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EXPANDING NARRATIVE

I

Fable may be defined as a form of primitive allegory which presents animals and plants as speaking human beings [Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics]. Aesop’s fables remain for practical purposes the measure of fable when one is needed. Yet while the simple Greek morals may epitomize fables, the actual use of the term is much less precise. It is not difficult to understand why, for even the general definition noted above invites us to include matter as diverse as stories from Aesop and Ovid to Disney cartoon inventions. “The Fox and the Sour Grapes,” I.o.s capacity to communicate even as a heifer, the animated version of “The Three Little Pigs”—each has qualities that allow it to be regarded as fable (Aesop 52; Ovid 1.64.50-54; 4.166-89; Katz 342). The problems inherent in defining fable through its content alone account for the practical approach to fable taken by Aristotle in the Rhetoric (I.20). Rather than thinking of fable as a genre, Aristotle considers it as a rhetorical figure used for a pedagogical purpose. It is for this reason that Aristotle considers fable (logos) in the Rhetoric and not in the Poetics. Nevertheless, fable assumes a quasi-generic status even in the Rhetoric, for in order for fables to be used they must be known in a form that permits them to be shared. Aristotle’s reference to Aesop indicates not a vague oral tradition but a body of stories already written down. As a rhetorical and didactic form, fable falls into a middle ground between poetic genres and other tropes or figures of discourse. Even more than poetic forms, fable has a mobility that permits it to be deployed differently.

In the Middle Ages it is above all the pedagogical function of fable both as a rhetorical figure for conveying moral lessons and as a means for teaching grammar that accounts for its popularity. When we think of fable at this time we must be careful not to limit the form to simple beast stories or fabliaux alone. While simple animal stories were used in elementary Latin classes—especially in the Disticha Catonis—and appear in sermons, they are also associated with the animal symbolisms found in bestiaries. 6 When the bird-like sentinels draw together in the heavens of Dante’s Paradiso to make legible God’s word we witness a highly developed fabulous sequence in which animals do not simply convey morals but become letters signifying divine revelation. (18:70-114.)

The range of hermeneutical measures used to control fable in the Middle

FABLE AND THE EPistemology OF EXPANDING

NARRATIVE: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE ROMAN DE LA ROSE

KENNETH J. KNOESFEL

Fables have a curiously vexed status as narratives. While much care is given to their collection and identification, their meaning receives more attention than their narrative function. In part this is due to fable’s ongoing association in Medieval and Renaissance scholarship with allegory. 1 It comes too from the inclination to approach fable from the vantage points provided by research on folklore and anthropological theory. 2 Work in literary theory that one would expect to deal with fable in a narrative setting remains silent. Earlier in the century Andre Jolles showed the value in specialized study of short narrative forms but did not include fable in his study (7-9). 3 Hans Robert Jauss, who has recently reminded theorists of fables’ work, considers fable only briefly in his discussion of medieval genres (107). Wolfgang Iser, whose work on reading does offer a potential setting for the study of fable—as I will suggest below—does not extend his inquiry to such intermediate rhetorical forms (Reading: Reader 106-19).

As short narrative forms, fables do more than supply a means for allegory or invite explanation through linguistic or cultural theory. They also provide components that contribute to our understanding of how we assemble and assimilate texts. Such a claim is not extraordinary, yet study of how fables participate in our experience of a text continues to be circumvented by the attention given to allegory and the propensity to locate the significance of fable in external authorities. These authorities—allegorical commentaries, taxonomic collections, archetypal configurations posited by modern mythographers such as Northrop Frye—constitute a parallel literature to which we sometimes inadvertently relinquish fable. Fable, however, is not only a graphic placeholder for imported meanings or a linguistic form in which we find cultural patterns. It is a short narrative structure which guides the audience’s evolving understanding of a text.

What follows I look at the interplay of fable with longer narrative. After noticing some complications that arise in defining fable, I consider a provocative elaboration of Mars and Venus in the thirteenth-century Roman de la Rose. Discussion of the fable’s deployment in the French text offers a basis for arguing that the traditional perception of fable as a stable form should be replaced by an understanding of fable as a volatile form which only appears stable because it is controlled by its location in other discourse. I include in discourse both the poetic texts which use fable and the academic texts which make up a corpus of commentary. Closely related to fable’s volatility and the hermeneutic efforts devised to enclose it, is fable’s persistent versatility. While fable’s
Ages may be surveyed by comparing Aesop and Ovid. Curiously, because such comparisons are seldom made by scholars working with either author, one might think that the two occupy entirely different territory. This is inaccurate. Although there are important differences between Aesop and Ovid, together they comprise a progression or hierarchy of fable which moves from elementary moral lessons to complex philosophical abstraction. In the Middle Ages each was assumed to convey pedagogical lessons mediated through interpretation. The general distinction made between them is found in the Somnium Scipionis where Macrobius notices that there are fables useful for philosophy and others suitable for entertainment (85). Aesop is mentioned as fitting in the latter category; Plato's use of myth in texts such as the Timaeus stands behind the idea of the philosophically useful fable. For the Middle Ages Macrobius' distinctions become not only an argument for distinguishing between Aesop and Ovid but also a justification for the implementation of a variety of classical fabulae in philosophical discussion. Medieval Latin schools, however, really did not need Macrobius to differentiate Aesop and Ovid. The simple comparison of their two texts gives ample evidence why. In contrast to the prose fables of Aesop which bear a manifest moral purpose, Ovid's fables which begin with a creation account and end with Pythagorean teachings about death and transmigration fit into a philosophical schema. Beyond this their carefully polished verse made it possible for them to function as models for Latin composition in the schools.

