

In the Archaic and Classical periods, animal fables are used as *exempla* in poetry and prose for both didactic and invective purposes. This paper demonstrates that several jokes in Aristophanes exploit conventions associated with these traditional (and rather clashing) functions. In each of these jokes (*Wasps* 1399-1405; *Clouds* 1427-1431; and *Peace* 47-49) animal imagery—initially presented as innocuous—is used to attack an unsuspecting target. I argue that these mocking jests derive humor from tensions implicit in animal fables: an addressee can never be sure if s/he is being educated, mocked, or threatened. Moreover, because animal fables aim to communicate a specific truth to a specific addressee by employing metaphorical language, it is always possible for the intended message to be misinterpreted. The use of animal imagery is revealed as a tendentious exercise with potentially dangerous results for either the speaker, the addressee, or even an innocent bystander.

Philocleon (*Wasps* 1399-1400) introduces an animal fable by claiming that he will tell a delightful story (λόγον...χαρίεντα), but instead savagely attacks his addressee by rather explicitly comparing her to a dog. The idea that clever stories can traditionally settle disputes is first introduced (1394) only to be turned on its head, as the woman is mocked and humiliated by the insulting imagery. Philocleon capitalizes on the expectation that stories about animals can instruct and entertain by using the implicit verbal obscenities (ὦ κύον κύον, 1403) to ridicule his target.

At *Clouds* 1427-1431, Phedippides uses the behavior of roosters as a justification for his plans to strike his father. Strepsiades, however, turns the reference to roosters against his son: "If you like imitating (μιμῆ) roosters so much, why don't you go peck away at some dung and sleep on a perch!" (1430-1431). By likening himself to an animal, Phedippides becomes exposed to attack. The use of μιμέομαι highlights the potential dangers a speaker of animal fables faces because of the traditional function of animal names and categories as modes of verbal abuse.

Finally, at *Peace* 47-49, a member of the audience interprets allusions to Trygaeus's overgrown, domesticated dung beetle as a veiled reference (ἀνίσσεται) to Cleon. The spectator's brief cameo and his attack on Cleon amount to a misreading of the animal imagery, which in fact is not intended as an allegorical reference to the demagogue. But it is precisely the tensions surrounding questions of intent and allegorical meaning—central to the use of animal stories—that provide the opportunity for the invective potential of the beetle to be exploited and turned on an unsuspecting bystander.

Several recent studies of Aesopic fable (Holzberg 2002; Adrados 1999; Dijk 1997) have stressed the difficulties posed by the polysemous nature of the genre in the Archaic and Classical periods. This study enhances our understanding of the complex status of animal fable in Aristophanic comedy by demonstrating that the diversity of its functions could itself be the source of comic effects.