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# INTRODUCTION

*Give me a copper coin and you'll hear a golden tale!*

—ROMAN STORYTELLER'S STREET CRY<sup>1</sup>

I begin with three instances of storytelling.

One hot day Socrates and a companion Phaidros sought relief from the sun by strolling alongside the cool stream of the Ilissos outside the walls of Athens. The place brought to Phaidros's mind an event from the distant past. "Tell me, Socrates," he said, "wasn't it from somewhere around here that Boreas is said to have carried off Oreithyia?" He was thinking of the myth according to which the Athenian king's daughter was playing on the banks of the stream when suddenly the god of the north wind snatched her up and carried her off to his cold kingdom. "Yes, that's what they say." "Was it from here, then?" "No," Socrates replied, "the spot is actually some distance downstream. There is an altar of Boreas there." Phaidros asked if Socrates believed the story was true. Socrates replied that although clever men might explain the story away, he did not care to waste time on such speculations and was content to accept the usual beliefs (Plato *Phaedrus* 229a–230b; cf. Finkelberg 2014).

On a different occasion, a group of persons was traveling and partying together aboard a ship. One of the men, Eumolpus, made a comment on the unfaithfulness of women, adding that he had in mind not women in the old tragedies and legends but a woman of their own day. When all ears turned to him, he told about a matron of Ephesos who was famous for her fidelity to her husband. When the man died, she kept company with his corpse in his tomb, fully intending to follow him in death. A soldier on guard duty nearby, noticing a light shining from the tomb, joined the widow in the underground chamber. Gradually the matron was won over by the comfort of the soldier's company, and in the end

## 2 INTRODUCTION

the two lay together in the tomb. As Eumolpus concluded his story, the sailors laughed, a woman blushed, and a man who had been cuckolded grumbled (Petronius *Satyrica* 109–113).

In an essay on the art of conversation Plutarch recommends that the questions posed by symposiasts should be simple and uncomplicated and the topics familiar, so as not to exclude the less intellectual guests. Persons who propose intricate subjects for discussion are no better fit for parties than are Aesop's fox and crane. A fox once entertained a crane at dinner, Plutarch explains, and served a broth, pouring it out upon a flat stone. The crane looked ridiculous as it tried to eat the broth with its bill. But it now invited the fox to dinner, serving the meal in a jar with a narrow neck. While the crane easily inserted its bill, the fox could not get its mouth inside. In the same way, Plutarch concludes, whenever philosophers plunge into subtle topics at a symposium, they are irksome to most of the guests, who cannot follow, and in consequence the other diners throw themselves into singing songs, telling silly stories, or talking business, with the result that the fellowship of the party is lost (Plutarch *Table-Talk* 1.5, *Moralia* 614d–615a).

The events recounted about the wind god and the princess, the widow and the soldier, and the fox and the crane are traditional stories (or, in the case of Boreas, an allusion to such a story), while the narratives themselves, the circumstances of their telling, and the intent of their narrators are quite different.

The myth of Boreas and Oreithyia was part of inherited Athenian tradition that was probably familiar to every resident of the city, so that Socrates and Phaidros could discuss it without actually having to narrate it. The event is set in the distant past, back when Athens was ruled by kings. It is precisely localized: the exact spot where the central action occurred—the abduction of a princess by the North Wind—was known and commemorated with an altar. The characters themselves are named, and they fit into known genealogies and sequences of events in Athenian prehistory. It is clear that, for all its improbability, the story was generally regarded as being true, although the question of its historicity was

something one could discuss, as Phaidros and Socrates do as they walk along the Ilissos, much as today two Americans might explore a Civil War battlefield and talk about what is said to have happened here and there. It is significant that Socrates and Phaidros do not actually relate the story but merely discuss it, not only because both of them already know it but also because there is nothing to be accomplished by telling it. The story did not serve to make or clarify a point of some sort or to entertain or to console; that is, it had no immediate purpose or application. It came up as a matter of information because the two men happened to be strolling near the traditional location of the abduction.

The story of the widow and the soldier is much less anchored in history. Although the city of Ephesos is given as the site of the events, the characters themselves are nameless and the action is set at an unstated time in the vaguely recent past. The narrator declares that the events really happened, but his interest and that of his listeners are on the action and not on the question of its historicity. And the tone is different, for whereas the atmosphere of the myth is weighty and dignified, even solemn, with its important figures (a god, a princess) and dramatic event (abduction of a human by a supernatural being), the tone of the Ephesian tale is light and, for most of the listeners, humorous. It is essentially entertainment, a story told for its own sake.

The third narrative, the fox and the crane, is an entirely unrealistic tale. The characters are animals that behave like humans, they are generic (the fox is any fox, the crane is any crane), and the setting is as vague as can be (somewhere sometime in the past). There is no question of the narrator or his readers giving the tale a moment's consideration as being something that actually happened. Its tone is neither serious nor entirely humorous, but rather instructive in a light sort of way. Whereas the myth tells of an important event in early Athenian history and the Ephesian tale is a bawdy novella of sexual seduction set in the recent past and told to amuse, the fable is an extended metaphor that illustrates in a somewhat absurd fashion, via humanlike animals, how guests should not behave at a dinner gathering. The narrator's intent is to persuade.

#### 4 INTRODUCTION

Traditional narratives are not, then, a homogeneous kind of discourse with regard to their content, form, presumed historicity, and register. The Greeks and Romans, like other peoples, recognized that such stories are expressed in different genres, or conventionalized narrative forms (cf. Swales 1990; Bauman 1992:53), although they did not always give them distinct labels. The ancients possessed relatively specific terms for short narratives such as anecdotes, jokes, and fables, according these genres explicit recognition, but for most extended kinds of story they did not, referring to them simply by one or another general word for “story.” The lack of a label did not necessarily mean the absence of a kind of story, only the absence of conscious and explicit cultural recognition of a kind of story. Thus, although urban legends are attested in classical antiquity, a term for them did not come into use until the twentieth century.

Broadly speaking, systems of oral-narrative classification are emic or etic. Emic genres are traditional categories of narrative discourse that members of a society themselves devise and employ in their daily lives. Etic genres are categories that analysts devise in order to classify and talk comparatively about the oral narratives of different cultural groups. Whereas native taxonomies arise piecemeal and serve mostly casual purposes, analytic categories tend to be more defined and systematic, since investigators create them for the purpose of scholarly study and communication.<sup>2</sup>

The genre categories that we English speakers ordinarily employ for ancient short narratives correspond approximately to the ancient emic categories: we distinguish anecdotes, jokes, and fables and employ specific terms for them, as the Greeks and Romans did. But for more extended forms of narrative the current practice does not match the ancient one. For example, scholars writing in English recognize certain kinds of realistic tales as “novelle” and generally lump together all stories of gods and heroes as “myths,” whereas the Greeks and Romans had no emic terms for novelle or for mythological narratives, neither *mythos* nor anything else. So the emic system employed by the ancients and the etic system used today in Anglophone scholarship agree generally in their classification

of simple narrative forms but disagree in their handling of complex narratives. Since neither the ancients nor the moderns make many discriminations among kinds of extended narrative, neither system is adequate for the scholarly study of ancient traditional narrative.

