

Cassandra's Swan Song: Aeschylus' Use of Fable in *Agamemnon*

John Philip Harris

A PASSAGE from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1444–1446) is our earliest reference to the belief that the swan sings a mournful lament once it realizes death looms:¹

ὁ μὲν γὰρ οὕτως, ἡ δὲ τοι κύκνου δίκην
τὸν ὕστατον μέλψασσα θανάσιμον γόον
κεῖται φιλήτωρ τοῦδε...

That is why he lies there like this, and she does too, his lover,
after singing her last death-laden lament like a swan...²

All earlier authors who allude to the swan's song note that throughout its life it sings joyously in praise of a god: they mention neither its vatic powers nor its lugubrious song.³ In no case prior to this play is the swan portrayed as singing a song of lamentation, let alone one prophetically bewailing its imminent demise. But once Aeschylus alludes to the moribund swan's plaintive threnody, this particularly elegiac vein of its repertoire

¹ See D. W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford 1936) 180–182; E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus: Agamemnon* (Oxford 1950) III 684; W. G. Arnott, *Birds in the Ancient World from A to Z* (London/New York 2007) 123.

² Transl. C. Collard, *Aeschylus: Oresteia* (Oxford 2002) 40.

³ Hes. *Sc.* 314–317; *Hymn.Hom.* 21; Alcman fr.1.100–101; Pind. *Pae.* 3.10–14; Bacch. *Dithyr.* 16.5–7. With the exception of the Hesiodic passage, where simply the volume of its sound is noted, the rest emphasize the clarity, sonority, sweetness of the swan's song, as well as its being sung in joyful celebration either in honour of a god or goddess (Alcman) or specifically Apollo (Pindar and Bacchylides). For "A Survey of the Swan Song in Greek and Latin Literature" see H. Donohue, *The Song of the Swan: Lucretius and the Influence of Callimachus* (Lanham 1993) 18–29.

takes on new life and virtually supplants its formerly jubilant hymn of praise.⁴ Notwithstanding Socrates' attempted rehabilitation of that earlier joyful strain in *Phaedo*, even he acknowledges that people commonly believe that swans "sing their final song bewailing their death."⁵ As W. Geoffrey Arnott notes:⁶

Thereafter the legend quickly became a literary commonplace ... By the third century B.C. the phrase 'to sing one's swan song' had already become a proverb.

But that Aeschylus is able to compare the dying Cassandra's prophetic song to the dying swan's necessarily implies the prior existence of a tale in which the swan is renowned for its prescient *Todeslied*. Yet the earlier literary tradition makes no mention of this prophetically melancholic song. We may account for this lacuna by simply acknowledging the vast amount of ancient Greek literature now lost, among which presumably should be included Aeschylus' source for the dying swan's mournful dirge. Barring the discovery of a papyrus fragment that would both allude to this peculiar talent and could be shown to antedate *Agamemnon*, there would not seem to be much more that could be said.

But what I will suggest here is the possibility that we already do possess a version of Aeschylus' source for his comparison of the dying Cassandra to the dying swan. I argue that Aeschylus' allusion to the dying swan's song has as its source not an earlier and now lost lyric poem or tragedy, but rather depends upon the oral tradition that ultimately came to be written down and

⁴ See D. L. Page, *Alcman: The Partheneion* (Oxford 1951) 100.

⁵ Pl. *Phd.* 85A4–5. While granting the swan's prophetic nature, Plato's Socrates vehemently denies that the song is a lament, arguing instead that, "when once they perceive they must die, although having sung earlier in their lives, they now sing most and very beautifully, overjoyed that they are to go to the god whose servants they are" (84E4–85A3). See Thompson, *Glossary* 181–182, for later writers who echo this Socratic spin on the swan's song.

⁶ W. G. Arnott, "Swan Songs," *G&R* 24 (1977) 149–153, at 149.

then collected in the first known compilation of Aesopic fables.

While all earlier references to the swan's voice or song focus on clarity, melodiousness, and its celebration of a god, most often Apollo, this passage introduces—not surprisingly given its context—a novel and ominous note (θανάσιμον γόον). Aeschylus here cleverly exploits the paradoxical nature of the Cassandra myth by giving it his own dramaturgical twist: the doomed prophetess foretells her own impending demise to an uncomprehending chorus.⁷ Yet despite being the first in extant Greek literature to extend the swan's Apolline associations from eulogistic servant to melancholic prophet, that Aeschylus can make the comparison at all requires his having the appropriate comparandum. At some point prior to 458 BCE, then, there had to exist a tale in which the swan not only sings a dirge instead of a paean, but also one in which it presciently mourns its own death.