An even more important matter distinguishes Aesop from Ovid. In contrast to Aesop's fables which provide a moral conclusion, Ovid's fables remain abstract and open ended and function as provocative narratives that require students to discover their meaning. They momentarily define limits within which significance must be sought. The importance of this task is demonstrated in the meanings the Middle Ages gave to Ovid's fables. The more active admonition to meaning that appears in the Macrobian association of fable with philosophy is really complemented by the tacit invitation Ovid's fables extend to discover meaning. In order for meaning to be discovered, however, previously established meanings attributed to a fable must be subverted or strategically used to ensnare or renew significance. Within the Roman de la Rose both Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun work to discover or fill in what Ovid leaves tacit or empty. Their perception that Ovid's fables are vehicles for higher wisdom stands behind the use of the fable in the Roman de la Rose.

Before looking at a specific elaboration of fable in the Roman, I want to emphasize that an ideological function accompanies the more localized pedagogical work of fable. At any given moment the status of fable may represent how a particular epoch defines itself through its relation to the past. In the Middle Ages Ovidian stories cannot be used until a means for their interpretation is devised. Interpretation which shifts them from a pagan to a Christian setting is fundamental to their incorporation. The simplest example of how this interpretive labor works comes from the word fabula itself, which designates a fable story used to edify (Murphy 13). I noticed above that Ovid's fables in particular became vehicles for higher wisdom. The privileged status of fable found in the Roman de la Rose represents not a simple implementation of Latin models but their adaptation and even evaluation as a means to knowledge. The critical assimilation of fable and the renegotiation of its meaning found throughout the French text make it impossible to view fable as a simple rhetorical embellishment.

The Roman de la Rose comprises a rich curriculum of simple forms. In the text fable works as a strategic device in structuring the poem's argument. The entire poem may be regarded as a gloss examining the limits of the Narcissus fable as a model for love. While Guillaume elaborates the psychological potential of the fable in describing love as a visually induced physical disease, he also initiates through personification allegory an Ovidian critique of the lover's condition—an allegorical remedia amoris—which is completed by Jean de Meun. In Jean's section, the Narcissus story and its moral interpretation are progressively shown to be an inappropriate model for love. Finally they are replaced altogether by Pygmalion. By describing love's evolution and consumption, the poem replaces the passive and impotent condition of Narcissus with procreation. The transition from one fable to another also shows that the ways fable provokes new meaning emerge from the narrative and not from the meanings given fable by moral commentary.

Since I have examined the rhetorical and epistemological function of the Narcissus story elsewhere, I have chosen to look at Jean's use of Mars and Venus here (Knoesel). As we will see, Jean's amplification of the fable subverts its common moral interpretation and replaces it with physical allegory. In regard to our perception of fabulous narrative, Jean's treatment of the fable shows that we are not justified in making assumptions about the fixed meaning of fable. Instead, he requires that his audience renegotiate the fable's meaning.

In the course of her lucid, experimental elaboration of optical phenomena in the second part of the Roman de la Rose, Nature asks the Lover to reconsider the clandestine affair of Mars and Venus (18031-18099). To the story known in the thirteenth century from the Ars amatoria (2.561-92) and the Metamorphoses (4.166-89), Nature makes a notorious addition (de Meun; and Dohle 800-81). If Mars and Venus, who were captured in the bed where they were lying together, had used such a magnifying glass before they got into bed, they would never have been captured or bound in the fine, thin nets that Vulcan had placed there and that neither of them knew anything about. Even if he had made the nets finer than a spider web, they would have seen them and Vulcan would have been deceived. They would not have entered the trap because every net would have appeared to them thicker and longer than a large beam, and cruel Vulcan, burning with jealousy and anger, would never have proved their adultery.
Nature's challenge to think what would have happened if Mars and Venus had taken a magnifying glass to bed with them, disrupts not only her technical discussion but also the closed narrative of the fable and its moral significance. Its reformulation abruptly demands that we make room for new semantic possibilities.

