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978-0-521-87553-0 - Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

How should we live? What kind of people should we be? What is it good or bad, necessary or right, sweet, absurd or impossible to do? Who decides for us, and on what grounds? These are fundamental human questions, and few people or societies pass a day without asking them. For a historian or an anthropologist, the question is framed in slightly different terms: what role does morality play in helping any group of people to create or maintain a society?

This book takes as its premise that morality matters. Like political, social and economic behaviour, moral behaviour is endemic in human societies. Like them, it helps groups to organize themselves, to negotiate their inevitable differences and to survive. Like them, it has a grammar, a structure, which is as distinctive of the group as is its language or religion. Unlike them, however, it is often overlooked as a constituent of history.

The focus of this study is what I shall call the popular morality of the Roman Empire in, roughly, the first two centuries of the common era. The early Empire has a number of attractions for a historian of ethics. More of the Greek and Roman world was then united (at least nominally) under one ruler than at any other time, giving us a vast field in which to work while remaining within the boundaries of one state.[1] It is a period outstandingly rich in all kinds of evidence, literary and documentary, making a many-sided study possible within a manageable chronological scope. Surprisingly, in view of these advantages, the popular morality (as opposed to imperial virtues, for instance) of the early Empire has not attracted as much interest as that of some other parts of antiquity. A period so remarkable in other respects, however, seems likely to be interesting ethically, and I hope to show that it is.

By 'popular morality' or 'popular ethics' I mean ethical ideas which were in wide circulation around the Empire and widely shared up and down the

[1] Insofar as it is appropriate to talk of boundaries, a question to which we shall return (pp. 183–4, Ch. Twelve).

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social spectrum.[2] These ideas are not, as we shall see, completely separate from ethical theories which were developed by philosophers, but I shall leave consideration of 'high' philosophy and its relationship with popular morality until the penultimate chapter. Meanwhile, I shall try to show that 'popular' is no misnomer. We can plausibly identify certain genres of ethical material as either originating in, or percolating to, the lower reaches of Roman society, even when our evidence for them comes from higher-level sources.[3]

Not every moral value or practice will have been equally applicable to everyone, nor equally appealing. The Roman Empire – vast, patchwork and multicultural – was no more one indivisible community in ethics than in social structure, language or religion. We shall do better to think of multiple overlapping communities with overlapping moralities. I shall try to show, however, that the degree of common moral ground between socially and geographically different groups is considerable, and that we can often talk meaningfully of the ethics of the Empire as a whole.[4]

I shall examine both the content and the structure of moral material and argue that they are remarkably coherent (about as coherent as one might expect a language or religious system to be, allowing for occasional anomalies).[5] We shall see that Roman popular morality has well-defined areas of interest which are not identical to those of other societies, and that (in sharp contrast, for instance, to most modern systems) executive ethics predominate in Roman thinking, while 'being good' tends to mean being good of your kind.[6] The language of ethics tells us not only about the

[2] There is no general agreement as to when one should use the word 'ethics' and when 'morality'. Some scholars prefer to use 'ethics' of the classical world, feeling that 'morality' has too many modern religious overtones. Others feel the opposite, and others again use both indistinguishably, in keeping with their semantic origins. I shall use both indistinguishably.

[3] This study was conceived as the first of two, the second of which would focus on early Christian ethics. It does not, therefore, deal with religious minorities – most distinctively, Jews and Christians – but confines itself to the mainstream, which means not only the popular, but the 'pagan' (though I shall try to avoid using this unsatisfactory word).

[4] In a few cases, the ethics of separate groups, such as Romans and Spartans (below, pp. 153, 174), converge substantially, and as it seems coincidentally (though we cannot rule out the possibility that by the imperial period, the portrayal of one group influenced that of the other). Since both groups are the subject of many sayings and stories, this gives an even stronger impression of ethics being shared across the Empire than is perhaps justified. I shall try to allow for such potential distortions of the evidence in drawing my conclusions.

[5] Many of the ideas of the early Empire are not, of course, unique to it, since it is part of the wider Graeco-Roman world which is in continuous evolution over a long period of time. Nor is there room in this study thoroughly to compare the first and second centuries with the fifth century BCE or the fifth century CE, to see what changes occur. I shall, though, from time to time indicate what I think is distinctive about the shape of ethics at this period.