Our own use of the word “myth” to refer broadly to classical narratives of gods and heroes goes back only to the German philologist Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812), who popularized the Greek word *mythos* and its forms as a replacement for the then more usual Latin term *fabula* and its forms. In the course of the nineteenth century the older term “fable” and the newer term “myth” competed for favor among English speakers, and “myth” eventually predominated.<sup>3</sup> It was a reflection of the times, then, that in 1855 when Thomas Bulfinch published his popular compendium of mythology, he called it *The Age of Fable; or, Stories of Gods and Heroes*, but that toward the end of the same century an editor renamed the book, giving it the title by which it is commonly known today, *Bulfinch’s Mythology* (Hansen 2013:24–26). But the victory of the word “myth” in popular and scholarly usage did not mark an advance in analytic sophistication, since it amounted merely to the replacement of one more-or-less suitable term for fabulous stories for another such word.

The present-day understanding of ancient oral narratives is hindered by the fact that we have a wholly inadequate system of generic classification as well as an overall atomistic approach. By this I mean that mythologists study myths, fable scholars study fables, and others study the Greek novella, the Roman anecdote, and the like, but no investigators view the object of their study as being a part of a much larger whole, that of traditional narrative. Just as our understanding of classical art would be severely limited if it consisted only of studies of individual arts such as sculpture, architecture, painting, pottery, and jewelry, and possessed no notion of the ancient arts as an interrelated whole or an overall concept of classical art as such, so also our understanding of traditional narrative is constrained by our particularistic focus upon individual genres. For a clearer understanding of traditional narrative and its manifestations in antiquity we need a holistic vision of ancient story (Hansen 1983).

## 6 INTRODUCTION

To distinguish the forms and variety of ancient popular narratives more clearly, I propose below a taxonomy of Greek and Roman oral-narrative genres. I begin with the emic categories that we find in use at different times among the ancients, and supplement them with etic categories that modern folk-narrative scholars find useful for cross-cultural study (e.g., Dégh 1972; Honko 1989). I distinguish genres mostly by internal criteria (i.e., form and content) because more is known about ancient texts themselves than about their contexts and the intentions of their narrators, who cannot now be interrogated, but sometimes I also give attention to the presumed communicative purposes of different genres (e.g., amusement, clarification, crystallization).

I use the term “credence narratives” for stories that ancient narrators shaped in such a way as to present, or imply, a claim to historicity. For example, in early Greek literature (epic poetry, lyric poetry, prose mythology) narrators handle narratives of prehistoric times respectfully as appropriate subjects for artistic treatment and retelling in dignified forms of literature. Although individual persons did not have to accept in full or even in part an implicit or explicit claim of veracity, hearers and narrators generally treated the issue of truth and historicity as something at least discussable by competent adults, as illustrated by the discussion of Socrates and Phaidros regarding the tradition of the North Wind’s abduction of an Athenian princess. In short, credence narratives were subject to listeners’ and readers’ evaluation of their truth-value (cf. Nagy 1990:59–72). “We know how to speak many false things (*pseudea*) that seem genuine,” declare the Muses to Hesiod, on whom they are about to confer poetic powers, “and we know how to utter true things (*alethea*) when we wish to” (Hesiod *Theogony* 27–28). Although the Muses constitute for human beings, and for bards in particular, the primary font of information concerning what happened in the remote past, they themselves announce to Hesiod that the information they choose to provide is not always reliable.

In the case of recent events, the sources are human beings alone, but human narrators are not necessarily trustworthy either. “Odysseus, as

we look upon you, we don't regard you as one of those imposters and cheats whom the dark earth nourishes in abundance, persons who fashion falsehoods (*pseudea*) that no one can test," exclaims King Alkinoos, at whose court Odysseus has been recounting his extraordinary experiences (Homer *Odyssey* 11.363–366). While Odysseus was telling of his adventures, his listeners were silently judging the credibility of his report, for human narrators may introduce details of their own invention, as the poet Pindar (*Olympian* 1.28–29) observes when he declares that the narration of a "true story" (*ton alathe logon*) can become embellished with "elaborate lies" (*pseudesi poikilois*). Discriminating between truth and fiction was an integral part of listening to, or reading, a narrative, and it is doubtless a universal preoccupation of audiences.

Moreover, the system I set forth is tripartite in that it classifies individual oral narratives broadly as myths, legends, or folktales, a division that reflects the basic classification of traditional narratives that is found in many native systems of genre (Bascom 1965). The tripartite division of traditional narratives is usually traced back in European scholarly thought to the early nineteenth century, when the Brothers Grimm sorted German narratives into folktale (*Märchen*) and legend (*Sage*), and suggested that some of the fabulous tales of the present day were transformations of ancient myths.<sup>4</sup> These three categories are in common use by folk-narrative scholars, who analyze them into numerous subgenres (Bødker 1965), and the system is sometimes employed for ancient story.<sup>5</sup>

## THE KINDS OF ANCIENT STORY

### Traditional Credence Narratives

#### *Myth*

In the context of traditional Greek story, *myths* are traditional credence narratives whose principal characters are gods and other supernatural beings, whose events are set in the remote past during the formative era of the cosmos, and whose central topics, taken as a whole, are the origins of

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the physical world (cosmogony), of the gods (theogony), and of human beings (anthropogony), as well as the establishment of cosmic order.<sup>6</sup> Other notable topics of Greek myth are important events in the lives of the gods (birth, loves and conflicts, acquisition of prerogatives, founding of cult sites), the establishment of the conditions of human life such as the advent of toil and death, and cosmic catastrophes such as the Great Deluge. The lives of the gods are only partial biographies, for once divinities are born, they quickly mature and thereafter remain indefinitely at a particular developmental stage, usually mature adulthood (e.g., the elder Olympian deities) or youthful adulthood (the younger Olympians). Many mythic narratives are etiological in that they tell of how some familiar feature of the world came into being.

Toward the end of the mythic period, the physical cosmos possesses its present structure and nature in its essentials, the Olympian gods are in firm charge, the relationship of gods and humans has been defined, and the basic qualities of human existence have been determined. In short, the big matters have been taken care of.