The narrative disruption caused by Nature's invention has different aspects which simultaneously work to open the narrative and subvert any preconceptions we have about the fable's meaning. The story is at once a preposterous joke, a lie, and a response to innovation. We smile at the prospect of famous lovers climbing into bed equipped with a detection device, but in our laughter we also pay attention. Quite literally the invention requires that we re-read a fable which we think we know. For a moment the fable's stability, condoned by its moral significance, is suspended so that new meanings may be explored. Recalling the Lover's earlier outrage at Reason's "dirty language" or use of "testicles," we find in the story another sample of Jean de Meun's invention of scenes which suggest graphically explicit sexual detail (cullions, 5507; 6897-6912).

Beyond this we can also find the story analogous to sex jokes told by Ovid. Not surprisingly our smiles turn quickly to questions about the meaning of the story for, even though fables lie by definition, convention also makes us expect that they reveal aperticular truth. Since this purpose emerges through Nature's fabulous remodeling, we must look at the mechanism that underlies it.

When introduced the fable assumes the status of an exemplum. This association which is emphasized by Aristotle, becomes commonplace in the Middle Ages. For practical purposes fable and example are interchangeable. But the example which we take for granted in narratives bears a closer look. The use of a fabulous example assumes that the audience knows the fable and will be able to use its plot to formulate a demonstration of moral truth. The demonstrative function of exempla is emphasized continually; remarks in the Rhetorica ad Herennium are standard: "Exempa are not distinguished for their ability to give proof or witness to particular causes, but for their ability to expand these causes." [Primum omnium exempla postulant nec confirmandis neque testificanti causa, sed demonstrandi] (Battaglia 455). While an exemplum is graphically abbreviated, its rational expansion takes place in silence. In essence the figure works as a muted logical statement that supports the more developed argument of a larger narrative through abbreviation. The moral argument conveyed by Mars and Venus at the time appears in commentaries by Arnulf of Orleans and Alberic of London (the so-called Third Vatican Mythographer) who note that Vulcan's net signifies the turpitude of earthly pleasure (Arnulf 210; Alberic 231-32).

It is said that Mars loved Venus because there are times when a strong man is undone by sensual pleasure. This means that sometimes strength is corrupted by Venus' embrace. By such an embrace understand lust made known by the Sun's witness. By the Sun's wit-

ness understand the guilty one recognized by the disclosure of truth. Agreedly, strength weakened by the fervor of illicit passion is an ever tightening fetter. (Arnulf of Orleans)

[Marco Venere dictum amasse, qui aliquando vir foris in venerem dissolvit, id est virtus aliquando corrupta amplius
Veneris id est libidinis Sole teste appareat id est in veritatis
indicio res esse cognosciatur. Quae quidem virtus prava consuetudine illiciti fervoris quasi cathena constringitur.] (Arnulf of
Orleans)

It is said that Mars secretly made love to Venus but was seen by the Sun who told Vulcan. Vulcan caught them while making love in a steel chain and shamefully showed them to all the gods. Such suffering inflamed the Sun's five daughters, Parthene, Medea, Phaedra, Circe, and Dicte, with a passion for abominable love. Thus Mars, corrupted by Venus' embrace, means strength corrupted by illicit pleasure witnessed by the Sun. The Sun's witness means the guilty one recognized by the disclosure of the truth. Assuredly, misguided strength, weakened by bad habits, appears bound by fetters which grow tighter and tighter. In this way Venus and therefore the Sun's five daughters—that is the five human senses given for light and truth and for the perception of all things (as the philosophers say), given, as it were as the Sun's offspring—are seductive agents that spread darkness. Indeed there is not a single faculty that cannot be corrupted by the pleasures it brings. In Mars you read even more convincingly how corrupt pleasures damage individuals. (Alberic of London)

[Dictur etiam cum Veneris Mars furtim concubuisse, quod Sol
videris Vulcanum proditi. Ile adamanitatis catenis eos colubros
ligans, diis omnibus torpiter ostendit iacentes. Ili dolens quinque
Solis filias, Parthene, Medea, Phaedram, Circe et Dicne destes-
tabili amore succedit. Mars igitur complexus Veneris pollutus, id
est virtus libidinis illecebris corrupta, sole teste appareat, id est,
tandum veritatis indicio res esse cognoscitur. Quae quidem virtus prava
consuetudine illecebra vinculis constrictoribus ostenditur cænata.
Venus itaque quinque Solis filias, id est quinque humanos sensus
lucii ac veritati deditos, et ad variam renun perceptionem, ut probant
philosophi, daos, quasi solis foustus, hac corrupta obfuscat. Nullus
enim sensus est, quem non suis illecebris voluptas iniiciat. Quibus
autem singulos corruptiones molestit, in Mariano competentius
leges.] (Alberic of London)

The definition of exemplum from the Ad Herennium notes a classical
assumption about their use which is frequently ignored. Use of an exemplum should direct attention primarily to causes, not to the result. Often we mistakenly assume that an exemplum would clarify discourse when it actually works towards its complication. Rather than working as a simple syllogism, the figure works as a vehicle for elaboration. Salvatore Battaglia notices that the example provided the Middle Ages with a means to investigate daily life and for this reason may even be regarded as a kind of counterforce to the Bible (467-485).

