

Babrius Vindicated: Re-examining the Trustworthiness of the First Prologue

Babrius authored the *Mythiambi*, a collection of fables organized into two books. For many years, his poems have been undervalued, often criticized for perceived deficiencies in style and substance. However, recent trends show a revival of interest in his work and ancient fables in general, prompting a re-assessment of his contributions to the genre. Existing research primarily focuses on the first prologue and the initial fable of his collection. Here, I will likewise focus on these texts, offering innovative interpretations of Babrius' programmatic poems. The trustworthiness of Babrius, specifically in his first prologue, has been questioned due to two main reasons. Firstly, according to some, Babrius set his fables in a non-violent Golden Age, a utopian world which contrasts sharply with the realities depicted in his poems (Pr.1.1-16). Secondly, scholars have challenged the veracity of his claim that he has mitigated the severity of traditional iambic poetry (Pr.1.17-9; Pr.2.6-16). Contrary to these critiques, I contend that Babrius' first prologue is not deceitful. A close examination of lines 14-6, where he seems to credit Aesop with a description of the golden age, and his relationship with Callimachus' *Iamb 2*, allows for a nuanced understanding of the setting for Babrius' fables, which accounts for the violent and litigious world of Babrius' *Mythiambi*. Also, Babrius' desire to soften his stinging iambs is to be taken more seriously than recent scholars have done. As an iambic poet, he fits into a long tradition of Hellenistic and Imperial iambographers who challenge the stereotype that equated *iamboi* with vituperation. Furthermore, I aim to explore how a metapoetic reading of the first fable of the collection (Babr. 1) supports my interpretations. Contrary to recent scholarship, which sees the juxtaposition of Babr. 1 with the first prologue as confirming the deception in Babrius' programmatic statements, I argue that this fable's dynamics can offer fresh insights into the metapoetic discourse suggested by Babrius' prologues.