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Fallacy: Close Reading and the Beginning of Philosophy

THE FORMAL STUDY OF FALLACIES began, as have so many other intellectual disciplines, with Aristotle. In a short treatise called *Peri Sophistikon Elenchon* (*On Sophistical Refutations*, referred to in the Latin Middle Ages as *De Sophisticis Elenchis*), he classified thirteen types of fallacious argument—six that depend on slippages of language and seven that do not. As with much of Aristotle's work, this emphatic division belied a dense cluster of problems that later expositors would tease out, and which this article will explore in a moment, beginning at the primal level of what, precisely, "fallacies" are. The change in terminology from "sophistical refutation" to "fallacies" belies an immense epistemic shift—nothing less, really, than the emergence of medieval philosophy out of classical thought. The Latin Middle Ages assimilated Aristotle's treatise into the logical curriculum simply as "On Fallacies" (*De Fallaciis*), from *fallare*, "to deceive," or "to trick." In William of Sherwood's influential twelfth-century *Introduction to Logic*, which expounds five of Aristotle's logical texts, *De Fallaciis* is the sixth and final chapter. On the face of it, the word *fallacia* in medieval logic retains the implication of deliberate misleading, the problem that motivates Aristotle's treatise, which is essentially a manual on how to spot the tricks an opponent might use to derail one's argument. But deception is used one way in medieval philosophy, another in Aristotle's.

Aristotle's definition of sophistical refutations itself is deceptively complex, beginning with what seems to be the plainest declaration of what they are. The very first sentence of his treatise defines them as what they are not: they "appear to be refutations but are really fallacies."[1] From the start, sophistical refutations involve a dialectic of appearance: they are what they do not seem to be, and are not what they seem to be. Medieval discussions swerve around this problem by arguing that fallacies have both "semblance"

ABSTRACT The precondition of rationality in Aristotelian syllogistic logic is fallacy. Medieval commentaries, in turn, treat fallacy as a nonreferential discourse, developing what is essentially a theorization of fictionality and its practices. REPRESENTATIONS 140. Fall 2017 ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 27–43. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2017.140.3.27.

or "appearance" (*apparentia*) and, seemingly paradoxically, nonexistence (*non-existentia*). What they mean by nonexistence needs to be qualified: a fallacy exists, of course, in the domain of language, and to that degree has the same ontological status as a valid syllogism. As William of Sherwood says in his foundational *Introduction to Logic*, fallacy and valid syllogism appear to be the same because they share a verbal identity: the resemblance comes "ex identitate sermonis."[2] But what leaves the fallacy in the realm of pure appearance only is that it doesn't mean anything real: it diverges from valid syllogism "ex identitate rei."[3] But William (and subsequent commentaries) doesn't say that what a fallacy refers to doesn't exist; *it is the fallacy* itself that doesn't have existence. To put this definition more precisely: a fallacy must meet the condition of *appearing* to be a syllogism *and* of "its nonexistence" ("non-existentiam eiusdem").[4] It exists only in *apparentia*, and its existence only there means that it does not actually exist.

For Aristotle, the *phainomenon* of fallacies is elusive, but so is the language we use to speak of them. They are "really" fallacies, *paralogismoi*, statements that lie outside of reason or of rational discourse (*para-*, outside, beyond + *logizomai*, to think, to calculate, to consider; the word is from *logos*, the Greek word that means anything from word to reason to order). That is, not only can we recognize sophistical refutations only by what they are not; we also cannot use the term itself to describe them, since they occupy a position outside of discourse. Sophistical refutations are actually not refutations at all (*ouk elenchon legomen*). Strictly speaking, a treatise on sophistical refutation is a logical impossibility, the first deception in a treatise full of them.