Such a function reminds us how misleading it is to reduce fables to the conclusions attributed to them in Medieval and Renaissance handbooks. Conclusions such as Arnulf's are not end points alone but points of departure. In effect the appropriation of meaning designated in allegories assumes a circularity in which each reading of the fable brings about new discoveries about how to read the conclusion. The exemplum permits the audience to range freely and explore silently the causes indicated by the figure and the way they are related to experience. Criticism often fails to take into account such silent assimilation. Successful examples are the ones which draw the reader into an imagined re-creating, not into a trap-door conclusion.

An exemplum may be complicated in several ways. If the argument made by an exemplum is ambiguous, it further complicates the progression of the narrative.

An example makes a statement more eloquent since it has no purpose other than making a statement more dignified. It renders accessible that which is obscure with much clarity. It places before our eyes that which is probable since it creates the likeness of a greater truth; it relates everything in a perceptible manner so that the matter I would justly present may be made tangible.

[Exemplum... rem omniorem facit, cum nullius rei nisi dignitatis causa simitur... aperto... cum id, qui... sciscirius... magis... probabiliorem... cum magis... similis facit... ante oculos ponit... cum expressit omnia perspicue... ut res prope... dicam... manu... tentari... posit.] 16

This is precisely the function of Nature's invention. Through the addition of the magnifying glass, Nature disrupts the conventional exemplary function of the fable and makes the audience re-formulate the narrative into a new example. Without simple moral closure, the new configuration leads to a series of interpretive puzzles that bring our attention again and again to the magnifying glass. Would an impassioned couple take time for such scrutiny? Would a magnifying glass really allow them to see Vulcan's net? What would it look like? If the glass permitted them to escape, what is the moral status of the instrument? Each hypothesis urges the audience to realize or materialize the story. In effect, the addition of the magnifying glass brings the fable closer.

The narrative too is called into question in this operation. Not only must the reader resolve the meaning of the fable; he must also locate it within his experience of the evolving narrative. Response to the exemplum requires that attention given to the causes figured by the short narrative also extend to exploration of their potential presence in the already experienced narrative. This necessitates review. It also generates hypotheses about the future. The fabulous invention thus becomes a momentary configuration useful in looking back over the narrative progression and for imagining where it may lead. Here fable becomes a particularly appropriate vehicle for the further delineation of how the reader formulates the text he reads. The study of fable within another text becomes a specialized way for thinking about models of reading.

Our response to the example may be considered in regard to Iser's account of reading. According to Iser the reader's wandering viewpoint "narrows" through past and future horizons and "leaves both to merge together in its wake" (112). Progression is repeatedly interrupted by shifts within the text and by the reader's ongoing reactions to the configurations he assembles from the text to control his experience. The exemplum in the *Roman* is an advantageous figure with which to consider this phenomenon because it not only disrupts our viewpoint by making us refigure the fable but also offers a potential frame for ordering our assimilation of the story. The example functions something like a scenic overview that we may turn into while driving through the countryside. Like the overview which invites the driver to temporarily suspend his progress to consider the terrain he has crossed, the example invites the reader to consider his progress within the text. Of course, it too may be drawn into other perspectives or configurations dependent on the reader's experience. Most importantly, it offers itself to the reader as a privileged moment in the process of interpretation.

Here I also want to notice that Iser's description of reading does not contradict classical rhetorical theory but offers what amounts to a psychological account of how rhetorical figures work within a text. In a sense he sets the static components of classical rhetoric in motion. By insisting that a text's encoded movements have the potential of ever being reconstrued or reconfigured with variations dependent on the reader's own expectations, his study complements the formalism of classical rhetoric. Iser's study—really a psychological explication of rhetoric—deserves to be regarded as an addendum to classical theory.

As we consider the range of questions provoked by the presence of the instrument, we recognize that the fable functions in part as a narrative response to scientific innovation and above all as a means for its assimilation. Each question asks that a moral setting be devised for the new object. We witness a means for testing the purpose of the glass. Each question asks whether the moral setting can be devised for the new object. We witness a means for testing the purpose of the glass. Each question asks if the glass permitted them to escape, what is the moral status of the instrument? Each hypothesis urges the audience to realize or materialize the story. In effect, the addition of the magnifying glass brings the fable closer.
about technology. Vulcan's identity as consummate fabricator, implicit within
the story, supplies reason for thinking about the glass as a synecdoche for manufac-
tured objects. In fact, Vulcan can be associated not only with the net but
with the glass used to detect the net. This is not surprising, for the glass, like the
net, also has the capacity to deceive. A significant reversal is implicit in the fable
as well. While previously the gods were accredited with giving technological
devices to humankind, here the glass signifies that a human invention may be of
help in resolving a problem for the gods.