[6] Below, pp. 179–90.

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content of the system, but about its authorities and aims, both of which I shall investigate and connect to content and structure. From all this I shall draw a number of conclusions about the overall shape and significance of popular morality and what it tells us about its time and place.

It will emerge that in various ways the ethics of the early Empire and its social and economic structures suited each other. What I shall not try to do, however, is to show that ethics were designed to support (or problematize, or comment on) any particular political, social or any other structure. There is still a tendency among historians (not to mention archaeologists and literary critics) to treat cultural phenomena as ancillary to political, social or economic phenomena. I doubt that this is often justified, but in the case of ethics, it certainly is not. Ethics must, for the most practical reasons, be among the first systems to evolve in any developing human society. People cannot live together until they have agreed not to murder each other (and agreed what counts as murder); they cannot farm until they have agreed not to steal from one another; they cannot decide who belongs to an ongoing group without deciding who can legitimately breed with whom. There is as much justification for speculating that political and social structures come into being to encode, protect and enforce ethical structures as the other way around. We should therefore treat morality as an aspect of ancient society in its own right, to be assessed on its own terms. It contributes to the continued existence of its society, and interacts with other aspects of it in many ways, but it does not depend on them, and does not exist simply to shore them up.[7]

THE POPULARITY OF MORALITY

'Popular' is a word which makes classicists nervous, and with good reason. In a world with probably no more than 20 per cent male literacy, maybe much less, and certainly much lower female literacy, the written sources on which we depend so heavily can never be trusted to refer to the great majority of people.[8] The high literature from which we mainly construct our picture of

[7] Making me in anthropological terms a culturalist or symbolic-culturalist (Geertz 1973: 142–6, Bell 1997: 61–2).

[8] Harris 1989: 3–24 prefers an even lower estimate which is now widely felt to be too sceptical. Morgan 1998: 39–42, 50–89, 120–51 is not much more optimistic than Harris, but I am now rather more optimistic, at least about the Roman Empire, where at least minimal literacy was needed in a wide range of occupations, was regularly taught in the army and is evidenced by a vast body of graffiti Empire-wide. Horsfall 2003: 20–30 helpfully summarizes the difficulties of identifying Roman popular culture in literary sources, and this study as a whole shows how much can be done despite the difficulties.

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Greek and Roman culture was written and read by a far smaller proportion of the population than that. Documentary and archaeological sources relate to a much wider range of people, but mainly to their social and economic lives. Of their beliefs, their attitudes, their language or culture, only scattered fragments of evidence survive, and their own voices are almost completely lost to us.

It would be premature, however, to despair. It is clear that some 'literary' works, though written by members of the social and cultural elite, had a mass audience from at least the sixth century BCE well into late antiquity. Foremost among them is Homer, followed by new comic playwrights, especially Menander, Plautus and Terence, farces and mimes. Oratory of all kinds was delivered to mass audiences in lawcourts, public assemblies and town councils. During the principate, epideictic oratory, delivered on behalf of a town in honour of visiting dignitaries, to honour local benefactors and politicians, or to mark a special occasion of almost any kind, by rhetors who were often paid by cities or emperors themselves to practise and teach their skill, was a prime form of public entertainment. In at least some places and times, it was common for the works of historians to be publicly read and honoured in their native or adopted towns. Even philosophers could become local celebrities.

Nor was the flow of culture all one way. Proverbs are a case in point: described by Aristotle as the earliest surviving form of philosophy and the particular property of ordinary people, proverbs were an object of interest to philosophers and scholars from the fourth century BCE to the end of antiquity and beyond.[9] It is thanks to them that several collections of proverbs survive, as well as numerous individual proverbs scattered through literary works. Fables, too, were regarded as the special form of speech of slaves and the oppressed, but that did not stop authors of higher social status collecting and retelling them and inventing more of their own in the same style.[10] Both fables and proverbs are widely described in literary texts as popular, vulgar, primitive or suitable for children as well as useful, moral and educational; evidently contemporaries regarded them as what we should call 'popular' morality.[11] Mimes and farces, like much comedy, occupy an ambivalent position between the vulgar and the sophisticated: the examples that survive may have been written by the relatively highly cultured, but they derived from popular entertainment and continued to draw on it.