Before discussing this precursor, I first turn to Sophocles, who alludes to the swan's song in *Antigone*.⁸ Creon, impatient to have Antigone taken away for punishment, indignantly asks (883–884):

ἄρ' ἴστ' ἀοιδὰς καὶ γόους πρὸ τοῦ θανεῖν
ὥς οὐδ' ἄν εἰς παύσαιτ' ἄν, εἰ χρεῖη λέγειν;

Don't you know that, if it were required to utter songs and lamentations before dying, nobody would ever stop?⁹

⁷ See A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington 1971) 52–56.

⁸ Although Sophocles twice mentions swans elsewhere (fr.928, 1026), he does not refer to their song.

⁹ Transl. M. Griffith, *Sophocles: Antigone* (Cambridge 1999) 274. For discussion of these vexed lines and their various emendations see P. Vidal-Naquet, "Le chant du cygne d'Antigone," in A. Machin and L. Pernée, *Sophocle: le texte, les personnages* (Aix-en-Provence 1992) 285–297, at 285–289. More briefly, R. D. Dawe, *Studies on the Text of Sophocles III* (Leiden 1978) 111; J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocle III* (Leiden 1978) 156–157; A. Brown, *Sophocles: Antigone* (Warminster 1987) 197; H. Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson, *Sophoclea: Studies on the Text of Sophocles* (Oxford 1990) 137–138.

In his commentary on this passage, Lewis Campbell simply compared these lines to *Agamemnon* 1444–1446 without further comment.¹⁰ For over a century no other scholar weighed in on this possible allusion until Pierre Vidal-Naquet resuscitated it, arguing that the lines contain an implicit metaphor, that of the swan singing its own lament just before dying.¹¹ Although dismissing Aesopic fable as a potential source given that it is “indatable,” he suggested that Sophocles is most likely alluding to this passage from *Agamemnon*. That may be, but Sophocles may just as well, like Aeschylus, be alluding to a lost precursor that first characterized the swan’s song as a prophetic lament upon its own demise. Yet even granting Vidal-Naquet’s suggestion, we are still left with having to account for the source of Aeschylus’ own allusion. Perhaps he was too hasty in dismissing Aesopic fable.

Although Euripides refers to the swan song seven times in his extant tragedies, only two are relevant to the Aeschylean allusion. In the monody of *Electra*, where she mourns her dead father, Electra compares herself to a swan (150–156):

ἔ ἔ, δρύπτε κάρα·
οἶα δέ τις κύκνος ἀχέτας
ποταμίους παρὰ χεύμασιν
πατέρα φίλτατον καλεῖ,
ὀλόμενον δολίοις βρόχων
ἔρκεσιν, ὡς σὲ τὸν ἄθλιον,
πάτερ, ἐγὼ κατακλαίομαι.

Ah, ah, tear my head,
And as some moaning swan
by river’s streams
calls to its dearest father,
perished now in the guileful corded
net, so do I lament
for you, poor father.¹²

¹⁰ L. Campbell, *Sophocles* (Oxford 1879) 530.

¹¹ Vidal-Naquet, *Sophocle* 290.

¹² Transl. M. J. Cropp, *Euripides: Electra* (Warminster 1988) 15.

Like all tragic monodies, this is essentially an informal lament and, as such, its “subject-matter and verbal style reflect the formal and conventional features of the ritual *goos* over the dead which was the province of female family members.”¹³ As Arnott pointedly asks:¹⁴

[I]s it possible that Electra's simile of the swan in Euripides here was inspired by an earlier passage in the Aeschylean trilogy: Clytemnestra's reference to Cassandra singing her last and fatal song like a swan, towards the end of the *Agamemnon* (1444 ff.)? Perhaps so: perhaps not.

But whatever Euripides' inspiration, what is not in doubt is the particular twist each puts on this motif. Whereas Aeschylus assimilates the swan's plangent self-lament to Cassandra's mournful dirge prophesying her own death, Euripides is able to appropriate its threnodic aspect, but cannot, given the context, similarly appropriate its prophetic quality. Constrained by the fact that Electra is a ritual mourner of her father's death, Euripides can only assimilate the swan's song to a dirge for a lost loved one and must forego any hint of prophecy, in particular prophecy couched as a song lamenting her own death.

The other Euripidean play is *Heracles*, in which the chorus repeatedly compares itself to a swan (107–114, 678–679, 691–694). In the first passage, calling itself “an aged singer of lament,” the chorus of Theban elders compares itself to “some bird of white plumage,” a simile most scholars properly understand as referring to the swan.¹⁵ G. W. Bond sees the point of the simile as twofold: “the white hair of the old men is like the swan's plumage,” and “the swan's ‘song’ is loud and suited to a lament” (95). Although initially rejecting Wilamowitz's inter-

¹³ Cropp, *Euripides: Electra* 107. Cf. Aeschylus' description of Cassandra's song as a θανάσιμος γόος.

¹⁴ W. G. Arnott, “Electra's Musical Swan,” in *Studi in Onore di Adelmo Baringuzzi* (Rome 1984) 27–31, at 27–28.