The problem posed by Nature gives justification to technology in another way
as well. We should think of it not only as registering or responding to technical change
but actually as participating in it. The query presents us with a thought ex-
periment not unlike those which appear in the work of Albertus Magnus and others
(XXXV 164-228). Nature invites the audience to test experience much as natural
philosophers appeal to readers' experience in their writings. By itself the fabu-
lar example does not give knowledge but requires that we become engaged in a rational
process that may lead to knowledge.

The ways in which fable helps assimilate the magnifying glass also alert us to
similar functions in modern story telling where we make the unfamiliar familiar by
including it in known stories. Cartoons offer a popular example of this. By de-
peicting characters running off cliffs and remaining suspended in mid air, cut into pieces
or horribly contorted only to regain their normal appearance, cartoons serve as nar-
native forms which rehearse and ultimately confirm a mechanistic or Newtonian
view of natural phenomena. The recent proliferation of anecdotals and jokes that
refer to black holes would be another example. Here, as in the case of the magni-
ifying glass, the incorporation of physics in simple stories hardly means that each
reader or viewer can give a precise account of the demonstrated principles. In
most cases such synthesis results in familiarity, not knowledge. As Einstein's
thought experiments show, however, there are occasions when the simple mani-
phation of natural phenomena in anecdotes or stories—most frequently in refer-
ce to visual phenomena—may provoke further investigation and reformulation
of basic physical principles. Jean's example really moves between the cartoon
and the thought experiment. While it undoubtedly works to popularize the magnifying
glass, it also challenges the reader to explain its operation.

In the preceding paragraphs I have stressed the ways in which Jean's example
responds to contemporary work with optics. Although Jean undoubtedly knows
about contemporary discussion of optics, his response surely comes from more
than his awareness of the Arab optician and scientist Alhazen. As is so often the
case in medieval composition, innovation, or more exactly amplification, stems
from something more familiar. Here visual details in Ovid's texts serve as the basis
for Nature's amplification. The Metamorphoses draws attention to the net's ability
to escape visual detection and the Ars amatoria probes the sun's visual acumen
(4.177, 2.573). But while the fable itself offers details, it is incorrect to think of
the entire invention being restricted by the Latin text. The Ovidian detail pro-
vides exploration, which finally leaves a particular referent behind. Assumptions
about medieval allegory have obscured the way a text such as the Metamorphoses

functioned not simply as a compendium of stories or a codebook for interpretation
but as a collection of natural phenomena which provoke new interpretations of
nature herself. Ovid's description of the sun's perspicacity provides justification
for the incorporation of the magnifying glass in the narrative as a potential agent
for perception and truth.

The invention which disrupts the narrative also reaffirms the larger narrative
setting which absorbs the fable. This occurs as one integrates the device into the
larger narrative by testing the ways it complements previous configurations. The
more we think about the fable, the more its incongruity fits into the evolving
strategy of the work. Familiarization leads away from the physical object itself
and to the psychological matter that may be associated with it. While the visual
detail in Ovid's text promotes Nature's invention, it is the larger setting of
optics and faculty psychology in the text that provides the interpretative setting
for the story. This psychological matter, exercised from the beginning of
Guillaume's poem, teaches that all visual phenomena must be judged by the
rational faculty. Within this setting the magnifying glass becomes an extension of
the eye both in its incapacity to make moral judgments and in its capacity to pro-
voke reason. How we use the glass or exactly what we choose to scrutinize becomes
unclear. The question really becomes a more deliberate imitation of an
aspect of vision described by Guillaume in his allegory of vision. In his descrip-
tion of the Fountain of Love, Guillaume explains carefully that, like the eyes, the
crystals within the fountain show only half the garden at a time (1561-64).
In Jean's description of the glass we notice too that it enlarges only what it is turned to.

But what visual phenomenon would Nature have us see with the magnifying
glass? We are urged to think about sexuality on several levels. Playfully we wonder
what the sex organs themselves would look like in the new instrument. But at the
same time the lens also displays how we may exaggerate the importance of sex.
The lens, which provokes reexamination of the fable, urges us to reconceptualize
the way we think of Mars and Venus. Finally reconceptualization urges us to sub-
vert moral interpretations. Rather than thinking of them as figures representing
illicit sexual embrace, as Arnulf of Orleans and Alberic of London would do, Jean
invites us to think of them as planets. Instead of portraying adultery, the fable
conveys an astronomical demonstration of the changing seasons and the generative
function of nature touched upon by John of Garland in his Integumenta Viridis.
"Venus represents spring; Vulcan summer; Autumn the adulterer, whom captured,
gives unexpected bounty" ("Ver Venus est, ostes Vulcanus, captus adulter/
Autem unus nos bibit aliena bona") (4.185-86). To study Mars and Venus in
Vulcan's net with a magnifying glass is to study God's natural law. The presence
of the magnifying glass does more than shift attention from one allegory to
another. It redirects the attention we give to the fable away from external author-
ities and meanings situated "behind" the text to others which follow the inter-
pretable process itself.