[9] Synesus *Encom. calv.* 22 p. 229 Terzaghi = fr. 13 Rose. Cf. *Rh.* 2.21.12, 15. See pp. 26–8.
[10] Below, pp. 57–62. [11] Below, pp. 26–7, 58–9.

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We should not underestimate, therefore, the degree to which groups up and down the social scale shared and exchanged aspects of their culture. More than that, we can, I think, identify certain sources of ethical material which are more likely than others to be widely shared, and sometimes to have risen from the ranks of popular culture to be enshrined in the writings of the elite. It is on four such groups of material that this study is based: proverbs, fables, gnomic quotations from famous authors, and exemplary stories.

PROVERBS, FABLES, GNOMAI AND EXEMPLA[12]

Chapters Two to Five will have more to say about the definition and terminology of these genres.[13] A gnomic quotation (*gnômê* in Greek, *sententia* in Latin) is a moralizing fragment taken from a well-known author. It usually consists of a line of verse, less often a sentence of prose, and is complete grammatically and in meaning. Closely related to proverbs and gnomai are moralizing riddles, of which a few examples (and one short collection) survive on papyrus or embedded in other texts. I shall include these, too few to merit a chapter of their own, in discussions of proverbs and gnomai.[14] An exemplary story (*chreia* in Greek, *exemplum* in Latin) is the short, pithy account of a saying or action of a famous man (or less often, woman). The heroes of exempla may be philosophers or 'wise men' such as the Seven Sages of archaic Greece, rulers, military commanders and occasionally orators or poets.

Proverbs, fables, gnomai and exempla are as widely distributed across our written remains as it is possible to be. They appear not only in independent collections and embedded in works of literature, but on papyrus in formal, scholars' and school hands, and in inscriptions. Collections which consist only of gnomai, proverbs, fables or exempla are easily identified. Embedded

[12] I use the Greek term for a gnomic quotation and a Latin term for an exemplary story, not because those genres are distinctive of those languages (below, pp. 123–5), but because the largest body of each genre to survive to us in this period happens to be in that language. Since our sources are divided between both languages, it also seems reasonable to borrow terms from both. The words *gnômê* and *exemplum* are so common throughout this study that I have not italicized them (nor *chreia* and *sententia*), nor marked the long syllables.

[13] Pp. 23–31, 57–60, 84–7, 122–5.

[14] Kindstrand 1978: 76 notes the relationship between proverbs and riddles, observed in antiquity at least by Clearchus (Ath. 10.86 457c = fr. 63, Wehrli III); Kindstrand suggests that Clearchus took this from Aristotle. Cf. Milner 1970 on the close relationship between proverbs and riddles across cultures and Hasan-Rock 1974 on the relationship between proverbs and riddles in Aramaic. In the *Life of Aesop*, Aesop solves a riddle (78–9) as well as telling fables and offering advice in proverbial style.

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in other literature, all four typically stand out: they are colourfully expressive, and have a strong, short form, with (if a story) a clear beginning and end. Proverbs and gnomai, in particular, appear repeatedly in exactly or virtually the same form, though there is some room for variation even in these genres, and rather more in the form of fables and exempla. Proverbs quoted in other texts are frequently flagged with expressions like 'as the proverb says' or 'as they say'.[15]

All four genres are not, however, 'popular' in quite the same sense or to the same degree. As I indicated above, there are good reasons for regarding fables and proverbs as socially lowly in origin, even though many of the fables which survive were certainly not composed by slaves or the poor. Gnomic sayings have a more mixed heritage: composed by members of the elite, often for a broad listening public, they find their way not only into other literature but also into proverb collections, which suggests that many became embedded in oral tradition. (There are many parallels for this among modern proverbial sayings in English, many of which have literary origins long forgotten by those who learn and deploy them orally.)

