians, and Samians heard of Aesop's execution, they avenged his death.

This ending raises a number of important questions. Why are the Delphians punished if the killing of Aesop was justified?[18] Why do three communities mobilise forces to defend a man who apparently deserved to die? Why would Zeus intervene on behalf of a mortal who was allegedly so hubristic as to imagine himself equal to the gods?

There is no doubt that the punishment of the Delphians is dealt with in a cursory manner but this may be because it was such a familiar part of the

12 On the lack of self-deprecation see Marinčič (2003) 69–70 and on hubris see the same at 66. This is despite the fact that, in Socratic fashion, the eminently capable Aesop jokes that he does not know how to do anything (§25).

13 Robertson (2003) 253.

14 Hopkins (1993) 25–6.

15 Merkle (1996) 230.

16 Watson (2010) 705.

17 Pervo (1998) 117.

18 Wiechers (1961) 42 argues that the story of Aesop's execution explains the establishment of a *pharmakos* ritual at Delphi along the lines of the Attic Thargelia. See also Adrados (1979) 105; Adrados (1999) 672; Nagy (1979) 279–88; Winkler (1985) 287–9; Compton (2006) 16–35. One problem with this approach is that there is no evidence for a *pharmakos* festival of the Thargelia type at Delphi: see Kurke (2011) 29–31.

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story, not because the author wished to diminish their guilt.[19] Aesop's death at Delphi was, after all, *the* most notorious episode of his life. Herodotus (2.134) recounts that after Aesop was executed, the Delphians were instructed by an oracle to offer compensation. Likewise, Aristophanes refers to Aesop being accused of stealing a sacred cup from the temple at Delphi (Ar. *Vesp.* 1446–48).[20] Aesop denied the charge and told the fable of the dung beetle. The story of Aesop taunting the Delphians is also alluded to by Callimachus[21] and Aesop's death at Delphi is mentioned in a Hellenistic collection of biographies.[22] Did the author wish to avoid revisiting familiar ground and have we perhaps confused the brevity of the *Life's* ending with a lack of significance?

A second problem for the view of Aesop as hubristic is that Aesop is repeatedly referred to as a pious man.[23] The priestess of Isis describes Aesop as a man 'who suffers and is yet pious' (§5) while Isis herself describes him as 'the very image of true piety' (§7).[24] Aesop admits that being pious is 'a good thing' (§8) and he warns the Delphians against hubris, saying: 'Since you are but mortals, do not consider yourselves higher than gods' (§128).[25] Aesop is consistently shown to be pious toward Isis (§4, §8), the Muses (§8, §100), and Zeus (§33). In relation to Zeus, Aesop says: 'Zeus, indeed, can keep the sun and moon from shining, and the stars from moving in their appointed times, if he becomes angry' (§115). None of these statements is consistent with the view of Aesop as hubristic.[26]

A third problem is that Aesop's death is not effective in silencing him or 'bringing him down' (at least not in a reputational sense). On the contrary, the execution of Aesop seems to have enhanced his fame and reputation as a fabulist. At the beginning of the *Life*, Isis prays that Aesop will 'achieve fame' (ἔνδοξος γένηται §7), and, at the end of the *Life*, news of Aesop's unjust death has travelled far and wide, both on earth and in heaven (§142). All of this suggests that the 'pride comes before a fall' moral is neither fitting nor suitable as a moral for the *Life*.

An alternative reading of the *Life* is that Aesop is not hubristic at all. Rather, Aesop delivers harsh (yet warranted) criticism of those in power: Aesop challenges Zenas because he is a cruel overseer (§9); he ridicules

19 On the story as familiar see Robertson (2003) 259.

20 For similar stories about the alleged theft of a golden cup see Gen 42:25–38 and Apul. *Met.* 9.9–10: discussion in Pervo (1998) 79 n.14.

21 See Callim. *Ia.* 1 (fr. 191.27) and *Ia.* 2 (fr. 192.15–18).

22 *POxy.* 1800: Test. 25 in Perry (1952).

23 Contra Winkler (1985) 286.

24 On the depiction of Isis as a saviour see Winkler (1985) 278 and as a healing goddess see Hunter (2007) 43–4.

25 Piety and rusticity are also motifs for the Philostratean Aesop: see Miles and Demoen (2009) 40.

26 The term used to describe Aesop's slighting of Apollo is ἀτιμία not ὕβρις (§127).

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Xanthus because he is an intellectual fop (§36); he reveals the Pharaoh Nectanebo to be avaricious and petty (§117–23)[27]; and he takes issue with Apollo and the priests of Delphi because they are unduly proud and self-serving (§33, 127). As for the end of the *Life*, the author does not necessarily want us to nod our heads with approval at the 'fall of Aesop' or to conclude that he deserved to die. Rather, we are encouraged to feel a great deal of respect for Aesop's truthfulness, sympathy for his tragic death, and a shared sense of retribution in Delphi's punishment.[28] In support of this reading, it is notable that the author takes every opportunity to emphasise the wrong-doing of the Delphians, including failing to show gratitude and proper hospitality (§124), engaging in dishonest subterfuge (§127), denying proper burial rites (§132), and refusing sanctuary (§134). Ultimately, Aesop's prophecies of doom for Delphi are fulfilled to the letter and Delphi pays a hefty price for executing an innocent man (§142). Aesop, on the other hand, wins everlasting fame and a reputation for great wisdom.

This reading requires a radical shift in our perspective on Aesop's life and death. It entails reading the ending of the *Life* not as punishment of Aesop's hubris but as a masterstroke of revenge upon powerful enemies.[29] To this end, Aesop's telling of the fable of the dung beetle, hare, and eagle is crucially important because it points to the moral of the *Life* as a whole.[30] Yet, as we shall see, interpreting this fable is by no means straightforward. We must convincingly resolve the following difficult questions: who is symbolised by the dung beetle, the hare, and the eagle in Aesop's retelling of the fable; what is the analogical argument[31] that is being made; and what is the moral of the *Life* as a whole? In order to fully answer these questions, I will examine a) how the fable has been employed elsewhere in surviving Greek literature and b) how the characters in the fable are analogous to those in the *Life*.