The mythic era as described above is a feature of Greek more than of Roman tradition, at least initially, since Roman sources preserve little native tradition of myth. Such myths as the Romans once had either ceased to be told or were historicized by being converted into episodes of early Roman history. Subsequently the Romans reacquired myth by borrowing, primarily from the Greeks.

Although it is usual in anthropological and folkloristic scholarship to characterize myth as *sacred* narrative, this feature is not part of the present definition because sacredness does not make a good fit in the Greek and Roman case, and classicists rarely speak of myths and sacredness in the same breath. Myths do not appear to have been regarded as sacred stories in the classical lands, unless one means by “sacred” a narrative in which deities play a role, in which case the category of sacred story is too large to be of any practical use (Hansen 2002b:20–21). The Greeks did acknowledge a genre of traditional story to which they expressly attributed the quality of sacredness, namely, “sacred story” (*hieros logos*), to which I return later.



### *Heroic Legend*

*Heroic legends* are traditional credence narratives set in the age of heroes, which in Greek tradition is the era that follows the mythic period and precedes our own era. In his *Myth of the Ages* the poet Hesiod tells of a species of person called heroes, or demigods, who lived upon the earth immediately before ordinary humans. These heroes fought in the great wars at Thebes and Troy. Some survived, some died there, and others were translated by Zeus to the Isles of the Blessed at the ends of the earth.<sup>7</sup> Heroes predominated on the earth for around nine generations (Cobet 2002:405–411).

In early Greek literature the term “hero” is approximately synonymous with “warrior.” Although not all members of the heroic era were warriors, heroes characterize the age and give it its name (M. L. West 1978:190). They exceeded today’s humans in mind and stature.<sup>8</sup> Hesiod can describe the heroes as a “divine species” (*theion genos*) and as “demigods” (*hemi-theoi*) because many of them were literally the offspring of a deity and a human being. Perseus, for example, was the son of the god Zeus and the mortal woman Danae. It was presumably the divine component in persons of the heroic age that led them to achieve the extraordinary feats that made that age so splendid and memorable. The age of heroes came about as a result of the mating of deities and human beings, and it came to an end when this activity became less frequent.

Heroic legends, like myths, focus sometimes upon the doings of individual characters such as notable fighters (e.g., Achilleus, the foremost combatant at Troy), questers (Jason, who goes in search of the Golden Fleece), monster-slayers (Perseus, who slays the sea monster Ketos), tricksters (Odysseus, who devises the stratagem of the Trojan Horse), and seers (Melampous, who understands the speech of animals). Other heroic legends tell of group efforts such as the Argonauts’ quest for the Golden Fleece, the hunting of the huge Calydonian boar, and engagement in two great wars, those at Thebes and at Troy, the Trojan War being the culminating endeavor of the age of heroes.

No sharp border separates the mythic and the heroic eras. Instead, there is a region of fuzzy overlap as the focus of narrative interest shifts from gods to demigods and other mortals, and similarly a murky period exists when early human communities are found and younger deities such as Apollon, Persephone, Hermes, and Dionysos, offspring of the elder Olympians, seek niches for themselves in the cosmos.

Taken together, these two genres of traditional story, myth and heroic legend, focusing respectively upon supernatural beings and heroic beings, the era of the gods and the era of the demigods, and providing between them a more-or-less continuous account of events from the beginning of the cosmos to the end of the heroic age, constitute what we have come to call Greek mythology, or, after its adoption and incorporation by the Romans, classical mythology. Although the Greeks themselves did not give this set of traditions the name “mythology” or any other special appellation (cf. Detienne 1986), they appear to have regarded these stories as belonging together and, as discussed below, as being in some ways distinct from stories set in later times. In a telling passage in which narratives of the distant past are distinguished from those of the recent past, the historian Herodotos (3.122) contrasts traditions about a figure of the heroic era, King Minos of Crete, with those about a ruler of more recent times, Polykrates of Samos, who lived in what Herodotos refers to as “the so-called human age.” For Herodotos, then, the present era is the age of humans, and it followed the age of heroes, just as, presumably, the age of heroes in its turn succeeded the age of gods.

As a historian of the Persian Wars, Herodotos is interested mostly in the events of the human, or historical, age, but there are other Greek authors who treat, in the form of prose compilations of Greek myths and heroic legends, the events that precede it. A work that survives mostly intact is Apollodoros’s *Library*, a work of Hellenistic mythography that recounts events in the form of a continuous narrative from the mythic origins of the world to the aftermath of the Trojan War, the end of the heroic age. Greek prose mythography of this sort goes back to compilations of stories and genealogies made in the late sixth and early fifth centuries

BC by Hekataios, Akousilaos, Pherekydes, and others. The Greek epic poets and tragedians drew their plots almost exclusively from such myths and heroic legends. These practices constitute a tacit recognition that the mythological traditions of Greek prehistory constituted for the Greeks, and subsequently also for the Romans, a distinctive set of stories (Fowler 2000:xxvii–xxix).

The popular genres, as it will be convenient to call them, differ from the mythological genres in their characters, settings, and register. The focus of myths and heroic legends is upon the lives and deeds of divinities and heroes, while that of the other genres is upon the doings of human beings (or, in the case of fables, upon the activities of animals and plants and the like). Temporally, the events in mythological stories take place in the distant past, whereas popular stories are set in the historic era or in an indefinite past. With regard to register, the tone of the mythological narratives is one of weight and dignity. They are, as it were, high church, as shown by the fact that the composers of the loftiest and most dignified genres of ancient literature—epic and tragedy—drew almost exclusively upon them for their plots, as well as by the fact that mythological stories were frequently the subjects of parody, for nothing invites parody so much as high seriousness and dignity.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the tone of the popular genres is less formal. They are, to continue the metaphor, low church, although not all to the same degree, ranging as they do in dignity from, say, historical legends at the heavier end to jokes and fables at the other.

Generically, popular stories can be sorted into two large groups: legends (or traditional credence narratives) and folktales (or traditional fictions). The opposition of legend and folktale is basic to folk-narrative scholarship, going back at least to the Brothers Grimm, who famously observe that “the folktale is more poetic, the legend more historic.”<sup>11</sup> Their formulation is relative, since legends need not be devoid of aesthetic qualities nor folktales of historical elements (Röhrich 1991:12), but on balance the presence or absence of presumed historicity along with the corresponding implication for belief is the basic distinction by means of

which ordinary traditional narratives are sorted into two great categories, legends and folktales, or traditional credence narratives and traditional fictions (Lüthi 1975).

Legends set in the historic period, as opposed to the heroic era, can be termed simply historic legends, but because of the large number and kinds of such legends it is useful to treat several kinds individually in accordance with their natures. Those distinguished here are historic legends as such, religious legends, belief legends, contemporary (or urban) legends, and anecdotes. In addition, it is convenient to include the quasi-legendary genre of the personal-experience narrative.

