CHAPTER THREE

UGLINESS AND VALUE IN THE LIFE OF AESOP

JEREMY B. LEFKOWITZ

1. Introduction

The representation of Aesop in the opening of the Life of Aesop reads less like a description of an historical figure than a catalogue of types of badness (Vita 6.1):

The fabulist Aesop, the great benefactor of mankind, was by chance a slave but by origin a Phrygian of Phrygia, of loathsome aspect, worthless as a servant, potbellied, misshapen of head, snub-nosed, inarticulate, swarthy, dwarfish, bandy-legged, short-armed, squint-eyed, liver-lipped—a portentous monstrosity. In addition to this he had a defect more serious than his unsightliness in being speechless, for he was dumb and could not talk. (tr. Daly)

This passage, with its exaggerated, cartoonish list of defects, introduces a man who is the near opposite of the Greek ideal of the καλός καγαθός (the Greek who is ‘both good to look at and manifests goodness in action’). Aesop is foreign (a ‘Phrygian of Phrygia’, Φυξ τῆς Φρυγίας, which seems to settle this difficulty).

---

1 Perry’s text, which I use throughout, reads ομός, σώρδος (‘i.e. surdus’) here, which poses a problem for the translator. Daly, whom I follow throughout, translates ομός (‘snub-nosed’) but omits translation of σώρδος altogether, perhaps because any sense given to σώρδος that anticipates Aesop’s ἀμάρτημα does not make good sense with πρὸς τούτοις (‘in addition to these …’); cf. Ferrari’s (1997) reading, ομός, λοφός (gibboso, i.e. ‘hunchbacked’), which seems to settle this difficulty.


3 Dover 1974, 41.

4 See Dillery 1999, 269–271, for a discussion of this seemingly redundant phrase.
and, worst of all, he is utterly, comically deformed.\(^6\) In terms of his physical appearance, speechlessness, social status, and nationality, Aesop is the very picture of Greek badness. But the opening of the *Life* also hints at a significant, programmatic paradox: for all the many ways in which he is ugly, for his inability to speak, and for his ‘uselessness as a servant’ (ἐἰς ὑπηρεσίαν σαπρός, literally his ‘rottenness’), Aesop is simultaneously called ὁ πάντα βιωφελέστατος Αἴσωπος, ὁ λογοποιώς, ‘the fabulist Aesop, the great benefactor of mankind’. Thus the opening is practically a fable in its own right: the implicit moral is that utility, beneficence, and good stories can be found even in the most unexpected and unattractive packages. There is hope for the reader of the *Life of Aesop* who continues reading beyond the opening paragraph—hope that this grotesque list of physical deformities does not tell the whole story.

Over the course of the *Life* the fabulist does overcome his essential badness and transforms himself into a distinguished, globe-trotting sage by means of his wit, wisdom, and exceptional mastery of signs and riddles.\(^7\) Nonetheless, Aesop’s repulsive ugliness remains a significant theme beyond the opening sentences: throughout the *Life* an encounter with the ugly Aesop compels one to make a decision—should he be dismissed out of hand because of his outrageous appearance or should he be engaged in some way in spite of it? There are numerous scenes in which observers, hosts, and bystanders comment on Aesop’s body and speculate about its potential relationship to his utility.\(^8\) On a few occasions Aesop is rejected for being too ugly to engage, and even those who decide to listen to him invariably do so after first posting some response to his ugliness. Such passages constitute a thematically linked series of receptions and rejections of Aesop, in which ugliness is consistently flagged as a key determinant of his value as a source of wisdom.

---

\(^5\) At least, in the opening of the *Life*, before he is granted the gift of speech by the goddess Isis (*Vita G* 7).

\(^6\) These features of Aesop’s essential ‘otherness’ have recently been discussed by Lissarague 2000, who comments (132) that Aesop provides ‘a good departure for reflecting on notions of identity and alterity in the ancient Greek world’.

\(^7\) For a nuanced and convincing description of the literary structure of the *Life of Aesop*, see Holzberg 1992, 33–75.

\(^8\) Cf. *Vita G* 1, 14, 16, 19, 21, 24, 26, 30ff, 87, 98.

\(^9\) E.g., *Vita G* 11, 15, 27, 55, 87–88.