¹⁵ E.g. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Euripides Herakles* (Berlin 1895) 30–31; G. W. Bond, *Euripides: Heracles* (Oxford 1981) 95–96.

pretation which “connects the comparison here with the belief that swans sing most sweetly and copiously before they die” (95–96), Bond himself later makes the very same connection: “Being old and near death they [the chorus] will sing most sweetly (A. *Ag.* 1444, Pl. *Phaedo* 84e6).” And having noted these allusions, Bond intriguingly remarks: “It seems likely that all three *HF* passages echo a well-known original, now lost ... The lost original would incidentally probably lie behind the simile of the swan at *El.* 151 and possibly also A. *Ag.* 1444” (240).

Although Bond postulates a non-extant precursor, he offers no suggestion about which genre it might have belonged to. Vidal-Naquet, on the other hand, after more tantalizingly suggesting Aesopic fable, quickly dismisses it as a source, preferring to see Aeschylus as Sophocles’ immediate inspiration. But such hasty dismissal of the fable tradition fails to consider Aeschylus’ allusions to and quotations from fables. Notwithstanding their absolute ‘undatability’, the fables to which Aeschylus refers obviously antedated his own writings. In what follows I first look at those instances in the Aeschylean corpus which *communis opinio* regards as definitive quotations or allusions to fables. I then turn to the swan song simile in *Agamemnon* and suggest as its possible source the oral tradition of fable, as manifest in its literary avatar, “The Swan and his Owner.”

While Euripides may not quote or allude to any fable in his tragedies, Sophocles refers to at least two.¹⁶ Aeschylus, how-

¹⁶ For a “synopsis of the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic Greek fables and allusions” in Greek literature, see G. J. van Dijk, *ΑΙΝΟΙ, ΛΟΓΟΙ, ΜΥΘΟΙ: Fables in Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic Greek Literature* (Leiden 1997) 385–399. Although van Dijk countenances no fables in Euripides, five have been proposed which he rejects (654). Sophocles refers to at least two in *Ajax*: “Man and Sailors” (1142–1146) and “Man, Neighbours, Somebody” (1150–1156); see van Dijk 176–181 for analysis of these, and 677–678 for four others he discounts as being fables per se. For a similar catalogue of Archaic and Classical Greek fables, but which does not include allusions, see F. R. Adrados, *History of the Graeco-Latin Fable* (Leiden 1999–2003) I 396–409.

ever, not only alludes to one and possibly two fables, but also directly quotes a fable.¹⁷ In a famous passage of Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*, Achilles, lamenting his own culpability for the death of Patroclus, refers to and quotes part of "the Libyan fable" (fr.139 Radt = Perry 276a):¹⁸

ὦδ' ἐστὶ μύθων τῶν Λιβυστικῶν κλέος,
 πληγέντ' ἀτράκτω τοξικῶ τὸν αἰετὸν
 εἰπεῖν ἰδόντα μηχανὴν πτερώματος·
 "τάδ' οὐχ ὑπ' ἄλλων, ἀλλὰ τοῖς αὐτῶν πτεροῖς
 ἀλισκόμεσθα."

Even so is the Libyan fable famed abroad: the eagle, pierced by the bow-sped shaft, looked at the feathered device and said, "Thus, not by others, but by means of our own plumage, are we slain."¹⁹

Although Achilles characterizes the fable of "The Wounded Eagle" as Libyan, the relevant point here is that Aeschylus not only refers to but actually quotes a passage from a well-known fable *within* a tragedy, thus demonstrating that he is prepared to quote and allude to a fable when its subject matter particularly suits the point he wants to make, as when someone is hoist by his own petard. As Niklas Holzberg notes: "the fable was not regarded in antiquity as a literary genre per se, but was primarily used in poetry and prose as exemplum with which to illustrate all manner of observations."²⁰ This passage from *Myr-*

¹⁷ Van Dijk, *AINOI* 169–176, allows Aeschylus one direct quotation of a fable and one allusion. But he rejects ten other candidates—five of which (not including *Ag.* 1444–1446) appear in *Agamemnon*—relegating them to the Appendix "Non-Fables & Non-allusions."

¹⁸ See further G. J. van Dijk, "Intertextualiteit in de Griekse Literatuur. De Functie van een Fabel van Aeschylus tot Eustathius," *Kleio* 22 (1992–1993) 141–157; M. L. West, "The Ascription of Fables in the Archaic and Classical Ages," in F. R. Adrados (ed.), *La Fable* (Geneva 1984) 105–136, at 114–115; van Dijk, *AINOI* 169–171; Adrados, *History* I 8–9, 35, 42, 153, 183, 400, and III 339–341.

¹⁹ Transl. H. W. Smyth, *Aeschylus* (London/New York 1926) 425.

²⁰ N. Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable* (Bloomington 2002) 1. Cf. C. A. Zafiro-

midons is a particularly fine specimen of such exemplary use of fable by a tragedian.