### *Historic Legend*

Credence narratives set in the human age are *historic legends*. They include stories about important persons, places, and events—rulers, states and cities, settlement, wars and pestilences, and so on—as well as about notable persons of more modest station—philosophers, artists, athletes, thieves, and the like—and of small events of regional or local interest such as etiological traditions about the names of towns and the origins of natural features. In short, such legends focus upon supposedly real persons and events of the relatively recent past, that is, Herodotos’s human era, as opposed to persons and events of the more distant heroic past. They range in magnitude from long saga-like narratives such as the traditional history of the Lydian Empire to short anecdote-like accounts such as that of the death of the poet Ibykos or how Ophiteia (“Snaketown”) got its strange name.

An interesting example is the curious legendry, discussed by both Herodotos and Thucydides, that developed around the Athenian youths Harmodios and Aristogeiton.<sup>12</sup> In the late sixth century BC the city-state of Athens was ruled by tyrants, first Peisistratos and then his son Hippias. (The Greek term “tyrant” referred to a ruler who had taken control of a state by force; it did not necessarily imply that he ruled it oppressively.) In 514 BC, acting on a personal quarrel, the Athenian youths Harmodios and Aristogeiton assassinated the younger brother of the tyrant, Hipparchos,

during a festival, and were themselves executed. The killing of Hipparchos did not put an end to the tyranny, which ended several years later, but after the expulsion of the tyrants political reforms taking place under the leadership of Kleisthenes led to the momentous creation of democracy in Athens. Despite the fact that Harmodios and Aristogeiton acted for personal reasons and despite the fact that they did not actually put an end to the tyranny, the two were transformed into culture heroes, celebrated in popular tradition as the liberators of Athens and the founders of the democracy. Statues of the so-called tyrannicides were erected in Athens, public sacrifices were made to them, drinking songs were composed in their honor, and civic privileges were granted to their descendants.

### *Religious Legend*

*Religious legends* are credence narratives set in the historical period that recount the epiphany of a deity who performs a wonder of some kind or otherwise affects human affairs in a significant way.

This category usefully distinguishes narratives of divine epiphanies set in the human era from those set in the mythic or heroic eras. Compare, for example, two deluge stories, one a myth set in the remote past and the other a legend set in the recent past. According to Apollodoros (*Library* 1.7.2), Zeus decided to destroy the humans of the Bronze Age. The god Prometheus privately advised his mortal son Deukalion to build a chest, fill it with provisions, and embark on it with his wife Pyrrha. Presently Zeus brought about an immense flood that covered most of Greece and destroyed virtually all human life. Deukalion and Pyrrha floated in their chest for nine days and nights, landing finally on Mt. Parnassos. After the rains ceased, Deukalion disembarked and sacrificed to Zeus, who thereupon dispatched Hermes and allowed Deukalion to make a wish. He wished for people. The two survivors were instructed to throw stones over their heads, and those cast by Deukalion became men, while those thrown by Pyrrha became women. For this reason, having come from stones (*laas*), humans were called people (*laoi*): “people” from “pebbles,” as it were.

In a different flood story Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 8.620–724) relates how the gods Jupiter and Mercury, in the guise of humans, came to a place in Phrygia where they sought shelter. A thousand homes rejected the travelers before finally an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, took them in and offered them the modest hospitality that their means afforded. Presently the two strangers revealed themselves to be gods and declared that the impious community would be punished. They instructed the couple to follow them on foot to the top of a nearby mountain. Philemon and Baucis did so, and when they turned around, they saw that every house in the region was covered by water, or rather every house except theirs, which had become a temple. Jupiter asked them what they might wish, and they answered that they wanted to serve as priests in the temple and, when their days reached their end, not to outlive each other. So the pious couple tended the temple until the time came for them to die, when they metamorphosed into two trees, which to this day the local peasants venerate with offerings.

These two narratives are constructed upon the same plot. (1) The principal god decides to destroy human beings, but (2) a pious couple is tipped off. When (3) the god causes a great flood, (4) the couple escapes by boat or on foot, and (5) comes safely to the top of a mountain. There (6) the gods offer the couple a boon of their choice, and (7) they state their wish, (8) which the gods fulfill. The stories conclude with a transformation and an etiology: stones metamorphose into people, or people metamorphose into trees.

What distinguishes the stories from each other is not their basic sequence of action, which is the same, but the scale and significance of the events. In the former story the world, or at least the world known to the narrator, is covered with water, and nearly all living creatures perish. The devastation is so complete that a new creation of human beings is called for. In contrast, the latter text describes a regional catastrophe. A Phrygian town is inundated; its houses disappear under water and its inhabitants perish. One story is a myth and the other a legend, not because of the plot but because of the implications of the events, which in one case are

of cosmic significance and in the other have only regional implications (Hansen 2005:171–173).

Religious legends, set as they are in the human era, are narrated from the viewpoint of human beings, into whose world the divine makes a brief incursion. Several legends of this sort, for example, are found in the Lindian Chronicle, an inscription that was displayed in the sanctuary of Athena above the town of Lindos on the island of Rhodes (Higbie 2003). The text includes a description of an epiphany of Athena that took place around 490 BC when King Darius of Persia sent a naval expedition against the island. The Persians besieged the Rhodians at Lindos. A lack of water eventually wore down the inhabitants, who considered surrendering the city, but the goddess Athena appeared to a city official in a dream and urged him to take heart.<sup>13</sup> Presently a large cloud settled over the acropolis, and a great storm followed such that the besieged now had abundant water. According to the Lindian Chronicle the astonished Persian admiral sent offerings of his own to Athena, lifted the siege, and made a treaty of friendship with the people of Lindos.

#### ARETALOGY

The legend of Athena's epiphany at Lindos is an instance of what Greeks called an aretalogy (*aretalogia*), or narration of a miracle performed by a deity.<sup>14</sup> Correspondingly, an *aretalogos* was an expounder of such wonders, either a professional attached to a particular cult or an independent storyteller. It is perhaps unsurprising that such persons had a reputation for being garrulous and mendacious (Scobie 1979:240). The satirist Juvenal compares Odysseus's apologue to the Phaeacians in Homer's *Odyssey* (9–12), in which Odysseus regales his hosts with an account of his amazing adventures with the witch Circe, a Cyclops, the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, the ghosts of famous persons in the death realm, and so on, to that of a "lying aretalogist."<sup>15</sup> Many aretalogical texts have come down to us, such as the inscriptions displayed at the healing shrines of the Greek god Asklepios and of the Egyptian god Sarapis that told of miraculous cures effected by these deities.