II

The fable of the dung beetle has been described as a quintessentially Aesopic fable.[32] The dung beetle makes several appearances in ancient Greek literature (particularly iambic poetry), but the Aesopic fable of the dung beetle (literally) rose to stardom in Aristophanes' *Peace* (127–34).[33] In this play,

27 Konstantakos (2010b) 103.

28 See Kurke (2011) 189 and Compton (1990) 333. Contra views of Aesop as the 'loser' in Hansen (1998) 109; Hopkins (1993) 25; and Adrados (1979) 95.

29 Jedrkiewicz (2009a) 154.

30 For discussion of the carefully considered use of fable in the *Life* see van Dijk (1996) 535 and Konstantakos (2010a) 280.

31 Hunt (2009) 379.

32 See Jouanno (2011) 115; Kurke (2011) 7.

33 In two iambic trimeters, Semonides (fr. 13W) refers to the beetle as τὸ ζώϊον κάκιστον κέκτηται βίον ('having the worst life of all living things'). Dung beetles also feature in two fragmentary poems of Hipponax (frr. 78 and 92W). For the strong link between the

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the rustic hero Trygaeus mounts a giant dung beetle and announces that he will ride it to heaven because, according to the fables of Aesop, the dung beetle was the only winged creature that reached the realm of the gods (Ar. *Pax* 129–30). It did so 'because it was at feud with an eagle, on whom it was taking revenge by rolling eggs out of its nests' (Ar. *Pax* 133–4).[34] In the play, Aristophanes extracts full comic value out of the dung beetle's hideous physical appearance, its coprophagic habits, and its unpleasant odour.[35] Ultimately, however, Trygaeus flies up to heaven to demand an end to the war – just as the dung beetle in the fable calls upon Zeus to punish the eagle. In both cases, Zeus is forced to pay heed to the dung beetle's complaints. Ultimately, the dung beetle is awarded a new role in heaven (as the bearer of Zeus' thunderbolt), which is a type of apotheosis and 'heroic divinization'.[36]

The beetle had made a briefer appearance a year earlier when, in Aristophanes' *Wasps* (1446–8), Philocleon relates how Aesop was once falsely accused of stealing a libation-bowl and Aesop responded by telling the Delphians a fable.[37] Philocleon compares himself to the innocent Aesop/dung beetle and, by analogy, claims that he is being falsely accused of theft, battery, and assault. In turn, he compares Bdelycleon to the Delphians who caused Aesop's death. Bdelycleon recognises the allusion to the fable and interrupts his father's storytelling, saying: 'You'll be the death of me, dammit, you and your beetles!'[38] The comedy lies in Philocleon's use of the fable as a stalling tactic, his false claim of innocence, and the implication that there will be divine vengeance upon his son, just as the dung beetle successfully achieved divine vengeance against the eagle.[39]

The fable makes another appearance in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (695) when a member of the chorus of women warns a man not to touch her, saying: 'I'll midwife you as the beetle did the breeding eagle!'[40] The woman compares herself to the fable's heroic dung beetle, while the reference to midwifery is sarcastic, since the dung beetle certainly caused the eagle's eggs to hatch (albeit prematurely and with destructive violence).[41]

Aesopic fable of the dung beetle and the role assumed by the iambic poet see Steiner (2008) and Hawkins (2014) 90. On this fable also see Adrados (2003) 6–8.

34 Translation by Sommerstein in van Dijk (1997) 204.

35 See Tordoff (2011).

36 Van Dijk (1997) 209.

37 The motive for the accusation of theft is explained in the scholion to *Wasps* 1446: Test. 21 in Perry (1952). Aesop apparently jeered at the Delphians because they were entirely dependent upon sacrifices to Apollo for their welfare. The Delphians were offended and falsely accused Aesop of *hierosylia*. The scholion to Callimachus has Aesop recite the dung beetle fable before the Delphians stone him or throw him from the cliff. See Schol. ad Callimachi iambos in *PSI* 1094 (Test. 26 in Perry 1952).

38 Translation by Sommerstein in van Dijk (1997) 195.

39 Stalling tactic: duBois (2003) 180; false claim: Pertsinidis (2009) 216.

40 Translation by Sommerstein in van Dijk (1997) 216.

41 See van Dijk (1997) 217–18.

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A full version of the fable appears in the *Augustana* fable collection from the first or second centuries AD.[42] The fable is told as follows:

> An eagle chased a hare. The hare, having no one to help him, saw a beetle, the only creature that the circumstances offered to him as a helper, and supplicated him. The beetle encouraged him, and when he saw an eagle approaching, he begged the eagle not to carry off his suppliant. The eagle, however, scorned the beetle's small size and devoured the hare before the beetle's eyes. Since that incident, the beetle was resentful and kept watching the eagle's nest and, whenever she laid eggs, it would fly up, roll the eggs out of the nest and smash them. This went on until the eagle, being driven away from every place, took refuge with Zeus – for the bird is sacred to him – and begged him to provide her a safe place to give birth. As Zeus let her lay her eggs in his lap, the beetle saw this, made a ball of dung, flew up and when he arrived at Zeus' lap he dropped it in there. Zeus wanted to shake off the dung, but as he got up he accidentally threw the eggs out. Since then it is said that eagles do not lay eggs during the time that the beetles are around.[43]

The epimythium reads:

> The fable teaches not to despise anyone, remembering that no one is so weak as to be unable to avenge himself when abused.[44]

It is notable that this epimythium is sympathetic to the weaker party (that is, the dung beetle) and that there is no suggestion of hubris on the part of the dung beetle. It is also notable that there is a third figure – the hare – in this version of the fable.