Another such use comes at *Agamemnon* 717–736, as part of the third stasimon, which Holzberg aptly denominates “The Young Lion.”²¹ Significantly, it possesses several formal characteristics of fable: the use of οὕτως (718) to introduce it; the use of ἀνήρ (719) unaccompanied by any qualifying adjective; and the device of ring composition: the introductory ἔθρεψεν (717) and the concluding προσεθρέφθη (736). Thus, as signalled both by its formal characteristics and by its paradigmatic use as cautionary tale, “The Young Lion” may properly be called a fable.²² So once again, in a choral ode fraught with great significance, Aeschylus takes advantage of the exemplary function of a fable from the oral tradition to enhance the tragic pathos not only of this passage of *Agamemnon*, but also of the *Oresteia* as

poulos, *Ethics in Aesop's Fables: The Augustana Collection* (Leiden 2001) 12–19; B. E. Perry, *Babrius and Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1964) xii–xiii.

²¹ Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable* 12. For criticism of those who would deny this passage its status as fable see G. J. van Dijk, “There were Fables before Aesop: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature,” *Reinardus* 11 (1998) 205–214, at 207–208, and *AINOI* 171–176, especially 172 n.20. B. M. W. Knox, “The Lion in the House,” *CP* 47 (1952) 17–25 (= *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* [Baltimore 1979] 27–38); Lebeck, *The Oresteia* 47–51; and C. Nappa, “*Agamemnon* 717–36: The Parable of the Lion Cub,” *Mnemosyne* 47 (1994) 82–87, all prefer the term ‘parable’ to ‘fable’ to denominate this portion of the third stasimon. Knox, however, concedes that “The lion cub story falls somewhere between the two types” (25 n.1). Cf. I. A. Schuurisma, “Aeschyli Apologus,” *Mnemosyne* 60 (1932) 179–192, at 179; F. R. Adrados, “El tema del león en el *Agamemnon* de Esquilo,” *Emerita* 33 (1965) 1–5. But Adrados (*History* I 408, III 827), following van Dijk’s lead, now accepts this as a fable. As van Dijk notes: “A fundamental difference between fable and parable does not exist” (*AINOI* 36). But for the difficulties in both defining fable and demarcating it precisely from other (sub)genres such as anecdote and parable, see further van Dijk 34–37 and 112–115.

²² See van Dijk, *AINOI* 112–115 and 362–366, for some of the characteristic formal features of fable, and 172–173 for the specific formal features of this particular fable, as well as van Dijk, *Reinardus* 11 (1998) 207–208.

a whole.

Besides these two clear instances of Aeschylus' use of fable, there is arguably a third where he may allude to a fable. At *Agamemnon* 355–361 the chorus addresses “friendly Night” who has thrown “[her] mesh to cover Troy’s battlements so that no one full-grown, nor any of the very young, might rise above the great dredge-net of slavery which captures all” (transl. Collard). Commentators are of at least two minds in their interpretation of this image, seeing in it an allusion either to hunting or to fishing.²³ Lloyd-Jones, however, argues persuasively that the image refers to fishing, and cites Babrius 4 (= Perry 282), “The Fisherman and the Fish,” as the relevant and obvious fable that inspired Aeschylus.²⁴ And in his appendix “Non-Fables & Non-Allusions,” despite rejecting Lloyd-Jones’ suggestion that Aeschylus is alluding to this fable, van Dijk concedes that this passage “is *comparable* [his emphasis] with Babr. 4.”²⁵ Malcolm Davies, on the other hand, does allow for the possibility that Lloyd-Jones’ suggestion may in fact have merit.²⁶ So, with two indisputable uses of fable established, and a third possibly alluded to, I turn to the swan song in Aesopic fable and Cassandra’s swan song in *Agamemnon*.

Of the eight fables in Adrados’ *Index Fabularum* that feature swans,²⁷ two make no mention of its song, but only of its white

²³ See e.g. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus* II 189–90; J. D. Denniston and D. Page, *Aeschylus Agamemnon* (Oxford 1960) 101; Lebeck, *The Oresteia* 64–68, 184–185; J. Dumortier, *Les images dans la poésie d’Eschyle* (Paris 1975) 76–79; E. Petrounias, *Funktion und Thematik der Bilder bei Aischylos* (Göttingen 1976) 148–149; J. C. Hogan, *A Commentary on the Complete Greek Tragedies: Aeschylus* (Chicago 1984) 52.

²⁴ H. Lloyd-Jones, “*Agamemnonea*,” *HSCP* 73 (1969) 97–104, at 98–99.

²⁵ Van Dijk, *AINOI* 632. Adrados, *History* I 144, regards this simile as independent of any fable.

²⁶ M. Davies, “Aeschylus and the Fable,” *Hermes* 109 (1981) 248–251, at 250.