### SACRED STORY

Somewhat similar is what the Greeks called a sacred story (*hieros logos*). Although the term had multiple meanings, its central sense was probably that of an esoteric credence narrative associated with a sacred rite (Henrichs 2003). Knowledge of such a story was restricted largely to an inner circle. For example, Herodotos comments several times that the Pelasgians or the Egyptians tell a sacred story about a particular cultic practice, and each time he respectfully stops at that point, not revealing the content of the story.<sup>16</sup> Instances in which ancient writers actually reveal the plot of a sacred story are rare. In one of them, Lucian discusses the self-castration of priests belonging to the cult of the Syrian goddess, offers a possible etiology for the origin of the custom, and then mentions an alternative etiology: “Others recount a sacred story on this subject, saying that Hera, in her love for Kombabos, put the idea of castrating themselves into the minds of many men in order that Kombabos might not be alone in mourning his manhood. This custom, once adopted, has abided to our own day.”<sup>17</sup> Lucian’s sacred story clearly falls within the definition of, and can be classified as, a religious legend, and it seems likely that the sacred stories known to Herodotos are of the same sort. A sacred story, then, is like an aretalogy in being a form of religious legend, but the two are dissimilar in that an aretalogy is a virtual public advertisement that calls attention to the powers of a particular deity, whereas a sacred story is the arcane property of an in-group. Unfortunately, so secretive a category of story has limited usefulness for the present-day classification of ancient narrative.

### *Belief Legend*

Like religious legends, *belief legends*, or legends reflecting a particular folk belief, concern human encounters with the supernatural.<sup>18</sup> Whereas religious legends may call forth pious feelings, belief legends, focusing as they do on controversial beliefs in ghosts, haunted localities, witches, werewolves (and in our day fairies, flying saucers, and extraterrestrials), tend rather to raise basic questions concerning the reality or nonreality of



particular supernatural phenomena, and so of different listeners' stances toward them (Dégh 2001). An ancient example can be seen in Lucian's dialogue *The Lover of Lies*, in which the author portrays a group of men exchanging reports of the supernatural and disputing among themselves the credibility of each narrative.<sup>19</sup>

Belief legends range from well-constructed narratives to virtually formless statements with a bare claim to the label of story. These extremes can be illustrated in a single ancient document, the famous letter on ghosts written by the younger Pliny (7.27) to Licinius Sura. Pliny asks Sura whether he believes in ghosts or thinks they are merely creations of our own fears. He acknowledges that he himself is inclined to believe in their existence because of what he has heard about the experience of Curtius Rufus, who once encountered a female figure of superhuman size and beauty. She foretold Rufus's future, and events turned out just as she had said.<sup>20</sup>

Pliny goes on to relate two more stories of the supernatural. The first concerns a haunted house in Athens. In a large residence the clanking of iron was heard during the night. These sounds were followed by the specter of an old man with chains on his wrists and fetters on his legs. Because of the terror caused by the apparition the mansion stood empty. At this juncture the philosopher Athenodoros showed up in Athens and rented the haunted house. In the evening he positioned himself on a couch, and after a while the ghost approached. Entering the room, it beckoned Athenodoros to follow. The philosopher did so, and the ghost vanished suddenly at a certain place. Athenodoros marked the spot, and on the following day the magistrates dug in the ground, finding bones and chains and fetters. After the remains had been given proper burial, the spirit appeared no more. This first story, says Pliny, he recounts as it was told to him. By this statement Pliny says in effect that while he himself is a reliable narrator, he assumes no personal responsibility for so colorful a narrative.

But his second story, he declares, is one that he can vouch for himself. One of Pliny's freedmen was sleeping in bed with his younger brother, and dreamt that he saw someone sitting on the bed and cutting the hair on the top of his head with a pair of scissors. In the morning he found that

the top of his head had been shorn and hair lay on the floor. A short time later a similar thing occurred to a slave boy who was sleeping in the slaves' quarters. Two men in white clothing entered through the window, cut his hair as he lay there in bed, and departed. When daylight came, the slave boy too discovered that his head had been shorn and his hair scattered about. Pliny speculates that these experiences were possibly a portent. In any case he concludes his letter with a request that Sura give his opinion on the question of ghosts so as to put an end to Pliny's doubts.<sup>21</sup>

Pliny's letter is belief legend in a nutshell. The story of the haunted house in Athens is an aesthetically well-structured, traditional narrative that begins with mystery and fear, introduces an intelligent protagonist, and concludes with a resolution of the problems of the house (haunting) and the ghost (improper interment). In contrast, the haircutting incidents are strange, rather formless events that are possibly connected with one another and possibly not, may involve supernatural agency and may not (ghost? practical joke? unreliable reporting?), and so remain unresolved and mysterious. In any case, the events challenged members of the household to take a position regarding the reality of ghosts and ghostlike beings.

### *Contemporary Legend*

*Contemporary legends*, also known as *urban legends*, are short credence narratives that tell of an unusual event belonging to the very recent past. Unlike the typical historic legend, in which the events are usually set a generation or more in the past and often involve notable persons, the contemporary legend is set almost in the present day, often in the narrator's own community, and typically features ordinary people.<sup>22</sup> The narrator may support the credibility of the story by alleging that the events happened to a friend of a friend.<sup>23</sup> Although three degrees of separation is common in contemporary legends, it is not peculiar to them.

The contemporary legend frequently concludes with a surprise such as a reversal or irony that resembles the punch line of a joke. For example, in the modern legend known as the Solid Cement Cadillac a man driving a

cement truck noticed a new convertible parked in his own driveway and his wife inside the house with a strange man. In jealous anger he filled the car with cement. Later he learned that the stranger was a car dealer who was delivering the convertible to the truck driver's house. His wife had ordered it as a birthday present for him.<sup>24</sup>

Although folk-narrative scholars initially supposed contemporary legends to be a new kind of legend, one expressive of a society that was no longer predominantly rural, scholars now perceive that stories of this sort have been in circulation for a long time. Indeed, there are ancient parallels to several contemporary legends that circulate in modern times, or at least to their principal motifs (Ellis 2001:46–57).<sup>25</sup> The existence of parallels between ancient and modern narratives is not in itself remarkable, but the urban-legend parallels seem more striking because such legends give the impression of being stories about current events and because, unlike many other traditional narratives, they are the sort of story that we ourselves hear, initially believe, and perhaps transmit. Because the legends are continually adapted to changing circumstances and are set in the very recent past, they have the feel of being new reports (Klintberg 1990).