The version of the fable told by Aesop in the *Life* is considerably longer than any of the versions so far described (it occupies six sections of the *Vita G*, §§134–9). Aesop relates the fable as the Delphians try to drag him away from the shrine of the Muses. In large part, this version of the fable is the same as the *Augustana* version although there is special emphasis on the dung beetle's revenge.[45] The dung beetle is ever watchful as it seeks out opportunities to destroy the eagle's eggs. In desperation, the eagle deposits its eggs with Zeus. The dung beetle crafts a ball of dung and flies around Zeus' head prompting the god to jump up from his seat and the eggs to fall from his lap and smash on the ground. When Zeus learns of the eagle's behaviour, Zeus admonishes the eagle for its wrongdoing, saying: 'You deserved to lose your eggs, for you have wronged the dung-beetle' (τὸν κάνθαρον ἀδικήσας §138) but the dung beetle is not satisfied with this

42 Zafiropoulos (2001) 23.

43 Text in Perry 3; translation from Zafiropoulos (2001) 130. The fable serves an aetiological purpose: to explain the differences in nesting season between dung beetles and eagles. This aetiology is entirely fictional: see Nøjgaard (1964) 427.

44 Text in Perry 3; translation from Zafiropoulos (2001) 131 n.101.

45 Von Möllendorff (1994) 143.

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admonition and it argues for a more drastic penalty. The dung beetle says to Zeus: 'Not only has she wronged me, but she has been very impious toward you as well. I had adjured her in your name, but she was unconcerned and killed the one who sought my protection. I will never stop until I have punished her to the fullest extent' (§138). Zeus tries to persuade the dung beetle to reconcile but the tiny insect is intransigent.[46] Zeus must change the nesting season of the eagle.[47] In keeping with the epimythium of the *Augustana* version, Aesop tells the fable as a warning that the small and weak may yet seek revenge. He says: 'In the same way, men of Delphi, you should not despise this temple where I have taken refuge, even though it is a small shrine, but remember the dung-beetle, and revere Zeus, the god of strangers and Olympus' (§139).

This survey of existing references to the fable reveals that the dung beetle is always victorious, heroic, and ferocious in its tenacity. The important differences are that, firstly, the author of the *Life* places special emphasis on the dung beetle's revenge, and secondly, the figure of the hare has been introduced into the fable. The epimythium that Aesop supplies in the *Life* is entirely consistent with the epimythium that is most often associated with this fable, namely that 'even the weakest may find a means to avenge a wrong'.[48] Thus, it is reasonable to assume that if the dung beetle fable points to the moral of the *Life* as a whole, there must be some equivalency between the figures of the *Life* and the figures of the fable. The question is then, who in the *Life* represents the dung beetle, who is the eagle, and who, in particular, is the hare?

III

In the *Life*, Aesop is described as having an exceedingly ugly appearance.[49] The *Life* says:

> κακοπινὴς τὸ ἰδέσθαι †εἰς ὑπηρεσίαν†, σαπρός, προγάστωρ, προκέφαλος, σιμός, λορδός, μέλας, κολοβός, βλαισός, γαλιάγκων, στρεβλός, μυστάκων, †προσμηπαῖος† ἁμάρτημα…
>
> *Life of Aesop* §1

> [h]e was truly horrible to behold: worthless, pot-bellied, slant-headed, snub-nosed, hunchbacked, leather-skinned, club-footed, knock-kneed, short-armed, sleepy-eyed, bushy-lipped – in short, an absolute miscreant.

46 The dung beetle's intransigence is motivated by injustice. It is not, as Nøjgaard (1964) 257 says, 'vengeance irrationnelle'.

47 Von Möllendorff (1994) 143.

48 See van Dijk (1997) 150.

49 On the traditions surrounding Aesop's ugly appearance see Lefkowitz (2008). For discussion of Aesop and the Vulci cup see Kurke (2011) 224–9 and duBois (2003) 170–1. On Aesop's deformity as essential to the tradition see Winkler (1985) 287–8.

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This is a highly unusual physical description for a human.[50] Yet, if a likeness is being drawn between Aesop and a dung beetle, the description matches well in every respect. The dung beetle is small, with a rounded abdomen, a curved head with a frontal horn, a pronotum (with a protruding lobe reminiscent of a hunchback), ribbed wing covers (*elytrons*) which are often dark brown or black in colour, short forelegs, bent hind legs, tiny compound eyes, and hairy mouthparts.

In the early sections of the *Life*, Aesop is beetle-like in his activities and his muteness. Like the proverbial dung beetle that lives in the earth and feeds on animal manure, the slave Aesop digs in the fields with only humble fare to sustain him.[51] Like the dung beetle that is notorious for rolling balls of dung repeatedly up and down a slope, Aesop behaves like a dung beetle, carrying an enormous basket of bread upon his back, then pulling the basket to the top of a hill with his teeth and rolling the basket down the other side while riding on top (§19).[52] Crucially, Aesop is also beetle-like in his initial muteness. The author of the *Life* emphasises Aesop's lack of speech: 'he was dumb and could not utter a word' (ἦν δὲ καὶ νωδὸς καὶ οὐδὲν ἠδύνατο λαλεῖν §1).[53] If Aesop wants to communicate, he must rely on animal-like methods, such as gesture (§§ 3, 4) or the expulsion of vomit (§3). Later in the *Life*, Aesop compares himself to a small insect that utters wise sayings (§99).[54]

In gratitude for his kindness and piety, Isis rewards Aesop with the power of speech.[55] While Aesop is asleep, Isis appears with the nine Muses (§7), miraculously removes Aesop's speech impediment and persuades each of the Muses to grant him a gift, namely, the 'power to compose and elaborate Greek tales' (λόγων εὕρεμα καὶ μύθων Ἑλληνικῶν πλοκὴν καὶ ποιήσεις §7).[56] The goddess then prays that Aesop will achieve fame, and she departs.[57] When Aesop awakes, he suddenly realises that he can speak (§8).[58] He reasons

[50] See Hägg (2012) 102 and Watson (2010) 701. For some similarities with Thersites in Homer's *Iliad* see Hägg (2012) 102–3.