²⁷ Adrados, *History* III 1080. I have added the fable “The Kite that Neighed” (Adrados’ “not-H.125”: *History* III 458), as explained in n.30 below.

plumage;²⁸ another refers to its greater weight relative to that of the goose.²⁹ Of the remaining five, two allude to the beauty (or possibly volume) of its song,³⁰ and another involves the swan in a singing contest to celebrate Easter.³¹ But it is the other two fables which, while taking for granted that swans sing beautifully, introduce the motif of swans singing just before dying. In one, violent death threatens, and it is the swan's singing that saves its life; in the other, the swan sings its own funeral dirge upon sensing death approach.³² Credit is due

²⁸ "The Raven and the Swan" (not-H.140 = Aphthonius 40), discussed at Adrados, *History* III 467, and "The Swan and the Crow" (S.100), discussed at Adrados III 872–873. Adrados' category "not-H" refers to the 311 fables not transmitted by the anonymous Greek collections (i.e. those not in A. Hausrath and H. Hunger [eds.], *Corpus Fabularum Aesopiarum*² [Leipzig 1959–1970]), and his "S" to the new group of 355 fables not previously included in any collection. For succinct summaries of Adrados' system of categorization see John Vaio's review in *CW* 99 (2005) 87–88 and William Hansen's in *CR* 55 (2005) 174–175.

²⁹ "The Geese and the Cranes" (H.256), discussed at Adrados, *History* III 322. This fable is included because swans appear instead of cranes in the version by "Syntipas," and a swan appears instead of a crane in the Syriac fables. The designation H refers to the 307 fables in the anonymous Greek collections edited by Hausrath and Hunger.

³⁰ "The Swallows and the Swan" (S.351), discussed at Adrados, *History* III 1000–1001: swallows rebuke swans for their reclusiveness and for their stinginess in sharing their song, to which the swans reply that if their music is rare, at least it is pure and beautiful. "The Kite that Neighed," discussed at Adrados III 458, I have included because, in the version transmitted in Aphthonius 3, kites are said to have once had voices as melodious (or as loud) as swans; but in the variant versions, the kite's voice is either compared to that of birds in general (Julian *Misop.* 366a), or there is no comparison at all (Babrius).

³¹ "The Nightingale, the Parrot and the Swan" (M 351), discussed at Adrados, *History* III 744. The designation M refers to the 512 medieval fables which comprise Appendix III.

³² Adrados (*History* III 344) adopts the numeration and titulation of Hausrath and Hunger, *Corpus*, designating the former "H.277 The Swan" and the latter (III 310–311) "H.247 The Swan." In his *Index Fabularum* Adrados (III 1080) refers to H.247 as "The Swan (1)" and H.277 as "The Swan (2)."

Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who, although dismissing Aesopic fable as a possible source for the Sophoclean passage, was the first to single out these two fables as referring to the swan's death-song.³³ Despite his reluctance to pursue this line of inquiry given the impossibility of securing a firm date for the entry of this motif into the oral tradition of fable, Aeschylus' allusion in *Agamemnon* allows us to posit a terminus ante quem of 458 BCE. Given Aeschylus' well-documented predilection for citing or alluding to fables, it is probable that he alludes to an oral version of a fable that was only much later fossilized in written form. It is to this fable and its companion piece that I now turn.

To more easily distinguish between these two fables, I refer to H.277 as "The Goose and the Swan" and to H.247 as "The Swan and his Owner."³⁴ The former is attested in the *Collectio Accursiana*, to which Adrados, reluctant to specify a particular date, gives the sixth century as a terminus post quem.³⁵ Interestingly, there is an almost identical version of this fable transmitted by Aphthonius, a rhetorician of the fourth or fifth centuries who produced a collection of forty fables for use in

³³ Vidal-Naquet, *Sophocle* 292 n.33. For his "nos 173 et 174 dans l'édition Chambry" read "174 et 175."

³⁴ I here follow Laura Gibbs, *Aesop's Fables: A New Translation* (Oxford 2002) 136, 146.

³⁵ Adrados, *History* I 92. Given that the *Accursiana* largely derives from the *Vindobonensis*, he suggests that the *Accursiana* can be traced "back to one of the two Byzantine renaissances: that of the 9th century ... or that of the 14th," with Adrados himself leaning towards the ninth century (93). For fuller discussion of this collection (also known as *Recensio* III) as well as the *Collectio Augustana* (= *Recensio* I) and *Vindobonensis* (= *Recensio* II), see E. Chambry, *Aesopi Fabulae* (Paris 1925) 1–29; Hausrath and Hunger, *Corpus* I.1 xiii–xvi; Perry, *Aesopica* vii–xvii, 295–311, *Studies in the Text History of the Life and Fables of Aesop* (Haverford 1936) 71–230, and *Babrius* xi–xix; Adrados, *History* I 60–100, and *History of the Greco-Roman Fable: The Fable during the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages* II (Leiden 2000) 275–356; Holzberg, *The Ancient Fable* 1–10, 84–95; Zafiroopoulos, *Ethics* 19–25 and n.72 for further bibliography.

the rhetorical schools.³⁶ “The Goose and the Swan,” while predicated upon the idea that the swan sings quite beautifully, includes the motif of the swan singing just before dying. In this fable, a wealthy man raises a goose for eating and a swan for singing. Coming at night to slaughter the goose, but prevented by darkness from correctly identifying it, he mistakenly grabs the swan, which then “reveals its nature through song” and so narrowly escapes death.