Thus a Roman legend recounts how a craftsman created a glass bowl that was unbreakable. He secured an audience with the emperor, and when he was in the emperor's presence, he deliberately dropped the bowl onto the floor, picked it up, and repaired the dent with a hammer, expecting the emperor to be mightily impressed. The emperor asked him if anyone else knew of this technique for tempering glass, and the craftsman said no. Then the ruler had the man's head cut off, thinking that if the process should become general knowledge, gold would be worth no more than clay (Petronius *Satyrica* 51). In this story the ruler suppresses the secret of making unbreakable glass in order to protect the price of gold, just as in present-day rumors and stories a particular marvelous invention—an everlasting razorblade or lightbulb, an amazing additive for gasoline, and so on—has allegedly been suppressed, usually by a corporation that would suffer financially if the technology should become widely available.

### *Anecdote*

Traditional *anecdotes* are credence narratives consisting of a brief incident that culminates in a memorable utterance or action by a named person, most often a humorous remark in direct speech.<sup>26</sup> They are told only of historical, not mythological, characters.<sup>27</sup> Ideally the story captures something deemed characteristic of the figure. Although the anecdote may seem to be a trivial form of expression, its importance is shown by the fact that it is the most abundantly represented genre of traditional story in Greek and Roman literature. Many hundreds of ancient anecdotes are known, far more than any other genre of traditional narrative.

Structurally, anecdotes are simple narratives. They typically consist of a single scene with two characters, the principal character and a lesser character whose narrative function is to provide the occasion for a comment or gesture made by the character of interest. For example, a Greek anecdote tells of an encounter between the philosopher Diogenes of Sinope and King Alexander of Macedon, known later as Alexander the Great. The philosopher was sunning himself in a grove as Alexander arrived in town. When Alexander stood over Diogenes and offered him anything he wanted, Diogenes merely asked him to move out of his light (Diogenes Laertios 6.38). The utterance fits the popular image of the Cynic philosopher, in particular his disdain for worldly possessions as well as his habit of frank speech (*parrhesia*).

As it happens, Diogenes was a magnet for anecdotes. Hundreds of stories circulated about him in antiquity, more than are told of any other ancient figure, and they continued to be recounted long after his death. As late as the second century of our era Dion Chrysostomos (*Oration* 72.11) remarks on the popularity of Diogenes stories. The philosopher was a local character who became an international figure.<sup>28</sup> And just as some persons such as Diogenes were the subject of many anecdotes, some anecdotes were attached to multiple persons.<sup>29</sup>

Although our word “anecdote” derives from Greek *anekdoton*, the Greek word did not bear its present meaning in the ancient language

and was not an early term for the genre. Rather, the adjective *anekdoton* (etymologically, “not given out”) signified something “unpublished” such as an unpublished text, or, by extension, something secret. In the sixth century the Byzantine author Prokopios employed the word in the plural as the title of a literary work, *Anekdotia*, usually rendered *Secret History*, an intimate and scurrilous account of the regime of the emperor Justinian and the empress Theodora. Prokopios’s *Anekdotia* appeared in print in 1623, after which the word “anecdote” gradually acquired its modern sense in English and other languages.

The Greek narrative category that was closest to the present-day notion of anecdote was the *chreia*, which ancient rhetoricians defined as a concise reminiscence of an utterance or action attributed in a fitting way to a particular person.<sup>30</sup> Since the principal meaning of the noun *chreia* was “use, service,” the ancients explained the term as being a reference to the usefulness of the genre. This perhaps unexpected idea is connected with the fact that in antiquity anecdotes were closely associated with the philosophic tradition. *Chreiai*, it was thought, crystallized and preserved teachings of the philosophers (Hock and O’Neil 1986:3–10). Thus the usefulness of a *chreia* was not so much that it allowed one to learn *about* an interesting character as to learn *from* such a character, and although many kinds of persons, from emperors to courtesans, star in anecdotal narratives, the ancient repertory of anecdotes teems disproportionately with philosophers.

#### APOTHEGM

A common subform of the anecdote is the *apothegm* (Greek *apophthegma*), a pointed utterance or retort.<sup>31</sup> Although apothegms can be transmitted as mere statements attributed to a particular person, more often they are given a setting, however minimal, and usually they have the form “A, when asked such and such by B, said C.” For example, “Aesop, when asked by Kelaites what would produce the greatest disorder among humans, replied, ‘If the dead should arise and demand their property back.’”<sup>32</sup>

Apothegms are also found contextualized and expressed in a more natural manner, as in Xenophon's account of the arrest and execution of the Athenian politician Theramenes. Upon being condemned to death, Theramenes was seized by an agent of the ruling oligarchy and dragged away through the agora. The victim cried out about the injustice he was suffering, prompting the goon to warn him to shut up or he would be sorry, to which Theramenes responded, "And if I do keep quiet, then I won't be sorry?" Later, when he was compelled to drink hemlock, he mockingly toasted the man who had condemned him to death. Xenophon comments that while such *apophthegmata* possibly do not merit recording, he himself admires Theramenes's self-possession and humor in the face of death (*Hellenika* 2.3.56).

Generically, the anecdote and the historical legend are close relatives, and many short belief narratives preserved in ancient literature in which authors tell about some remarkable person or event do not fit squarely into one category or the other. Depending upon the individual case, one might think of a particular narrative either as a short legend or as a diffuse anecdote, and for such stories the term "anecdotal legend" is perhaps descriptively apt.

#### CATCH TALE

Several comic anecdotes told in antiquity are cast in the form of a *catch tale*, a kind of narrative in which the speaker induces the listener to ask a particular question for which the speaker has a ready answer that makes the listener appear foolish.<sup>33</sup> Thus a story told of the orator Demades relates how he was once declaiming to the Athenians, who paid him little attention. So he asked if he might tell them an Aesopic tale. When they assented, he said that Demeter, a swallow, and an eel were traveling together. When they came to a river, the swallow took to the air and the eel went in the water. Then Demades fell silent. The listeners asked, "And Demeter, what did she do?" Demades responded, "She is angry with you for being content to listen to an Aesopic fable and neglect the affairs of the city!"<sup>34</sup> There was of course no tale for Demades to finish, for there

was no such fable. The whole point was to embarrass the audience. In written texts, catch tales are necessarily represented as dialogues since they involve the spoken participation of both teller and listener.

### *Personal Narrative*

The *personal-experience narrative*, or simply *personal narrative*, is a first-person narration based upon, or supposedly based upon, actual experiences that the narrator has had.<sup>35</sup> It is the sort of everyday, conversational story that we relate to friends and acquaintances when we tell of something that has happened to us. Personal narratives are sometimes called personal legends, but they are perhaps best regarded as a quasi-legendary form, since they are not traditional in the usual sense of the term. Special forms include the memorate and the personal fable, which I discuss below.