[51] Steiner (2012) 35.

[52] Jouanno (2011) 116.

[53] Or more precisely 'inarticulate and unable to speak well': for discussion of this phrase see Dillery (1999) 278.

[54] On Aesop comparing himself to various animals see Jouanno (2009) 43, 46.

[55] On similarities between these episodes and Book 11 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* see Robertson (2003) 251–3. On Isis as the god responsible for language see Dillery (1999) 271–4 and Hunter (2007) 41–2.

[56] On similar visitations by the Muses to Archilochus and Hesiod see Robertson (2003) 255, Hägg (2012) 115 and Jedrkiewicz (2009b) 177.

[57] Xanthus scolds Aesop for 'uttering blasphemy' and questions whether he is 'able to ascend Mount Helicon, where the Muses hold forth?' (§36). The irony is that Aesop effectively can claim to have ascended Helicon, owing to the divine gifts he has received directly from the Muses.

[58] Aesop names the objects around him much like Adam in Genesis, 2.19–20. On the possibility of this scene referring to the child-like development of speech see Hunter (2007) 49.

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that it must be a reward for his piety and exclaims: 'Surely it is a good thing to be pious! No doubt I can expect to receive even more rewards from the gods!' (§8).[59] From this point onwards, Aesop has a new and divine prerogative. He has been given the extraordinary gift of the *heuresilogos* ('one who finds the right words or stories') and the *logopoios* ('storyteller').[60] Aesop, just like the dung beetle, will work to form well-rounded, polished creations made of simple and homely materials.

Just as the dung beetle is unpleasant to behold but is highly intelligent and capable, Aesop proves to be a living paradox: he is monstrous to look at but gifted in wit and wisdom.[61] Aesop is continually referred to as 'rotten' (σαπρός §§2, 10, 16, 23, 29, 33, 37). He is likened to 'a specimen of human garbage' (τὸ ἑπτάμορφον ἀπόμαγμα §14) and 'human refuse' (κάθαρμα §§30, 69). Horrified by Aesop's appearance, a slave-dealer declares: 'Is this a man or a turnip? If he did not speak, I would have said he was a pot or a jar or a goose egg' (§14). As individuals realise Aesop's wisdom, however, they are forced to admit that he is 'short on looks [but] long on brains' (§19), that he is a 'true Demosthenes' (§32) and that he is 'marvellous' (μακάριος §25). Later he is hailed as a 'true prophet' (ἀληθινὸν μάντιν §93), as wiser than others (§§96, 123), and as a 'beacon of hope for all people forever' (εἰς φῶς γλυκὺ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις δι' αἰῶνος §107). It is notable that κάνθαρος has a double meaning as both 'beetle' and 'wine-cup', and that Aesop embodies this paradox: he is beetle-like in his appearance but more than once compares himself to an ugly wine jar that contains delicious wine (§26, 88).

It is also notable that Aesop, in the manner of a dung beetle, is unashamedly preoccupied with scatological matters. For example, Aesop worries that his new master Xanthus, who likes to urinate while he walks, will expect Aesop to defecate whilst flying (πετόμενον χέζειν §28); Aesop is able to explain, better than anyone else, why it is that we turn around to examine our faeces after we defecate (for fear that we have lost our wits, §67); Aesop causes Xanthus and his guests to contract diarrhoea by serving them only tongues for dinner (§§51–3); and Aesop delights in publicly exposing the rear end and 'eyes' of Xanthus' wife while she is asleep (§77a).[62] Aesop's preoccupation

[59] On the worship of Isis in popular religion see Karla (2016) 61 n.60. For a detailed analysis of this section as an Isis initiation scene see Karla (2014) 84–91.

[60] Hägg (2012) 116.

[61] For similarities with Socrates who was likened 'to a Silenus statue hiding the effigy of a god (cf. *Aesop* 26, 87)' see Hägg (2012) 105. See also Jouanno (2009) 44 and Ruiz-Montero (2014) 266–7. For other similarities with Socrates see Compton (1990); Jedrkiewicz (1990–92) 122–6; Schauer and Merkle (1992) and duBois (2003) 181–2. On antithesis in the *Life* generally see Karla (2016) 54.

[62] Also see §32 and §76. On the links between scatology in the *Life* and Old Comedy see Goins (1989) and Jouanno (2005) 401–2. On traces of Cynic philosophy (and similarities with Diogenes of Sinope) see Adrados (1999) 677–81 and Jedrkiewicz (1990–92) 122–6. For similarities with adultery tales see Konstantakos (2006) 577.

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with scatological matters is certainly reminiscent of the dung beetle's keen interest in manure.[63]

Just as the balls of dung created by the dung beetle are rich in nutrients but also rather off-putting,[64] Aesop's speech is carefully crafted and useful to some but highly offensive to others. Aesop uses his complete freedom of speech (an extreme form of παρρησία) to call out injustice (§9); to label masters as slaves and slaves as masters (§§13, 126); to deliberately misinterpret thoughtless, mundane questions (§25); and to ridicule the imprecise use of language (§§38–41). Aesop's criticisms are useful and amusing to those who are lower down in the social hierarchy, such as slaves and students, but they are deeply offensive to those who belong to the higher echelons of society. While Aesop argues that he is very useful as an averter of evil (§14), for example, his overseer Zenas complains that as soon as Aesop began to speak, he started uttering 'inhuman things' (λαλεῖν γὰρ ἀρξάμενος πάντα ὑπὲρ ἀνθρωπίνην φύσιν φθέγγεται §10).