Although the two versions of this fable are nearly identical, they differ significantly in describing the swan song itself. Aphthonius 2 (Hausrath and Hunger, *Corpus* I.2 133):

ὁ κύκνος δὲ ἀντὶ τοῦ χηνὸς ἀπαχθεὶς ᾠδῆν σημαίνει τὴν φύσιν καὶ τὴν τελευτὴν διαφεύγει τῷ μέλει.

But the swan, caught instead of the goose, reveals its nature by song and escapes its end through its music.

The *Collectio Accursiana* (*Corpus* 93):

ὁ δὲ κύκνος, ἀντὶ τοῦ χηνὸς ἀπαχθεὶς, ᾄδει τι μέλος θανάτου προοίμιον, καὶ τῇ μὲν ᾠδῆν μηνύει τὴν φύσιν, τὴν δὲ τελευτὴν διαφεύγει τῷ μέλει.

But the swan, caught instead of the goose, sings a melody—death’s prelude—and by its song discloses its nature, escaping its end through its music.

While both acknowledge that the swan is naturally talented at singing, Aphthonius merely notes its narrow escape through song, whereas the *Accursiana* elaborates by characterizing the swan’s song as “death’s prelude.” In Aphthonius, the swan’s song, rather than signalling a premonitory lament at its impending demise, simply reveals to its wealthy owner its true identity and so becomes the very thing that prevents the swan from dying. But the *Accursiana* intimates that, in such dire straits, the swan’s song can also serve as a presentiment of

³⁶ These are conveniently collected by Hausrath and Hunger, *Corpus* I.2 133–151. For Aphthonius more generally see Adrados, *History* I 128–132, II 236–253.

death. Yet in neither case can its song be properly characterized as a lament. Both versions relate that the wealthy man acquired the swan solely “for the sake of its song” (Aphthonius $\phi\delta\eta\varsigma \dots \chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota\nu$; *Accursiana* $\phi\delta\eta\varsigma \dots \acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\kappa\epsilon\nu$), not because it sings a prophetic dirge before dying. But the *Accursiana* does allow for the possibility that, when on the brink of being slaughtered, the swan’s song, while serving primarily to identify and so distinguish it from the goose, can also serve secondarily as a prelude to death.

For an unmistakable reference to the swan’s song as a prescient dirge, I turn to the fable H.247, “The Swan and his Owner” (*Corpus* I.2 66; transl. Gibbs):

Κύκνος

τοὺς κύκνους φασὶ παρὰ τὸν θάνατον ἄδειν. καὶ δὴ τις περιτυχὼν κύκνω πωλουμένῳ καὶ ἀκούσας, ὅτι εὐμελέστατόν³⁷ ἐστὶ ζῶον, ἠγόρασε. καὶ ἔχων ποτὲ συνδείπνους προσελθὼν παρεκάλει αὐτὸν ἄσαι ἐν τῷ πότῳ. τοῦ δὲ τότε μὲν ἠσυχάσαντος, ὕστερον δέ ποτε, ὡς ἐνόησεν, ὅτι ἀποθνήσκειν ἐμελλεν, ἑαυτὸν θρηνοῦντος ὁ δεσπότης ἀκούσας ἔφη· “ἀλλ’ εἰ σὺ οὐκ ἄλλως ἄδεις, ἐὰν μὴ ἀποθνήσκῃς, ἐγὼ μάταιος ἤμην τότε, ὅτε σε παρεκάλουν, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔθουν.”

οὕτως ἔνιοι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἃ μὴ ἐκόντες χαρίσασθαι βούλονται, ταῦτα ἄκοντες ἐπιτελοῦσιν.

The Swan and his Owner

They say that swans sing when they are about to die. A certain man chanced upon a swan that was for sale and bought him, since he had heard that swans sing very beautifully. At the man’s next dinner party, he came and got the swan, expecting that the bird would serenade his guests at dinner. The swan, however, was completely silent. Later on, when the swan realized that he was about to die, he began to sing his funeral dirge. When his owner heard him, he said, “Well, if you are going to sing this song only at the moment of your death, then I was a fool for

³⁷ εὐμελέστατον is the elegantly simple conjecture of Adamantios Coraës (*Μύθων Αἰσωπείων Συναγωγή* [Paris 1810] 424), adopted by all subsequent editors, for εὐμενέστατον of the MSS. Cf. Hausrath, *Corpus* I.1 xx.

having commanded you to do it. I should have ordered you to be butchered instead!"

Some people are the same way: they will agree to do things under compulsion that they are not willing to do as a favour.