As we reconsider the fable we are invited to think not only of Mars and Venus
but also of Vulcan and his net. Urged to imagine the net through the glass, we
find that it is possible to think of its links as a representation of fabulous language.20
think of *hyle* as a narrative but must rather approach the figure as an animating metaphor that may lead to a more complete explication. The medieval use of *integumenta* mentioned above also fits within this setting, for the problematic term really has a quasimetaphoric function that precipitates knowledge and carries an expectancy for more complete expression. Although my remarks here are necessarily brief, they point to some important theoretical issues which accompany the study of fable and which deserve further study.

Throughout the Roman optics is central to narrative. This is obvious from the beginning in the careful attention given to description. Naturally it is present in the introduction of the Narcissus fable by Guillaume and the critique of the fable by Jean as a story that provides an inappropriate model for procreation. The elaboration of Mars and Venus shows that the fable becomes part of an ongoing fabulous discourse which begins with Narcissus and sexual isolation and ends with Pygmalion and procreation. Within the progression of fables Mars and Venus represent a lesson in fable's critical assimilation.

III

So far I have looked at a particularly ingenious extension of fable in the Roman. In my concluding remarks I want to consider several larger assumptions that accompany the use of fable and suggest how the hermeneutical problems associated with fable are similar to those confronted in other short forms as well.

We are accustomed to think of fable and myth as stable forms. The simple patterns which govern the forms, reinforced by oral transmission, are often cited as evidence of their "stability." But the assumption of stability is misleading. I think, and needs revision. It is more appropriate to think of fable as an unstable form. Instability accompanies fable wherever it is found. Recognition of this is of utmost importance because it determines subsequent response to the form. Instability is manifest whether we approach fable from a narrative or hermeneutic vantage point. As a narrative form fable is never centered completely in itself but exists in potentiality, ever expected to become part of another narrative. This volatility, fable's capacity to take on widely divergent meanings, accounts for the industrious attempts within pagan and Christian culture alike to police fable hermeneutically. All the elaborate methods associated with fable in the Middle Ages (euhemerism, moral and physical allegory, and specialized redaction of fable such as *integumenta*) are systematic attempts to control this instability.

There are important implications in viewing fable as an unstable form. That fable has a stable or fixed quality has been emphatically stressed for centuries. In the eighteenth century, Lessing located its stability in its capacity to express absolute laws which govern the human spirit. Herder expanded the transcendent nature of fable even further by finding it in accord with a fundamental cosmic harmony. In the nineteenth century Grimm's study of origins formulated stability in a now distant *urform* which may be reached. But with these examples we must make a critical distinction. In each case the stability associated with fable comes not from fable itself but from the interpretive setting in which it is placed.
The question of origins remains an important assumption in folklore and mythographic studies and deserves special mention. Such a method would either posit mythology as a fixed form or seek an original form behind the variations of a single story. The almost a priori assumption of an original form accounts for much scholarly effort to collect variations and then sift through variants until an original substructure may be established. But such procedures overlook the way variations actually describe ongoing reception and interpretation. Paradoxically, a method that would look for an historical source actually comes to deny the importance of historical variation. The misleading conception of source dominates the study of fable and contributes to a false notion that fable is a stable form. Even though a simple structure may be deduced from a complex range of seemingly unrelated stories, the commonly shared pattern enforced through interpretation only means that stability is a feature of interpretation. Variations attest not only to the propensity of fabulous matter to change but show they are actually a means of controlling fable. The instability of the form is momentarily secured through the elaboration of stories.