The most surprising genre, on the face of it, to find its way into this study is the exemplum, especially in the form of the collection of Valerius Maximus. Exempla, by definition, are about exceptional men and women, most of them of high status, and most of the examples which survive to us were probably composed by men of high culture. Scholars tend to associate exempla particularly with oratory, and Valerius' *Memorable Words and Deeds* has been taken to be a source book for orators, and not therefore as a reliable guide to Roman ethics in general. I shall argue in Chapter Five that the association of exempla with oratory is only part of the story, that there is no reason to suppose that Valerius' book was particularly aimed at orators, and that exempla in general, and the *Memorable Words and Deeds* in particular, are an invaluable source for early imperial morality. To call exempla elitist, moreover, is an oversimplification. Some exemplary stories, such as those about Aesop, may in fact be popular in origin. Others, surely elite in origin, make their way into proverbs and gnomai, and in that way become accessible to a much wider range of society. Almost all the names in Latin eponymic proverbs, for instance, appear among Valerius' stories. Yet others will have been heard by large, mixed audiences in public performances.

Exempla must be included in a discussion of popular ethics because even when not popular in origin, they often achieved popularity. In

[15] Otto 1890 quotes numerous examples.

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addition, even the relative elitism of an author like Valerius can be turned to advantage. Sometimes we shall find that his ideas fit well with those of proverbs, fables and gnomai, and sometimes not, which will help to refine our sense of how far ethical ideas were shared up and down the social scale.

The last point but one hints at yet another reason for focusing on these four genres: they form a loosely interactive group. Proverbs are rewritten more epigrammatically by poets, and poets' formulations become proverbial.[16] Stories and gnomic sayings of famous men also become proverbial: so, for instance, ps.-Diogenianus explains the proverb 'See the end of life' with reference to Solon's advice to Croesus that one should not count a man happy until he is dead, which appears elsewhere as both an exemplum and a gnome.[17] Fables become compressed into proverbs and proverbs expanded into fables: so, says ps.-Diogenianus, if you want to say that something is impossible, you can say that the tortoise will overtake the hare first.[18] Exempla enshrine sayings which have an independent life of their own in anthologies and gnomic school texts: 'He died on the point of my speech' or, 'If you are lazy when you are rich, you will become poor.'[19] This kind of cross-fertilization seems to be a universal characteristic of popular wisdom; numerous studies demonstrate the same phenomenon in many different cultures.[20]

Last but not least, these four are genres which are very widely attested across ancient and modern cultures as being vehicles of popular morality. Small, discrete, mobile sayings, quotations and stories, which make statements about the nature of the world or tell us how to behave in it, are a staple of ethical thinking all over the world.[21] If we had no other evidence

[16] E.g. the English proverb 'God is where he was', which is now completely superseded by Robert Browning's version, 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world.' (*Pippa Passes* 1.227–8)

[17] D8.51.

[18] D7.57. Given that in the fable the tortoise does overtake the hare, the proverb may be even older than the fable. Both hares and tortoises feature in other proverbs and fables.

[19] *P Mil. Vogl.* 6.263; Boyaval 1975 no. 3.

[20] E.g. Taylor 1931: 25–8, 32–3 on the relationship between proverbs and stories across cultures, Shippey 1977 on proverbs and proverbial language in Old English literature, Russo 1997 on proverbs, maxims and apothegms in Greek prose, Coats 1981 on parables, fables and anecdotes in Greek, Kjärgaard 1986 on metaphors and parables, Carnes 1988 on proverbs and fables in Greek, Theissen and Merz 1998: 324–30 on proverbs, riddles, sayings and parables in the Old and New Testaments.

[21] On the stability (usually) and mutability (sometimes) of sayings and stories see Crépeau 1981, Anderson 2000: 19. Abrahams 1972: 121–2 notes the relationship between proverbs which are statements about the world and those which tell us how to behave: '[Not] all proverbs attempt to produce an action immediately. Many proverbs rather attempt to produce an attitude toward a situation that may well call for inaction and resignation. This is the usual use for proverbs like, "Such is life," and, "Don't cry over spilt milk".'