The analogy with the dung beetle takes on even greater significance when Aesop reaches Delphi. After the Delphians falsely accuse Aesop of *hierosylia*, Aesop takes refuge in the small shrine of the Muses. According to Steiner, the smallness of the dung beetle in the fable echoes the small shrine of the Muses, while the grand eagle mirrors the 'grandiose temple of Apollo'.[65] Just like the dung beetle in the fable, Aesop (once wronged) is tenacious and unforgiving. The dung beetle mercilessly follows the eagle and destroys its eggs three times.[66] Similarly, Aesop's death brings three disasters upon the Delphians: famine, payment of compensation, and war. Like the dung beetle that uses a great ball of dung to shock Zeus into paying attention to its appeal, putting a piece of the lowliest, earthly matter (literally) in front of the nose of the supreme Olympian god, Zeus cannot ignore ugly little Aesop's claim for justice and he orders the Delphians to expiate the death of Aesop.[67] Zeus finally achieves peace by enforcing a new and permanent separation between Aesopic wisdom (represented by the dung beetle) and the ruthlessness of power (represented by the eagle).[68]

So far, we have established some strong parallels between Aesop and the dung beetle. As for the eagle, the analogy with Apollo (and the Delphians) may seem obvious.[69] The eagle is, after all, a 'superior, top-rank bird as

[63] Aesop uses bodily excretions for specific purposes: he vomits in order to prove that he did not eat some stolen figs (§3) and he masturbates openly in order to attract the attention of Xanthus' wife, to cuckold Xanthus and ultimately to win himself a shirt (§75–6). The masturbation episode does not appear in the *Vita G.* It was probably removed in an act of censorship: see Hägg (2012) 108.

[64] Steiner (2012) 35.

[65] Steiner (2012) 29. On the history of the shrine of the Muses at Delphi see Parke (1981) 108.

[66] Zafiropoulos (2001) 131.

[67] On the significance of the oracle from Zeus see Kurke (2003) 86.

[68] For a different interpretation see Robertson (2003) 257–8.

[69] Steiner (2012) 32.

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indicated by its close relationship with Zeus', just as Apollo is the son of Zeus.[70] Even so, there are several references to eagles throughout the *Life* that are worth a closer look.

In §81 of the *Life*, the Samians are deliberating over who should assume the official title of law-keeper when an eagle suddenly swoops down, snatches the official ring of the city, and flies away. The eagle later returns and drops the ring into the lap of a public slave (§82). The Samians resolve to call a seer or priest to interpret the omen when an elderly man suggests that it would be preferable to seek advice from a wise person rather than consulting 'men who fill their bellies with the cult offerings' (§81). Here we have a clear statement of opposition between those who hold official titles and those with 'real *sophia*'. Aesop agrees to interpret the omen but he does so only after clarifying that he is not a seer (οὔτε γάρ εἰμι μάντις §84).[71] Aesop's interpretation gives due recognition to the eagle as 'the king of birds, stronger than all the others' (§91) but he then interprets the eagle's conduct as an omen of war and enslavement (§91). In the immediate context, Aesop's interpretation proves accurate because an ambassador from Lydia appears and tries to 'enslave' the Samians by demanding tribute and taxes. In a broader sense, however, Aesop's interpretation implies that deference to Apollo (symbolised by the eagle) leads to enslavement.[72]

If this seems like rather harsh criticism of Apollo, we need only examine Aesop's equally harsh criticisms of Apollo elsewhere in the *Life*. In §33, Aesop is asked to explain the occurrence of false dreams. Aesop does so by telling an aetiological fable: when Apollo became too proud of his prophetic gifts, Zeus punished him by allowing men to accurately see the future in their dreams. When Apollo subsequently begged Zeus for forgiveness, Zeus restored the balance by creating false dreams, which confuse men and prompt them to once again seek Apollo's guidance.[73] In telling this fable, Aesop undermines Apollo in several ways: he presents Apollo as an arrogant upstart, he shows that there are avenues for prophecy aside from Apollo, and he reminds the audience that even Apollo himself is subject to Zeus' authority. Aesop later indicates that he does not think much of Apolline bird-omens describing them as 'useless' (εἰς μάτην §77).[74]

Another important episode involving eagles occurs in §111 of the *Life* when the Pharaoh Nectanebo challenges King Lycurgus (and his advisor Aesop) to build a tower that touches neither heaven nor earth. Aesop captures four eagles, plucks out the last row of tail feathers, attaches cords to

[70] Steiner (2012) 29.

[71] See Kurke (2011) 198.

[72] This may also be a portent of the future justice for Aesop since the eagle (Apollo) will have to defer to a public slave (Aesop) eventually. On the kairotic aspects of this episode see Jennings (2016) 205.

[73] A similar story is told in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1259–83): see Roberston (2003) 263.

[74] '[B]irds are mantic Apollos for humans': see Jennings (2016) 204.

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them as reins and trains them to carry jockeys on their backs. In doing so, Aesop reduces the supreme eagle to a degraded race-track animal, simultaneously downgrading Apollo's status and elevating the roles of ordinary men in order to create a new race of 'winged men' (πτηνοὺς ἀνθρώπους §116). When Aesop displays his 'winged men' to Nectanebo, the pharaoh is astonished. Aesop's ability to turn ordinary folk into 'winged men' may be interpreted as an allusion to Aesop's ability to equip men with wisdom and wit, a feat that is achieved at the expense of Apollo![75] No wonder then, that when Aesop returns triumphantly to Babylon, King Lycurgus erects a golden statue of him with the Muses (in effect, replacing Apollo with Aesop §123). Apollo has, quite simply, become redundant.