Aristotle also uses the word *pseudos* to describe these fallacies. Its ontology is apparently simpler—it means "false" in a more concrete way than does *paralogismos*—but its use in the treatise is confusing. In places it refers to sophistic refutation in general: in the first section Aristotle says that it is important for the expert to refrain from fallacious (or false) arguments (*apseudein*) and to expose a fallacious argument (*pseudomenon*) when he hears one. Yet just a few lines later he calls one of the five (legitimate) types of refutation the identification of a *pseudos*, a lie or a falsehood—translated "fallacy" in some texts (including the Loeb). In the first case he seems to use *pseudos* as a general, if vague, term for fallacies of all kinds; in the second, he seems to use it as a term for one specific kind of fallacy, the outright lie. In one sense, there is no difference between them: all fallacies are untrue; every *pseudos* is false. The distinctions that Aristotle seems to be drawing fall apart simply because the *pseudos* is yet another kind of *a-logos*, a statement outside of what is normative. But the *pseudos* is not precisely irrational in the same sense: it is an exact negation of what is true, and therefore has a precise and determinate relationship to reality. In that sense, it is subtly different

from sophistic in general—which is only apparent wisdom and therefore, Aristotle says, "lacks being."[5]

But one can also argue, as Michel Foucault did in his lectures *The Will to Know*, that it works exactly the other way around: it is the *pseudos* that lacks reality and is therefore the "true" form of the sophistic. It is actually the *paralogismos* that retains some kind of discursive relation to reality. The verbal nature of the paralogism, Foucault argues, represents a different form of knowledge than *pseudos*, which is the absence of knowledge altogether. And the *paralogismos* retains the primal entanglement with language that continues to hold the promise of a *logos* cleared of and defended from untruth. But this entanglement is never undone in the *paralogismos*, which, Foucault says, exploits a strange scarcity that Aristotle identifies in language: "There are a limited number of names . . . whereas there are an infinite number of things."[6] A kind of doubling up is sometimes necessary, and one word must sometimes stand for two or more things (Aristotle's example is *kuon*, which can refer to dog, the Dog Star, or a Cynic philosopher [*kunikos*]).[7] This is where the sophist's manipulation takes place: as Foucault puts it, "He says two things in the very same thing said."[8] In other words, the sophist practices exactly the kind of deception that the *paralogismos* originally signified: a false or duplicitous accounting (the word originally referred to a false reckoning in the keeping of accounts).

I am not entirely convinced that Foucault's distinction between *pseudos* and *paralogismos* is as absolute as he says it is, both from the perspective of the text and conceptually. Indeed, I think that the distinction itself is a kind of paralogism, a distinction of the irrational that does not break through into absolute reason. In one sense, Aristotle's use of the two words inverts what Foucault describes as the sophistic economy of language. Foucault seems to have in mind what Aristotle means by both homonymy (things having both names and definitions in common) and synonymy (things having only names in common). In sophistic, we have an abundance of terms for what seems to be the same thing: the fallacy, the lie, the falsehood, the sophism, the paralogism—a predicament that does not really arise anywhere in the *Organon*, the standard collection of Aristotle's six works on logic.[9] Polynomia and heteronomia are not a problem in Aristotle's *Organon*, says the early fifth-century commentator Syrianus, because they do not belong to logic at all: they more properly "pertain to ornament of diction."[10] That is, they belong with the *Poetics*, not with the logical works. Put simply, the designation of the fallacy in *Sophistical Refutations* is an aporia. But to simplify it this way is to miss the point of the multiplication of terms: the sense of wonder that is occasioned by our failure to measure and designate things with the terms we have to hand. Elsewhere in his work Aristotle lingers over precisely the terms he uses for fallacy to explain how, and why, literature works.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle argues that epic poetry derives its power from precisely the same effect as *paralogismos*. We sometimes believe *paralogismoi*, he says in *Sophistical Refutations*, because of inexperience; and inexperience is "like those who view things from a distance." In epic poetry, similarly, we believe events that would seem ludicrous on the stage because in epic "the person acting is not seen." We retain a distance from the event, in other words, and for this reason not only believe something we otherwise might not believe but also enter into a realm beyond credulity: the wonderful (*thaumaston*) and the irrational (*alogos*).[11] Epic is a form of fallacy in which we allow ourselves not to identify the fallacy, or at least not to see it as merely sophistical. This distance from the normative operation of the *logos*, from the correct syllogism, is important not only because it enables poetry but also because it enables the sense of wonder, which is the beginning of philosophy and the ethos of tragedy and epic. "The element of the wonderful [*thaumaston*]," says Aristotle, "is required in tragedy," but "it depends for its effects" upon the "irrational [*alogon*]."[12] This passage is clearly entangled with the famous passage in Plato's *Theaetetus* where Socrates says that wonder (*thaumaston*) is the only beginning of philosophy.[13] What Socrates means there is that philosophy begins with puzzlement, with the apparently irrational, which it seeks to explain away, to reconcile with the domain of the logical. Yet the *Poetics* implies that literature seeks to dilate the irrational, to keep it active precisely because it is not merely the negation of reason but also contains a provocation that might be addressed in literature, if not in philosophy.