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that the material of this study was the stuff of popular morality in the early Roman Empire, comparative evidence alone would create a strong presumption that it was.[22]

Proverbs, gnomai, fables and exempla, therefore, have good claim to be included in an investigation of Roman popular morality. It may seem less obvious why other things should be left out. There would, one might think, be a case for paying equal attention to inscriptions, especially on tombstones, dedications or honorifics, which have much to say about the goodness (usually) of their subjects, or court records on papyrus in which plaintiffs revile their neighbours as wicked law-breakers. I shall from time to time, and especially in the final chapter, make comparisons between the sayings and stories which are my main focus and other material, including tombstones, honorific and dedicatory inscriptions, court records, dice oracles and dream books. There are several reasons, however, why I have not made all these a central part of this study. Their language is, on investigation, rather less rich and their ideas less diverse than those of the sayings and stories I explore. They are also, in the main, well studied in their own right, while much of the material I discuss here has been studied by historians little or not at all, or not in recent years, and especially not as a source for popular morality. Finally, it is not clear that such material is better, or in many cases even as good as sayings and stories as a source for *popular* morality. Tombstones or dedications elaborate enough to display ethical vocabulary, for instance, are likely to have been erected by wealthy families. It is leading members of their community that receive honorific inscriptions. Speeches in lawcourt records are not generally made by the plaintiffs and defendants themselves, but by lawyers to magistrates, who, if they were wealthy enough to have received a rhetorical education, belonged to the higher ranks of society.[23] Such materials do add something to the study of ethics, but not perhaps as much as one might hope, and they rarely have as good a claim as sayings and stories to be regarded as popular.[24]

[22] Prantl 1858 and Todesco 1916: 424 on proverbs as 'the philosophy of the people' in every culture.
[23] Crook 1995 ch. 3; Morgan 1998: 61–3.
[24] One could also attempt a history of early imperial morality by means of a grand survey of all the literature of the period, but even if one drew (as one can) a number of common ideas and attitudes from the works of different authors, one would be a long way from a study of popular morality. To identify what is popular about any author, we need to if possible excavate the popular material from his work, distinguishing it from the influence of philosophical schools and from the author's own ideas. This has not been done systematically for the early Empire, and in effect, it is what I have done here.

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CLASSICS, PHILOSOPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The study of ethics has often been regarded as the special concern of philosophers or theologians. In the past century or so, however, ethics have increasingly attracted the interest of historians and anthropologists, who have hoped to discern in the structure and content of ethical systems either what is common to humanity as a whole, or what is distinctive and constitutive of a particular group of people. Classicists have contributed a good deal to this developing literature, and not only philosophers, but literary critics and historians have found it fruitful territory. Early inspiration came from the vast nineteenth-century project of identifying and publishing sub-literary Greek and Latin texts, as part of which first Gaisford, then Leutsch and Schneidewin published editions of the Greek paroemiographers.[25] The earliest of these, the proverb collections of Zenobius, ps.-Diogenianus and ps.-Plutarch, date from the early Roman Empire, and form some of the material of this study. Latin proverbs, of which no ancient collection survives, were explored in the eighteenth century by Serz, but for an attempt at a systematic collection scholars had to wait for the work of August Otto in the 1880s and 90s.[26] The twentieth century saw more work on proverbs, and also collections and explorations of other kinds of ethical literature and sub-literature, notably gnomic quotations from Menander and other poets and Aesopic fables.[27] A body of ethical material had begun to emerge which was at least not dominated by philosophy or theology, if it was indebted to them at all.

The identification of this material, which could not exactly, in itself, be called literary any more than philosophical, or at any rate certainly could not be called high literature, but which cropped up continually in literary texts, led scholars to consider its role in literature as traditionally defined. Von Scala pioneered the study of proverbs in Polybius, and since then Lucian, Strabo, Plautus, Menander and Plutarch are among the authors whose use of 'sub-literary' ethical material has been investigated.[28] A number of authors

[25] Gaisford 1836, Leutsch and Schneidewin 1839–51, cf. Graux 1878, Crusius 1883, Crusius and Cohn 1891–3. Serz 1792 worked by tracing as many of Erasmus' proverbs as possible back to both Greek and Latin originals; his production is fascinating in its own right, but does not attempt to be comprehensive.

[26] On the strengths and weaknesses of this collection, additions to it and discussions of it, see below, pp. .