None of this bodes well for Aesop's relationship with Apollo. At §100, Aesop erects a shrine to the Muses along with a statue of himself instead of Apollo (οὐκ Ἀπόλλωνος). This is said to provoke Apollo's anger in the manner of his wrath with Marsyas: ὁ Ἀπόλλων ὠργίσθη αὐτῷ ὡς τῷ Μαρσύᾳ.[76] The reference to Marsyas is full of symbolism and it anticipates a bad end for Aesop.[77] Pervo regards Aesop as entering into a dangerous Marsyas-style ἀγών with Apollo, from which we learn that '[t]he ugly asiatic marsyases of this world will be torn to pieces by its apollos'.[78]

Yet, Aesop is not the only one who has a problematic relationship with Apollo and again one suspects that Aesop's criticism of Apollo is perhaps not so much hubristic as it is justified.[79] Zeus is said to have punished Apollo for his arrogance in the fable told at §77, and in the fable of the dung beetle, the hare and the eagle, Zeus also puts the eagle in its place. When Zeus learns of the eagle's mistreatment of the dung beetle, we recall that Zeus reprimands the eagle and that, furthermore, Zeus' final solution negatively impacts the eagle, not the dung beetle (§139). All of this suggests that Zeus is justifiably concerned to keep Apollo in check.[80]

The analogy between Apollo and the eagle extends further to the Delphians as the representatives of Apollo on earth.[81] In particular, it is

75 A perfect example of a winged man is Trygaeus in Ar. *Pax* 127–34 (discussed above).

76 Conflict with Apollo is not mentioned in the *Vita W.* Ferrari argues that this is a late addition to the *Vita G*: see Ferrari (1997) 12–20 and Kurke (2011) 36–8.

77 Marsyas was reputedly a Phrygian, like Aesop: Hägg (2012) 109. Marsyas challenged Apollo in musical performance and the god defeated him by means of a trick: see Jedrkiewicz (2009b) 190. After his death, Marsyas' hide was apparently made into a wineskin, a container with which Aesop often compares himself: see Kurke (2011) 337–8. Also see Jouanno (2006) 45–6 and von Möllendorff (1994) 157–9. According to Perry (1936) 15 'the Phrygian Aesop, like the Phrygian Marsyas in the ancient myth, is a champion of the native talent of the common folk as opposed to the formal learning of the aristocrats and academicians whose god is Apollo'.

78 Pervo (1998) 111.

79 See Robertson (2003) 264.

80 See the fable of Zeus and Apollo, in which Apollo arrogantly challenges Zeus to an archery contest which Zeus all too easily wins: fable 104 in Perry (1952).

81 On the people of Delphi as synonymous with Apollo see Kurke (2003) 81.

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said in the *Life* that Apollo was angry with Aesop and that the Delphians planted the cup in his baggage (§127).[82] To this end, and given Aesop's animosity toward Apollo (and vice versa) it seems paradoxical that Aesop wanted to visit Delphi at all (§124). Did Aesop know that he was putting himself in danger and was he, in effect, 'throwing down the gauntlet before Apollo's face'?[83] At §94, for example, he appeared to prophesy his own death when he talked about the life of a slave 'ending in a narrow path, rugged, with sheer cliffs'. In addition, when he is accused of stealing the cup, he bravely says, 'Let me die if I am found guilty of any such charge' (§128).[84] If Aesop does anticipate his own end at Delphi, this certainly does not prevent him from harshly criticising the Delphians. Aesop compares the Delphians to the leaves of the trees,[85] then to worthless driftwood (§125), and finally to the offspring of slaves (§126) because they live off spoils of war sent by the Greeks.[86] In the last four fables told by Aesop, he likens the Delphians to murderers, practitioners of bestiality and incest, and brute rapists.[87]

As Kurke has persuasively demonstrated, Aesop's criticisms of Delphi are not only specific to his own circumstances, they are also representative of a wider critique of 'problematic Delphic practices'.[88] Aesop calls into question the authority of the Delphic priests and Apollo because the Delphians had become synonymous with 'greed and rapacity'.[89] This picture fits well with the rapacious behaviour of the eagle in the dung beetle fable: it snatches a vulnerable suppliant hare from the home of another, tears it to shreds, and devours it in front of the helpless beetle. The eagle should be moved by the dung beetle's plea (especially given that the hare is a suppliant) but the eagle is a slave to its primal instincts.[90] Aesop implies that slavishness to greed begets a violent nature, which shows no mercy for the victim and no respect for Zeus. Despite Aesop's telling of the fable, the Delphians drag Aesop from the shrine of the Muses and lead him to the edge of the cliff. This is as violent and ruthless as the eagle's treatment of the dung beetle in the fable when 'the eagle knocked over the beetle with

82 Aristophanes alludes to this episode in *Vesp.* 1446 = Test. 20 in Perry (1952). There are also pronounced similarities with the story of Joseph's cup in Genesis 44. For discussion of the precise wording in this section see Papademetriou (1980) 34–6.

83 Pervo (1998) 110; see also Andreassi (2015) 159–60.

84 For a different reading (with Aesop 'trembling' in the face of death) see Pervo (1998) 120.

85 Quoting from Hom. *Il.* 6.146.

86 It is paradoxical that Aesop, a former slave who is now a freedman, is criticising the Delphians for being slaves. See Kurke (2003) 87. On this criticism as the cause of Aesop's death see Nagy (1979) 283–4; also Hägg (2012) 115.

87 See van Dijk (1996) 535.

88 These practices involved greed, rapacity and preferencing of the elite: see Kurke (2003) 80–1.

89 Kurke (2003) 80.

90 See Zafiropoulos (2001) 131.

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her wing' (ὁ δὲ ἀετὸς τῇ πτέρυγι τὸν κάνθαρον ῥαπίσας §135). The Delphic priests are only concerned to maintain their reputation and their monopoly on power.[91]

On the edge of the cliff, Aesop curses the Delphians and calls on Apollo as head of the Muses to witness his unjust death.[92] It is unlikely that, at this late stage, after all his criticisms of the god, Aesop is calling on Apollo for help. Rather, Aesop appears to be calling the god to take responsibility for his imminent death,[93] just as the dung beetle will call the eagle to account before Zeus. Aesop then throws himself over the cliff (ἔρριψεν ἑαυτὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ κρημνοῦ κάτω §142).