The mode in which literature does this, suggests Aristotle, is precisely that of the fallacy. In the *Poetics* Aristotle recommends Homer as the best example of how to pursue the wonderful in the *alogos* because he has "taught other poets the art of telling lies [*pseude*] skillfully": that is, by "fallacy [*paralogismos*]."[14] Both the *Thaeatetus* and the *Poetics* offer immediate answers for the wonderful or unsettling: we can either do philosophy or write literature. But neither answers the question of what, precisely, is unsettling in that initial perception—just that we need to respond to the provocation. Martin Heidegger's course on Plato's *Sophist*, which explores the uncanny wisdom (*Sophia*) of sophistry in great detail, suggests that the ultimate question is whether beings "are as they show themselves."[15] This suspicion is what primally constitutes the *thaumaston*: it "is that which is awry."[16]

This is precisely the opening predicament of *Sophistical Refutations*: "arguments which appear to be [have the appearance of, *ton phenomenon*] refutations [*elenchon*] but are really fallacies [*paralogismon*] and not refutations."[17] Something is awry, but it is unclear what it is. The crucial problem at the beginning of the treatise is appearance: one cannot, initially at least, tell the difference between *sophistikon elenchon* and "reasonings" (*sullogismoi*).

Sophistical refutation bears the features of logic, and not of outright nonsense. Yet it is nonsense, and Aristotle surprisingly says that *this* aspect of sophistical refutation is obvious (*phaneron*).[18] Yet the illogic of fallacious appearance—of fallacy—is not obvious, because it depends upon its superficial resemblance to reason to mask itself; but it is obvious that there is a difference—although one that is not obvious—between fallacy and syllogism. It is precisely because of this disturbance of thought—that fallacies and real refutations appear to be the same, but that they "obviously" are not—that this treatise is necessary.

Aristotle gives several analogies for the appearance of this concealed falsehood, having to do with superficial appearance: tin might appear to be like gold; someone might appear to be beautiful, but is only self-beautifying. From the beginning of the treatise sophistical refutation is linked to substitution and impersonation. Aristotle's first analogy is to someone dressed up like the "tribal chorus" at Athens. This analogy says three things about sophistical refutation. First, the outfitting of the tribal chorus was in part a display of conspicuous wealth, usually paid for by a *choregos*, one of the wealthiest men from each "tribe" of Athens; Aristotle is obliquely criticizing not the mercenary motives of sophists, but the fraudulence that impeaches the real value of their performances.[19] Second, tribal choruses appear not in performances of tragedies but in comedies, a genre that Aristotle says makes people worse than they really are.[20] Third, tribal choruses participate in agonistic dithyrambs, competitions to determine which tribe has the best chorus: given that argumentation in *Sophistical Refutation* is described as an *agon* (that is, done by *agonizomenoi* [165b13]), Aristotle seems to be comparing struggle on stage with "real" (that is, intellectual) struggle.[21] This first analogy has a significant difference from the other two: from the start one knows that the appearance of the actors is "false," precisely because one is in the theater, and the deception is thus an "obvious" one (from the *Poetics*: the "person acting is seen"). But the other analogies are deceptive precisely because one does not know that the appearance does not correspond to the underlying reality. In the first case, one knows something is awry; in the others, one does not know that one is ignorant. The implicit question is "how does one tell the difference?" The rest of the treatise is the answer to this problem, but not obviously, at least, the answer to the question of appearance that they raise. Aristotle's answer seems circular: you can tell an argument is false by experience (*apeirian*—inexperienced, without limit[ation]). Although the treatise will go on to give a taxonomy of fallacies, it is useful to describe what has gone awry, or to inform one's suspicion that something could be awry: fallacy as a potentiality, in Aristotle's sense. The intuition that something is awry is not triggered by the appearance of the argument; it is a sense that lurks in the mind even before one hears an argument.