[27] On Greek proverbs see especially Strömberg 1954, 1961; on Latin proverbs Häussler 1968; on gnomic quotations Jäkel 1964 and Liapes 2002; on fables especially Perry 1936, 1952 and van Dijk 1997.

[28] Von Scala 1891, cf. Rein 1894 on Lucian, Keim 1909 on Strabo, Beede 1949 on Plautus, Arnott 1981 on Menander, Fernández Delgado 1991 on Plutarch.

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have attracted studies of their 'moral vision' as a whole, notably Pliny the Elder, Phaedrus, Menander, Sextus, ps.-Phocylides, Valerius Maximus, Polybius and Livy.[29]

The twentieth century also saw an increasing interest in trying to capture the main moral concerns – the distinctive *shape* and most important elements of morality – in ancient society as a whole, or significant parts of it. Horrald and Ferguson were among the first to trace the evolution of a small number of central ethical ideas throughout antiquity. Mondolfo, Pearson, Adkins, Ferguson and Bryant took a similar approach but concentrated on the archaic and classical Greek worlds (where Schmidt had already marked out the ground in 1882).[30] Earl and Edwards have focused on the Roman Republic and early Empire, while in a series of studies Lind investigated the foundations of Roman morality in Republican writings. Some scholars have preferred to limit their geographical and chronological scope still further: Dover and Dillon to classical Athens, Charlesworth and Fears to the Roman principate.[31]

At the same time, interest was growing in genres of popular morality themselves. Proverbs, fables and gnomic sayings have all attracted significant studies in recent years.[32] Exempla have developed perhaps the highest profile of all: a plethora of studies in recent years have examined both exemplary stories in their own right and their role in a wide range of authors, frequently connecting their moral ideas with their function in rhetoric.[33]

Another fruitful trend has been the examination of a single term or theme in Greek or Roman ethics. The Greek *andreia* and its Latin equivalent *virtus*, 'virtue' or 'manly virtue', have profited from the attentions of McDonnell,

[29] Chadwick 1959, Carlini 2004 (on Sextus), cf. Azzarà 2004, Giannarelli 2004 (on patristic citations of other early imperial pseudonymous anthologies), Burns 1963–4, Marchetti 1991 and de Oliveira 1992 on Pliny, Alfonsi 1964 on Phaedrus, Arnott 1981 on Menander, Horst 1978 on ps.-Phocylides, Bloomer 1992 and Skidmore 1996 on Valerius Maximus, Eckstein 1995 on Polybius and Moore 1989 and Chaplin 2000 on Livy. The phrase 'moral vision' is borrowed from Eckstein.

[30] Horrald 1925, Ferguson 1958, Schmidt 1882, Mondolfo 1960, Pearson 1962, Adkins 1972, Ferguson 1989, Bryant 1996.

[31] Earl 1967, Edwards 1993, Lind 1972, 1979, 1989, 1992, Dover 1974, Dillon 2004, Charlesworth 1937, Fears 1981. Langlands 2006 focuses on sexual morality in late Republican and early imperial authors.

[32] E.g. on proverbs Solari 1898, Reichert 1957, Dalitz 1966, Tzifopoulos 1995; on fables La Penna 1961, Nøjgaard 1964, Gual 1977, Adrados especially 1979–87, Karadagli 1981, Jedrkiewicz 1989, Arnheim 1979–80, Cascajero 1991, 1992, van Dijk especially 1997, Zafiropoulos 2001; on gnomic sayings Kalbfleisch 1928, Barns 1950–1, Klinger 1961, Grilli 1969, Liapes 2002. On the comparative importance of gnomic sayings in Near Eastern and Mediterranean culture, see Tosi 2004.

[33] E.g. Klotz 1909, 1942, Litchfield 1914, Kornhardt 1936, Helm 1939, Nordh 1954, Ronconi 1966, Guerrini 1981, 1994, 1997, Maslakov 1984, Mayer 1991, Goldhill 1994, Gazich 1995, Hölkeskamp 1996, Roller 2004. Fables, gnomic sayings and even proverbs are also components of rhetoric, and the first two are also part of rhetorical education, on which see below, pp. 57–8, 84–5.

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