Homer relates how the royal couple Helen and Menelaos were relaxing in their palace with their young guests Telemachos and Peisistratos, when Helen slipped her grief-banishing drug into the wine and proposed that they pass the time telling stories: “Now sit in the hall and feast, and take pleasure in stories. I’ll tell one myself that’s apt” (*Odyssey* 4.238–239). She proceeded to tell of a personal experience (she described it as “apt” because it features Odysseus, whose son she is at that moment entertaining), after which her husband Menelaos recounted a personal experience of his own. Since the ancients had no special term for the genre of personal narrative, Helen speaks simply of exchanging “stories” (*mythoi*).

There is some generic sleight-of-hand here. Inasmuch as Helen and Menelaos are characters of the heroic age, stories that are personal-experience narratives for them may be heroic legends for us. Helen’s story has to do with an occasion at Troy when Odysseus disguised himself and daringly made his way into the city, where Helen recognized him and secretly helped him. Menelaos’s story describes the tense occasion when Menelaos, Odysseus, and other Greeks sat concealed within the Wooden Horse.

But there are many straightforward instances of the personal narrative in ancient literature. Lucian, for example, recounts experiences of his own in his essay *Alexander the False Prophet* (53–57).<sup>36</sup> The essay begins as a

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third-person account of the life and career of a religious charlatan, but toward the end the author himself enters the story, as Lucian charts Alexander's growing hostility toward him, which ends with an attempt on the author's life. Here, as in most personal narratives, the narrator's own experience takes center stage, but sometimes another person is the focus of narrative interest.<sup>37</sup>

MEMORATE

A subset of the personal-experience narrative is the *memorate*, or first-person account of a supernatural experience.<sup>38</sup> Whereas a belief legend is a third-person narrative of someone else's encounter with the supernatural, a memorate is a first-person account of one's own experience. An ancient example is the striking account that the poet Hesiod gives of his encounter with the Muses. Once, as Hesiod shepherded his sheep at the base of holy Mt. Helikon, the Muses appeared to him and addressed him, handed him a staff of laurel, "breathed into" him a divine voice with which to celebrate things future and things past, and told him to sing of the blessed gods (*Theogony* 22–34), whereupon he became a bard.<sup>39</sup>

While we possess Hesiod's own narration of his paranormal experience, for the memorate of Curtius Rufus, mentioned earlier, we are dependent upon retellings by Pliny and by Tacitus.<sup>40</sup> Is a retelling of Rufus's memorate still a memorate? It seems preferable to refer to a retelling of another person's story as a *vicarious* narration (Labov and Waletzky 1967:32, 34). Thus Rufus's first-person account of his encounter with a supernatural being is a memorate, whereas tellings by Pliny and Tacitus, at an unknown remove from Rufus's, are properly vicarious narratives, or vicarious memorates.

PERSONAL FABLE

The *personal-experience fable*, as we may call it, or simply *personal fable*, is a rare but interesting form that combines two narrative models, the personal narrative as a first-person account of the speaker's own experience and the fable as a simple metaphoric narrative possibly with an



application to the immediate situation. Although the ancient instances of the personal fable are set in the heroic age, I locate it here among other personal narratives because the essential idea of the subgenre is not its content but its structure. It is at bottom a rhetorical device.<sup>41</sup> Thus Homer recounts how Odysseus came in the guise of an old beggar to the hut of the swineherd Eumaios. In the evening the weather turned rainy and windy, and Odysseus, hoping to induce his host to lend him a cloak, said he was going to express a wish in the form of a story (*epos*). He then told how, as a younger man at Troy, he and other soldiers had encamped for the night, and the weather turned bitterly cold. He had neglected to bring a cloak. He mentioned his plight to his commander, who cleverly devised a way for him to have the use of another man's cloak. When Odysseus finished his story, the swineherd commented, "That was a fine *ainos* you related, old fellow," and provided him with warm clothing for the night.<sup>42</sup>

The term that Eumaios uses for the beggar's story, *ainos*, signifies a narrative that has a hidden (i.e., metaphoric) meaning. Like the Aesopic fable, the personal fable is a traditional rhetorical device in which the speaker relates a brief story that is meant to be understood metaphorically and applied in some way to the present situation. The difference between the two lies in their content. The person who employs a personal fable draws upon a personal experience, or simply invents a realistic tale, as Odysseus does in the Homeric passage, and reports it as something he or she experienced. In contrast, the person who uses a fable of the Aesopic kind ordinarily draws upon a repertory of traditional fables and recounts an obviously fictitious tale featuring talking animals or the like. In the present scene the personal fable enables the guest to express a need without rudeness and presumption.

### Traditional Fictions

Traditional fictions can be grouped together under the umbrella-term *folktale*, or simply *tale*. Since folktales are generally presented by narrators as fictional, they do not normally raise issues of historicity or belief. The

ANCIENT FOLK-NARRATIVE GENRES

*Traditional Credence Narratives*

Myth  
Heroic Legend  
Historic Legend  
Religious Legend  
    Aretalogy  
    Sacred Story  
Belief Legend  
Contemporary (or Urban) Legend  
Anecdote  
    Apothegm  
    Catch Tale  
Personal Narrative  
    Memorate  
    Personal Fable

*Traditional Fictions*

Wonder (or Fairy) Tale  
Religious Tale  
Novella  
    Milesian Tale  
Animal Tale  
Fable  
    Short Fable  
Comic Tale  
Joke  
    Tall Tale  
Chain Tale

characters are usually nameless or bear generic folktale names, and the action is usually set in a generic location in the vague or timeless past. Narrators make little attempt to lend credibility to such narratives by claiming to have been present or by attributing their story to a reliable source, unless they do so in a playful spirit.

The principal genres discussed here are the wonder (or fairy) tale, the religious tale, and the novella, which are complex tales, and the animal tale, the fable, and the joke, which usually are simple tales. Frequently the tone is comic, especially in the shorter forms. Some of the genres may be regarded as nonbelief counterparts to particular credence genres, notably, the wonder tale to the heroic legend, the religious tale to the religious legend, and the tall tale to the personal narrative.

*Wonder Tale*

The stories known to English-speakers as *fairytales* are complex (that is, poly-episodic), artistically formed traditional tales of fantasy that mix the supernatural into the natural.<sup>43</sup> To folklorists they are *magic tales*

(*Zaubermärchen*) or *wonder tales* (*Wundermärchen*), since the element of magic along with an atmosphere of wonder are characteristic, whereas fairies rarely appear in them. I shall refer to them by the etic term “wonder tale” as well as by the familiar emic designation of “fairy tale.”