If we are correct in our reading of the *Life* so far, and Aesop is the dung beetle, and Apollo/Delphi is represented by the eagle then who, precisely, is represented by the hare? The hare in the fable, despite being much larger and stronger than the beetle, supplicates the dung beetle out of desperation and necessity. It is then mercilessly torn to shreds by the eagle. As Steiner has observed, the beetle brings disaster for the eagle, just as Aesop does for Delphi, but the hare is 'the more immediate and obvious victim. It undergoes the sacrilegious death that is Aesop's own fate and suffers the rapacity of the aggressor'.[94] Steiner therefore suggests that the hare may be Aesop.[95] But if Aesop is the hare, then who is the dung beetle? This is van Dijk's solution: Aesop is the hare, the Delphians are the eagle, and his 'future revengers (Greece, Babylon and Samos) are the dungbeetle'.[96] The problem with this interpretation is that it ends up assigning the rather unfortunate characteristics of the dung beetle to different and multiple avengers (the Greeks, Babylonians, and Samians).[97]

The best solution is that Aesop is a composite of the hare and the dung beetle.[98] The hare could be said to represent Aesop's weak mortal self (which is physically torn apart by the eagle/Apollo), and the dung beetle his tenacious and immortal spirit (that part of Aesop that was bestowed upon him by the Muses, journeys to heaven and survives long after his death).

[91] For a different (tamer) account of the source of the conflict between Aesop and the Delphians see Plut. *De sera* 12, 556f. = Test. 24 in Perry (1952); discussion in Kurke (2003) 93–4.

[92] There is some debate as to whether Aesop is calling on Apollo or Isis as head of the Muses: see Compton (2006) 36, Robertson (2003) 264, Dillery (1999) 280, Finkelpearl (2003) 46–7, Hunter (2007) 44 and Karla (2014) 96. Kurke argues that Aesop's characterisation of Apollo as 'leader' (προστάτης) mirrors Aesop's earlier criticisms of his overseer at §13: see Kurke (2003) 84 and Kurke (2011) 200.

[93] See Jedrkiewicz (2009a) 152–3.

[94] Steiner (2012) 32.

[95] Steiner (2012) 32.

[96] van Dijk (1996) 534 and (1997) 196.

[97] See Jouanno (2011) 115. We run into a similar problem if we regard the dung beetle as representing the Muses: see von Möllendorff (1994) 143 and La Penna (1962) 279.

[98] Steiner (2012) 32.

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In support of the view that there are two elements to Aesop – the mortal and immortal – we need only examine the many stories about the soul of Aesop as well as his resurrection.[99] Furthermore, this view of Aesop's dualistic nature fits well with the paradoxes we have observed about him elsewhere in the *Life*:[100] Aesop is a physical monstrosity but he is eminently good and pious (§26); although a slave in status (§13), he is freer in his thinking and his speech than his social superiors (§36); although he is worthless in worldly terms (three obols §15) he is priceless in terms of his moral value for humanity (§1); although he is seemingly powerless, he has the ability to move the highest god in the cosmos (§142); and although he is vulnerable as a mortal, he achieves a longstanding reputation as a fabulist (§1). Thus, the mortal part of Aesop (the hare) dies, to be sure, but the heroic part (the dung beetle) does not. The immortal Aesop succeeds in achieving divine justice for the hare and punishment for the eagle. In this way, the immortal part of Aesop – that is, his reputation as a fabulist – lives on as testimony to the truth and value of fable.

If, as a mortal, Aesop is vulnerable to being attacked by the likes of Apollo, who is out to extract (literally) sacrificial meat from him, then the metafable of the *Life* demonstrates that one of the only ways to grapple with the brutality of power is to seek refuge in the divine wisdom of the Muses/Aesop, thereby gaining a powerful and tenacious ally. At a more general level, then, the *Life* invites us to view Aesop's fables as a powerful resource and ally *for ourselves.*[101] In the fable, the dung beetle pleads with the eagle to spare the hare (representing a vulnerable mortal). This reminds us of Aesop's many acts as an intercessor for vulnerable mortals in the *Life*, such as when Aesop pleaded with Zenas not to mercilessly beat an innocent slave (§9) or when Aesop pleaded with King Croesus to spare the Samians (§98–9). Surely then Aesop may act as an intercessor on our behalf in speaking 'truth to power'? As Aesop says: 'do I not also have the power of speech, granted to me by the gods? The master will come soon, and I shall condemn the overseer and have him removed from his position' (§13). Aesop's fables therefore become an enduring and empowering weapon against the powerful and unjust.

In scholarly literature, the explanation given for Aesop's failure to persuade the Delphians is said to be that Aesop has lost his skill as a *logopoios.*[102] In my view, however, Aesop's failure to persuade the Delphians is not because of a sudden deficiency on Aesop's part but because there is

[99] See Test. 45–8 in Perry (1952). The story of Aesop's resurrection is mentioned in Plato Com. fr. 70A and Phot. *Bibl.* 152b, 11–13; discussion in Pervo (1998) 118; Andreassi (2015) 164 n. 64; Karla (2016) 56. There is also a notable parallel with Ahikar's false death and return to life: Adrados (1979) 103.

[100] See Konstantakos (2010a) 281.

[101] On identifying with Aesop see Karla (2016) 59 and Jouanno (2009) 46–7.

[102] See van Dijk (1996) 541; Pervo (1998) 120; Hägg (2012) 111.

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no 'better nature' to which Aesop can direct his appeal. Hitherto in the *Life*, Aesop had been vindicated of all false charges: the slave-master realises that he did not steal the figs at §3; the governor releases him from jail at §65; the Samians decide to keep him at §98; and King Lycurgus laments the supposed loss of him at §106. At Delphi, Aesop confronts an opponent who does not speak the language of truth, fear, pity, ethics, justice, or wisdom. He fearlessly hurls fable after fable at his aggressors and still they persist with their plan of violence. At this point in the *Life*, Aesop has not lost his storytelling ability: quite the opposite. The closely packed sequence of fables told by Aesop represent the climax of the *Life*. These powerful stories unmistakably present Aesop as innocent and the Delphians as unjust and dishonest.