The practice of devising taxonomies of fables or short narratives also contributes to our perception of them as stable forms. Often we are urged to examine the relation a fable has to an external text rather than the one in which it is situated. This suggests a curious inversion. Rather than exploring the meaning a fable has within a narrative, we locate the fable within a taxonomic system. In Medieval or Renaissance studies allegorical commentaries may themselves assume the function of transcendent narrative sometimes referred to as tradition. When approached from such a vantage point texts become timeless and affirm idealized notions of tradition rather than being recognized as narratives viewed from a particular historical period. Interestingly, by assigning a text a place within tradition, one risks divorcing it not only from a contemporary vantage point but also from its original setting. Regarded as artifacts or relics, fable becomes universalized and the unique application of fable in time is lost. An important hermeneutic assumption balances the instability associated with fable. As volatile and uncertain as the form appears, fable invariably brings an assumption that it already contains or will acquire meaning. This expectation of meaning, which cannot be restricted to Christian culture, has its source in the demonstrative function of language manifest in a more formalized way in fable. No matter how obscure or how bizarre the fable, the belief that it has a meaning leads eventually to the discovery of one. As we have seen in Mars and Venus, the vehicle of this meaning may rest either in the plot or in a textual detail that may be turned upon the text as an interpretative scheme for construing it. Belief in fixed meaning has given myth an identity of being culturally stable. The faith that fable will give up its meaning must also be regarded as a factor closely related to the genesis of narrative. The intersection of interpretation of Mars and Venus and its narrative expansion is a small example of this. More elaborate examples are found in the commentaries and handbooks. These works not simply assign meaning but generate narrative not only as their readings are adopted into other texts but as they themselves locate meaning. A commentary like the Ovide moralisé offers an elaborate example of the narrative generated through an attempt to track meaning (Demats 61-105). Commentaries are not only warehouses for meaning but seminaries for narrative.

The final matter I want to emphasize involves the reader's silent appropriation of fable. By appropriation I mean the interpretative work undertaken by the reader as he or she assimilates the fable into the evolving narrative. This silent because it occurs as readers psychologically assemble their experience of the text. In regard to Mars and Venus the process may be located in the reader's elaboration of causes associated with the fable's exemplary function. We do not establish the significance of the fable automatically or by recourse to an external authority alone but by exploring different possibilities. My own discussion of the fable represents in a deliberate and graphic manner one way such exploration may be undertaken.

For a moment I want to return to a point made by Wolfgang Iser already mentioned in my discussion of examples. When we initially come upon Mars and Venus in the course of reading, the fable is similar to what Iser calls a blank or a locus within the narrative that invites completion. By thinking of the fable, particularly in its exemplary deployment, within the setting of Iser's discussion, we find a means for thinking of fable not simply as a form characterized by allegorical closure but as a form that provokes inquiry. Strictly speaking, a fable is not a blank because it guides at least in an elementary way our perception. Nevertheless, like the blank it too engages our imagination. Regarded as analogous to a blank, fable appears not as a narrative unit that works toward closure but rather as a component that further opens a text. Here a further distinction can be made that further complements Iser's notion of blanks. For Iser the idea of narrative blanks accounts for our engagement in a story at a particular moment. When joined with the reader's memory of previous blanks, the individual blank moves beyond its localized setting. Fable too not only provokes the reader to local elaboration, but continues to work as a framing device even after its meaning has been established. Even after we discover that Mars and Venus bear a physical allegory, the story becomes a device for encapsulating potential meaning elsewhere. Using the metaphor supplied by the Roman, we may simply say that the fable becomes a lens for viewing our subsequent experience of the narrative.

I noticed at the beginning of the essay that fable is associated with a pedagogical function. While this is true, fable need not be confined to a moral setting alone. As a short narrative unit fable also has an epistemological function suggested by the way it serves as a simple form of inquiry. Here I especially have in mind plot, or what the Middle Ages referred to as narratio or argomentum. The simple plots included in many Ovidian commentaries are not only abridged versions useful in the memorization of stories but patterns useful in ordering experience. It is the capacity of fable to arrange both psychological and physical phenomena that accounts for the proliferation of fable in philosophical discussion in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Vestiges of the epistemological use of fable remain today in the utilization of fables like Oedipus and Narcissus in psychoanalytic theory.
But as simple forms which provoke the invention of discourse, fables approach philosophy in another way as well. Whether we think of the abbreviated matter of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations, the succinct statements of Pascal in the Pensées, or the evolving declarations of Nietzsche in Zaratustra, we find a narrative form which continually opens new inquiry. Like fable, the aphorism or maxim must be placed in a setting which transends it in order to work. If it seems that maxim takes us away from fable, we have only to remind ourselves that Aristotle considers these ever transcend forms as twins in the Rhetoric (II.20). For fable and aphorism alike, the simple form works as a persuasive vehicle either challenging and testing narrative or opening and disrupting more systematic approaches to philosophy.

It is appropriate to conclude this discussion by thinking of fable as related to philosophy. As a narrative form and as a frame for inquiry, fable simply cannot be restricted to fiction alone. Aristotle's early recognition of fable's capacity for deployment as a rhetorical figure in a variety of discourse acknowledges this versatility. Even when used in a poetic text such as the Roman de la Rose, fable not only contributes to our comprehension of the story but engenders inquiry that extends beyond the text. It accomplishes this by requiring that we ever enclose the fable in configurations beyond itself. Recognition of this phenomenon alerts us to the way fable functions as more than a device for allegory. Even more it reveals that the stability associated with fable is not a feature of fable itself but a result of the interpretive settings continually invented for fable. By approaching fable as an unstable, volatile form, we discover not only a way to explain medieval commentary and its efforts to control fable, but also a means to account for fable's disruptive capacity. As a short narrative form fable does not close inquiry but ever bears the potential for new openings.