This fable is first attested in *Recensio Ia*,³⁸ which consists of 143 fables dated by Perry "from late antiquity, probably the third or fourth century."³⁹ Adrados, however, even more tentatively, gives the fifth century as its terminus post quem.⁴⁰ And just as with "The Goose and the Swan," Adrados believes "The Swan and his Owner" to be "[d]erived from the well-known passage of Plato's *Phaedo* on the swan that sings when dying."⁴¹ But I suggest that rather than this motif being derived from Plato's *Phaedo* or even being a fabulization of a theme from natural history, Aeschylus' simile in his *Agamemnon* allows us both to posit for it a terminus ante quem and to conclude that, accustomed to incorporating fables into his tragedies, he was here similarly influenced by the oral tradition of this fable in creating his memorably powerful simile.

The question of original fable versus subsequent fabulization is difficult to determine, given the lacunose nature of Greek literature as well as the rather fluid nature of the concept 'fable' itself. Adrados himself cites the similes of "The Trees and the Torrent" (*Soph. Ant.* 710–714) and of "The Tailless Fox" (*Timocreon 3, PMG 729*) as providing "clear evidence of the previous existence of a fable."⁴² Granted, he also cites two similes from *Theognis* (347–348, 601–602) where it is debatable whether simile derives from fable or fable from simile. But when he next turns to similes that he regards as "conclusively

³⁸ On *Recensio Ia* see Hausrath, *Corpus I.1* xxvi, xxxii; Perry, *Aesopica* 309–310; Adrados, *History I* 86, II 276–278, 281–293.

³⁹ Perry, *Babrius* xvi.

⁴⁰ Adrados, *History II* 291; cf. Perry, *Aesopica* 300: "rec. Ia ... quae saeculi videtur esse fere quinti."

⁴¹ Adrados, *History II* 288, cf. I 405.

⁴² Adrados, *History I* 143–144.

independent of any fable," he instances *Agamemnon* 718–736, which he describes as "the simile of Helen and the lion cub, from which H. 225 'The Shepherd and the Wolf Cubs' undoubtedly derives."⁴³ But, as we have seen, he subsequently changed his mind and reversed the current of influence, no longer seeing *Agamemnon* 718–736 as a simile from which a fable was subsequently derived, but rather as self-standing fable in its own right which Aeschylus has adapted from an earlier one for his own dramaturgical ends.

This is not meant to catch Adrados in an error, but rather to point out how difficult it is to determine precisely whether a particular version is in fact inspired by a fable or is itself a later fabulization. The difficulty is not made easier given that not only is fable not readily distinguished from simile, it is also not easily distinguished from other such sub-genres as portents, enigmas, proverbs, anecdotes, and natural history. Yet in the case of "The Swan and his Owner," Adrados comes down unequivocally on one side, characterizing it as a "[f]abulization of the well-known theme of 'Natural History', according to which the swan only sings when it is about to die."⁴⁴ But it is more likely that Aeschylus here avails himself of fable—as he does elsewhere—rather than bird lore, if only, as we shall see, because of this fable's intrinsic tragic quality. Moreover, as the fable itself makes clear, the swan does not sing only when it is about to die, but is purchased precisely because of its reputation for singing beautifully throughout its life. In other words, it is only in this particular fable that we witness the swan singing, not as it normally does, but only when it intuits death's approach.

But let us now turn to those elements in "The Swan and his Owner" that might have inspired Aeschylus to allude to this

⁴³ Adrados, *History* I 144. Cf. his later characterization of this fable (I 405): "As has already been explained, a fabulization of the simile of Helen and the lion in *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus."

⁴⁴ Adrados, *History* III 311, cf. I 489.

particular fable at this specific moment in *Agamemnon*. At home with his owner and the guests assembled at a symposium, the swan remains obstinately silent despite being commanded to sing. Only later when “the swan realized that he was about to die” did he begin “to sing his funeral dirge.” In “The Swan and the Goose,” the swan, about to be slaughtered, sings and so reveals its identity. But nothing in that fable indicates that the swan’s singing is confined to the moment before death, its reputation for beautiful song implying just the opposite. So too in “The Swan and his Owner,” it is precisely its reputation for singing beautifully that prompted its owner to buy the swan in the first place. Although the swan was more than likely simply unwilling to sing when commanded—as the epimythium would have us believe—it is also possible that, rather than being merely *unwilling*, the swan is actually *unable* to sing except when it has intimations of its imminent mortality. This latter reading is in fact encouraged by the owner’s self-recriminating comments. Although his words leave open the possibility that he regards the swan as quite capable of singing at any point in its life, and assumes that it sings only out of sheer spite before dying, they may also be interpreted as implying that the swan cannot sing otherwise except when death impends. As Arnott notes: “In the second century A.D. the dream-writer Artemidorus introduced a variant that became especially popular with later poets ... the variant that swans do not sing at all until the approach of death (2.20).”⁴⁵ But if I am correct that Aeschylus is relying upon the oral tradition of fable for his allusion to the swan song, then Artemidorus is not the originator of this variant: that honour should go to the anonymous fabulist. Nevertheless, Arnott is correct that this particular strain, precisely because of its heart-rending pathos, and despite Plato’s best efforts to counteract its seductive charms, prevails in later allusions. And it is quite easy to see how Aeschylus would want to avail himself of this interpretation (swans sing only on the