In many such tales a young hero or heroine goes out into the world, where at some point he or she encounters the supernatural, overcomes obstacles, and triumphs by means of kindness, perseverance, and/or luck, achieving wealth or elevated social status or both.<sup>44</sup> The wonder tale is the genre par excellence for happy endings in an atmosphere of the marvelous. Tales teem with such elements as enchanted spouses, supernatural adversaries (monsters, ogres, witches, etc.), mysterious helpers, talking animals, and magic objects, not to mention princes and princesses and kings and queens. Unlike characters of legend, who respond to supernatural phenomena as something extraordinary, characters in the wonder tale exhibit neither astonishment nor fear at giants, speaking animals, and other marvels, but treat them as perfectly ordinary.<sup>45</sup>

One such wonder tale has come down to us in classical literature, the enchanting story of Cupid and Psyche, which is recounted by the Roman novelist Lucius Apuleius in his *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*. In this tale a beautiful princess, Psyche, was obliged to marry a mysterious supernatural being, who visited her nightly but forbade her ever to look upon him. When she was induced by her jealous sisters to break her husband’s strange taboo, he departed, never to return. She regained him after a long and arduous quest, and they were happily reunited (4.28–6.24).

An abstract of the plot does not capture the tale’s qualities of wonder, which are found mostly in the details. Thus Psyche, attired for her wedding, was led by her grieving parents to a cliff to be claimed by her mysterious husband-to-be, where the West Wind gently lifted the girl up and deposited her below in a flowery valley. From there she made her way through a woods to a palace of divine craftsmanship, full of treasure, and was welcomed by an invisible servant, who suggested that she rest, bathe, and proceed to the banquet table. And so on.

Although today wonder tales are generally treated as children's literature, historically they were a form of entertainment primarily for adults. Still, some traditional wonder tales are designed to appeal to children, and although none has survived entire from antiquity, we have tantalizing allusions to ancient children's tales and legends that attest to the existence of stories of this sort.

### *Religious Tale*

*Religious tales* are traditional, noncredence narratives focusing upon some aspect of the relationship of humans and gods. An ancient Greek story, for example, relates how a man witnessed a ship sink with everyone onboard, whereupon he declared that the gods were unjust, since many innocent persons perished merely because, as he assumed, one impious man had been aboard. In the meantime some ants crawled upon him, and when one ant bit him, the man trampled on them. Thereupon the god Hermes appeared, saying, "So, then, won't you let the gods be your judges the way you are the judge of the ants?" (Babrius 117).

Religious tales are the folktale counterpart of religious legends. In religious tales, as in wonder tales, humans respond without awe to the appearance of the supernatural. So in the foregoing narrative the focus is upon what Hermes has to say, almost as though he were a human interlocutor, and not upon his sudden epiphany. In contrast, humans in belief legends and religious legends treat the supernatural as a startling intrusion into their world.

### *Novella*

Like wonder tales, *novelistic tales*, or *novelle*, are complex narratives of traditional fiction, but they are realistic rather than fantastic.<sup>46</sup> The novella features domestic and urban themes such as love, seduction, cleverness, and thievery. Its heroes and heroines are ordinary people rather than royalty, the action takes place in realistic settings, and the protagonist faces social enemies rather than monstrous antagonists. When characters and places are named, they serve to create a realistic atmosphere rather than to lend serious credibility to the events.

An example of a novelistic tale of clever thievery is “The Treasury of Rhampsinitos.” King Rhampsinitos of Egypt had a stone treasury constructed to house his valuables, but the man who built it secretly made one of the stones removable, and on his deathbed he revealed to his two sons this vulnerability of the king’s treasury. The sons went to the building, removed the stone, and took away much of the king’s money. The next time that the king visited his treasure-house, he was surprised to find that although the locks were intact, some valuables were missing. So he set a trap inside the treasury and when the two thieves struck again, one of them got caught. The ensnared thief instructed his brother to cut off his head in order to prevent his identification. The other brother did so, replaced the stone, and departed with his brother’s head. Although the monarch tried again and again to catch the clever thief, the youth always outwitted him, until finally the king offered the thief a pardon and a reward. The youth presented himself to the king, who gave him his daughter in marriage (Herodotos 2.121).

#### MILESIAN TALE

A well-known ribald novella is exemplified by the tale “The Widow of Ephesos” mentioned earlier. A matron of Ephesos was famous for her fidelity, and when her husband died, she followed his corpse to his underground vault and remained there in constant mourning. Meanwhile, a soldier, seeing a light in the tomb, descended into the vault to investigate, and found the beautiful widow. He offered her food, which eventually she was persuaded to accept, and presently the two were passing their nights together in love. When the soldier discovered to his horror that one of the corpses he was supposed to be guarding had been stolen, the widow came to his rescue by replacing it with the dead body of her own late husband (Petronius *Satyrical* 110.6–113.9).

The bawdy novella of the widow is the sort of narrative that the Romans called a *Milesian tale*.<sup>47</sup> The appellation derives ultimately from a Greek literary work, *Milesiaka*, composed in the second century BC by a certain Aristeides, which seems to have been a compilation of amusing and licentious short stories in prose much like Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*,

possibly set in the city of Miletos. Its favorable reception is evidenced by the fact that it was translated into Latin, though very little survives of the original or the translation.<sup>48</sup>

Although Aristeides popularized the bawdy novella, the form predates him, for we find a ribald novella, lightly mythologized, centuries earlier in Homer's *Odyssey*. Ares and Aphrodite carried on an affair in her own home in the absence of her husband, the blacksmith Hephaistos. When the cuckold learned of the affair, he went to his smithy and forged fetters as fine as spiderwebs, which he draped around his bed. No sooner were the two lovers in bed together than they found themselves trapped in place and unable to move. Hephaistos summoned the other gods to view the discomfited pair (*Odyssey* 8.266–369). The mythic coloration here is superficial. The narrative is essentially a realistic tale of adultery and revenge set in the vague past in a nameless Greek village: a handsome soldier begins an affair with the beautiful wife of a lame blacksmith, but the cuckold has a trick of his own, trapping the lovers and displaying them publicly to their shame and for the amusement of others.

### *Animal Tale*

The traditional *animal tale* is a short folktale featuring animals as characters, or animals and humans. A story told whimsically as an etiological tale about why dogs sniff one another relates how the dogs once sent ambassadors to Jupiter in order to complain of the poor treatment they received at the hands of humans, and to petition for a better lot in life. The ambassadors sniffed around for food on the way, took a long time to reach Jupiter's palace, and when they finally beheld the face of the mighty god, were so frightened that they shat all over the palace, whereupon they were driven away. The dogs then dispatched a second group of ambassadors, who took pains to guard against a similar mischance by stuffing their rear ends with perfume. But when they faced the father of the gods sitting on his throne and brandishing his thunderbolt, they promptly voided shit and perfume. The gods were indignant, and Jupiter decreed that dogs would evermore be tormented by hunger as well as

(continued...)

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