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Notes
1. The place of allegory in contemporary Medieval and Renaissance studies is well known. Recent studies which deal with fable and allegory include Demats, Dranke and Nykrog.

2. I have in mind J. G. Frazer's mythologic encyclopedia, The Golden Bough, with its omniscient interest in hunting through narratives to decipher larger meaning. The structural or taxonomic methods used by Lévi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp have also drawn attention away from the individual text by emphasizing that "meaning" transcends any individual version of a narrative. For a brilliant review of Propp's contributions to folklore theory, see Anatoly Liberman's Introduction to Propp.

3. The work first appeared in German, Einfache Formen: Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasu, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1930. For remarks concerning Jolle's interest in fable, see the editor's note to the French edition.

4. The arrangement of the fables differs from edition to edition. In the Penguin text, "Sour Grapes" appears as the third entry.

5. After distinguishing between example (paradigma) and enthymeme (entimema), Aristotle identifies fable (logos) as a type of example. "We will first treat of argument by Example, for it has the nature of induction, which is the foundation of reasoning. This form of argument has two varieties: one consisting in the mention of actual past facts, the other in the invention of facts by the speaker. Of the latter, again, there are two varieties, the predictive parallel and the fable (e.g. the fables of Aesop, or those from Libya)." For a helpful discussion of Aristotle's analysis of fable and its reception in antiquity, see Nijghard.

6. For a study of the fable in medieval classroom texts such as the Disticha Catonis, in sermon literature, and in bestiaries, see Gräbmüller.

7. There are surprisingly few references to Ovid in studies on Aesop in the Middle Ages, and one finds sparse mention of Aesop in work on the medieval Ovid. The separation comes from the general distinction made between myth and fable, or the more practical differences found in Aesop's use in pedagogical texts and Ovid's use in philosophical writing. The modern tendency to separate myth and fable suggests an assumption about high and low culture. While pedagogical distinctions between Aesop and Ovid were made in the Middle Ages, they were hardly divorced from one another.

8. Macrobius distinguishes between fable and fabulous narrative in the following
way: “In the first both the setting and plot are fictitious, as in the fables of Aesop, famous for his exquisite imagination. The second rests on a solid foundation of truth, which is treated in a fictitious style. This is called the fabulous narrative (narratio fabulosa) to distinguish it from the ordinary fable.”

9. See Dronke, and Wetherbee.

10. The association of fable and fiction is standard and appears as early as Cicero’s *De Inventione*.

11. For an overview of the strategic use of fable in the French text see Hill (404-25).

12. Mars et Venus, qui jam furent ansamble ou lit ou il se jurent, s’il, eunon que seur le lit montasent, en tex miroans se mirassent, mers que leurs miroers tenisent si qui le lit dedans vaissent, ja ne fusset pris ne fex ea la soutill et delize que Vulcans mis i a veult, de quoc suo d’aus rions ne savoit; car s’il les est fes d’ouvrainque plus soutille que fil d’haine, eusset il les lacs veinz, si fust Vulcans deceus, car il se fusset pas atre car chasen la plus d’un grant tre leur peruit este gos et lons, si que Vulcans li felonc, ardez de jaloussie et d’tre, ja ne prouust leur avostrue (18031-50).

13. I am especially thinking of Ovid’s sarcastic manipulation of amatory realism in the *Ars amatoria* where the injection of mundane technical detail works against the idealization of love.

14. Unless otherwise indicated translations are my own.

15. The realistic aspect of *exempla* is stressed by Battaglia.


17. See, for example, Albert’s “De visu,” in which physical *exempla* are introduced

18. For a useful study of metaphor in science, see W. H. Leatherdale.

19. See Eberle for a detailed discussion of the optical theme in Nature’s discourse. Eberle does not, however, examine the fabulous mechanism used in the assimilation of the optical matter.

20. The linguistic significance of entrapment is also supported by Ovidian texts. In the *Ars amatoria* the net serves as a vehicle for a discussion of the use of language in the revelation of secrets (2:593-604). In the *Amores* Ovid compares his own “limping” elegiac couplets to Vulcan (II.xvii.17-22).

21. *Integumentum* is a term used for the allegorical representation of fable in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It frequently is applied to fables used to express and intimate philosophical truth. For a discussion of the evolution of the term see: Stock; Jeanneau; Wetherbee; and Dane.

22. According to Ricoeur the two were “conceived together” (Time I.ix). See also Rule.

23. The material on *lyle* is extensive. The most animated use of *lyle* in the twelfth century appears in the *Cosmographia* of Bernard of Silvestris. For a discussion of the concept see Wetherbee and Stock.

24. My comments on Lessing, Herder, and Grimm are indebted to Morten Nørgaard’s discussion of the changing theories of fable (23-47).
Works Cited