⁴⁵ Arnott, *G&R* 24 (1977) 150, cf. his *Birds* 123.

point of death) as being far more hauntingly poignant than the other (swans refuse to sing out of sheer spite), in an allusion comparing the prophetess Cassandra who has just sung her prophecy in vain before being slaughtered, to the swan which similarly sings a prophetic lament for its first and final time.

And what of this prophetic element in its song? Whereas Cassandra's prophecy encompasses not only her own death but Agamemnon's as well, that of the swan, not surprisingly, is confined to itself. Yet what is of particular interest here is that the swan, without any external threat as in "The Swan and the Goose," intuitively—one could almost say divinely intuitively—its looming fate. Although nothing in this fable, or any of the swan fables, makes the connection explicit, Aeschylus was well aware of the swan's role as Apollo's bird. He may have seen in this prophetic quality of the swan's song, as transmitted orally through fable, the germ of his comparison of Cassandra's accursed gift, applied with bitter irony to her own fate, with the swan's far less fraught but nonetheless poignant gift. And he also may have seen in the owner's petulant self-chastisement for failing to have "butchered it" (ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔθυσον) a stark contrast with Clytemnestra's successful sacrificial butchering of her faithless husband and his concubine.⁴⁶ Finally, Aeschylus also may have seen a tragic kernel in the description of the swan "singing his funeral dirge" (ἑαυτὸν θρηνοῦντος), given that the verb θρηνεῖν exactly captures the mournful connotation that Clytemnestra's description of Cassandra "having sung her final fatal wailing" (τὸν ὕστατον ... θανάσιμον γόον) captures.⁴⁷ Since θρηνεῖν and γοᾶν, along with their nominal and adjectival forms, significantly overlap in their semantic ranges,

⁴⁶ At *Agamemnon* 1409 the Chorus describe Clytemnestra's deed as a θύος, a "sacrifice," which Denniston and Page, *Aeschylus Agamemnon* 200, gloss as " = 'murderous killing.' "

⁴⁷ Creon's sneering comment (*Soph. Ant.* 883–884) "that no one would cease to pour forth songs and lamentations before death," with its use of γόος for 'lamentations' may perhaps tip the scale in favour of Sophocles' being influenced directly by Aeschylus and only indirectly by the fable.

they could be substituted for one another without difficulty. As Margaret Alexiou notes:

In the classical period, the *thrēnos* was still remembered as a distinct type of lyric poetry, but it was interchangeable with *gōos*, especially in tragedy, and could be used to refer to any kind of lament, not necessarily for the dead. The older distinctions are partially retained in the later scholarly definitions of *thrēnos* as a lament for the dead which contains praise, sung before or after burial or on the various occasions for mourning at the tomb; the ritual element of the *gōos* on the other hand is less frequently emphasised after tragedy, and in the Lexica it is glossed with *thrēnos*.⁴⁸

In the first half of “The Swan and his Owner,” we are reacquainted with a conceit well known before Aeschylus: swans sing beautifully. In the second half, we are introduced to a variant: swans sing prophetically on the point of death—but one that left no trace in the written tradition until *Agamemnon*. Although it is possible that the source for this simile may have been a lost tragedy, lyric poem, or even popular bird-lore more generally, it is also possible, and, given Aeschylus’ fondness for this particular narrative form, far more probable, that his source was orally transmitted fable. Just as in *Myrmidons* Aeschylus quotes the fable of “The Wounded Eagle,” and in *Agamemnon* alludes to the fable of “The Young Lion,” because both aptly suit his particular point, so too I suggest, at *Agamemnon* 1444–1446, he similarly alludes to a motif he most likely knew from fable because it perfectly captures and enhances the tragic pathos of this scene. Although well aware of van Dijk’s caveat that “fable scholars must resist the temptation to look for a fable behind every fox,”⁴⁹ I believe that behind the song sung by this swan is the oral tradition of fable. Despite

⁴⁸ Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*² (Lanham 2002) 103; cf. Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature* (London/New York 1992) 111.

⁴⁹ Van Dijk, *AINOI* 631.

“The Swan and his Owner” not being a direct source for Aeschylus’ allusion to the swan song in *Agamemnon*, I suggest that it represents one particular written version of an orally transmitted fable that was the source for Aeschylus’ simile likening the dying Cassandra to the dying swan.⁵⁰

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Dept. of History and Classics
University of Alberta
Edmonton AB
T6G 2H4 Canada
jpharris@ualberta.ca

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