When speech fails to persuade, the immortal (dung beetle) part of Aesop wreaks havoc on the natural order by appealing to a higher authority to exact justice. Aesop achieves this by administering a 'shock': literally forcing the supreme god Zeus to pay attention to him even though he is a seemingly small and insignificant creature. Using his full powers of creativity and intelligence, Aesop (as the dung beetle) engages in an act of *poiēsis*, conveying a homely substance to the highest levels of heaven in the pursuit of justice.[103] In the same way, Aesop's homely stories convey powerful truths that resonate on earth (in relationships between humans) and in heaven (in relationships between humans and gods) literally forcing Zeus to take action as arbiter of justice and protector of the weak. Contrary to the views of some, therefore, Aesop (as an embodiment of wisdom) does prove to be an effective weapon against excesses of power. Thanks to Aesop's insistence, Zeus puts Apollo/the Delphians back in their place, just as Aesop systematically outwits and belittles Zenas, Xanthus, Croesus, Lycurgus, Helios, and Nectanebo in the *Life*. In doing so, Aesop performs a great service for humanity, proving that one should never underestimate a seemingly weak, powerless, and insignificant man.

As we have seen, the 'pride comes before a fall' moral does not work since Aesop is not proud and there is no 'fall'. In contrast, the moral that is usually associated with the fable of the dung beetle, the hare, and the eagle is that 'even the weakest may find a means to avenge a wrong'. This moral fits much better with the *Life* because, despite his apparent insignificance, Aesop achieves justice and retribution against the Delphians through his own tenacity and finally, through an appeal to Zeus himself.[104]

[103] Steiner (2012) 35.

[104] For similarities with other popular heroes like Lucius, Encolpius, and Homer see Adrados (1979) 102. This moral also complements the shorter lessons that are dotted throughout the life such as the lesson stated at §3 ('A person who connives an evil scheme against another will often find later that he has brought it upon himself); the lesson at §97 ('the lesson of this fable is that you should not so readily hand over people who contribute to your welfare') and Aesop's statement at §88 ('Intelligence is judged by her words'). On the last of these see Patterson (1991) 15; Pervo (1998) 104–5, n.125

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The message that 'even the weakest may find a means to avenge a wrong' is, admittedly, a more outrageous, provocative, and subversive moral than has generally been assumed for the *Life*.[105] If Aesop, as the dung beetle, is ultimately the victor and champion and the hubristic Apollo is put back into his place, then this is not the sort of story that one would risk reading to one's slaves or have one's slave read to one's family, as Hopkins has suggested.[106] Any reader or listener who interprets the metafable of the *Life* as we have just done is unlikely to view this story as a 'fantasy' that can be given 'a short airing' and then safely locked away again. The moral of the *Life* is profoundly subversive and, if anything, it is more likely to inspire subversion than stifle it.

CONCLUSION

According to Patterson, proof of the significance of the *Life* 'can be seen in the various attempts, over time, to clean it up or reshape it to the needs of a less confrontational aesthetic'.[107] We can see these attempts in the *Vita W* (a censored version of the *Vita G*)[108] and in the 'cleaner' Byzantine version of the *Life* (in which all sexually explicit language has been removed).[109] In the *Vita W*, in particular, there is no mention of the Muses,[110] and Apollo is no longer the enemy of Aesop.[111] Arguably, these attempts to 'tone down' the *Life* are still operative, particularly in the way in which the moral of the *Life* has been read and interpreted by some scholars to date. By presenting Aesop as hubristic and his downfall as inevitable, the metafable of the *Life* has been interpreted in a way that is less confronting to those who would otherwise be unsettled by Aesop's usurpation of authority (and his overt criticism of intellectuals).[112] The problem with this reading is that it also involves a distortion of both the *Life* and death of Aesop. As Finkelpearl observes: 'Aesop has been coopted and domesticated in ways that make him seem far from the iconoclastic "grotesque outsider"'.[113]

[105] See La Penna (1961), Winkler (1985) 288–9 and Karla (2016) 49. On subversive *bioi* generally see Konstan and Walsh (2016).

[106] Hopkins (1993) 19. For similar views see Watson (2010) 714.

[107] Patterson (1991) 31.

[108] On the censoring that is evident in the *Vita W* see Pervo (1998) 80–1 and Jouanno (2006) 48–54. The adultery episode is missing from *Vita G* (except for a few sentences at the end of chapter 76): see Konstantakos (2006) 563.

[109] See Hägg (2012) 101–2, Adrados (1999) 682.

[110] Perry (1936) 14.

[111] Plutarch's version of the death of Aesop at Delphi (in his dialogue *On the Delays of Divine Vengeance*) 'entirely exculpates Apollo': for text and analysis see Kurke (2003) 93–4. See also Robertson (2003) 249.

[112] See Patterson (1991) 6. On the *Life*'s Aristophanic criticisms of the intellectually pretentious see Goins (1989) 30.

[113] Finkelpearl (2003) 38.

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The reading of the *Life* that I have adopted involves viewing Aesop as the living, enduring paradox that he truly is: grotesque, lowly and subversive on the one hand, but wise, tenacious and victorious on the other, just like the tiny dung beetle which proves to be the victor in the fable of the dung beetle and eagle. Thus, the moral of the story is that 'even the weakest may find a means to avenge a wrong'. This moral indisputably speaks truth to power and is critical of abuses of power.[114] By giving this moral message its full, proper and rightful recognition, we recover an important part of the Aesopic tradition.

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[114] On this role of fables see Clayton (2008) 183 and Zafiropoulos (2001) 41. On the intended audience of the *Life* (as both the illiterate and the erudite elite) see Karla (2016) 63–4.

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