The term in the title that covers both false and true refutations—*elenchon*—conceals the originary function of fallacy in logic while continuing to challenge the possibility that logic is a pure science. Refutation begins as a challenge to logic, a challenge that is never entirely dispelled. The narrative of *Sophistical Refutations*, on the other hand, encourages us to think of refutation as something that comes along once one has articulated an argument. Aristotle says that the expert in a subject will strive to avoid false argument altogether, as if it were an obstacle to be avoided in making an assertion.[22] The goal of the entire treatise, at any rate, seems to be to drop the pseudo-refutation along the way, leaving nothing but the reality of the pure syllogism. But refutation remains nevertheless: it is the condition of the language of the treatise. The treatise's treatment of pseudo-refutation is, after all, a "true" refutation, which is premised on the initial appearance of pseudo-refutation. Refutation is thus the originary trace of a primal falsehood, of an unreality that lies outside of language: the *paralogismos*.

The etymon of the word *elenchon* contains another primal sense. In Homeric Greek it meant something less cerebral and dialectical; something, indeed, that reached deep into the primal logic of shame and dishonor. To "refute" meant to impeach, even to destroy, the person's reputation, which is to say their worth—their *arete*, the cultivation of a form of honor that was the Greek (male) cultural ideal.[23] In that sense, the *elenchos* undermines the presentation of the self in the community (or *polis*) or, to be precise, what the community believes a person to be. Essentially a "moral reproach," it sometimes simply meant "shame."[24] Although its grounds are in prelogical discourse, the *elenchus* in Greek philosophy is also belated: it is a refutation, a response called up by a valid proposition or syllogism. In that sense, sophistical disputation is the shadow of illogic that logic carries with it. Yet it's a shadow that logic itself creates: sophistical disputation wouldn't exist without the demands of syllogistic disputation, and the demand to distinguish the reasoning from the falsehood lurking together under the veil of appearance. Sophistical disputation, in other words, is both prior to logic and is its supplement.

From a narrative standpoint, though, if one can talk about Aristotle's *Organon* as having a narrative, the first appearance of mistakes in argument, of fallacy, is in the *Sophistical Refutations*, the last work of the *Organon*. It also may have been the first work. At the end of *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle himself says something slightly unclear about its order of composition: "Of this present inquiry . . . it is not true to say that it had already been partly elaborated and partly not; nay, it did not exist at all."[25] Much depends upon what he means by "this inquiry": it could be the entire *Organon*, or it could be just *Sophistical Refutations*. This might imply that it was the last work of logic that he wrote; or that it is the first that should be studied; or, more abstractly,

that logic cannot begin without there being already a knowledge of fallacy: the discipline of logic did not exist before there was the study of fallacy. That last point obviously echoes my larger argument about fallacy; but the order of the *Organon* as we have it also suggests that fallacy is a kind of *thesaurus* laid up before one begins disputations. The procedure through the *Organon* up to that point is invention, the construction of a valid argument through the steps of syllogism. The initial treatises on logic in the *Organon* lay out the valid forms of deduction, forms that were so axiomatic and basic to philosophy in the Middle Ages that students were given a twenty-four-word mnemonic (beginning "Barbara celarent . . . ") for the twenty-four valid forms of syllogism, a meaningless set of words that nevertheless hews to the logic of grammatical inflection and the status of a phrase in the universal language of logic.[26] The introduction of syllogism as a kind of invention, analogous to the creation and manipulation of tropes in rhetoric, makes logic appear to be an unflappably diegetic narrative. At least in its initial stages, logic must follow a sequence that is its own ground. Logic has a purely formal aspect whose purity is precisely the reason that it is taken for an ontology by some medieval commentators.[27] In Aristotle, logic is the means by which knowledge of the world is produced, the means by which we can tell the difference between a phantasm and an idea about reality. Its formal nature is ontological in another way: its forms are unimpeachably stable—hence the importance of learning the mnemonics for the moods of syllogism—and also implicitly the order of the universe. Syllogism is not merely a description of the world; it is an ontology in much the same way that for Alain Badiou mathematics is ontology.

For logicians, syllogistic form is not always "purely" formal, even when it seems to be. One of the most influential medieval manuals on disputation, written by the late fourteenth-century physicist and logician Walter Burley, is called *The Purity of the Art of Logic*. He does not mean that logic is uncontaminated by (to put it in a slightly Kantian way) investment in the world. He means that logic has an essential, immanent purity that one must continually, even habitually, keep in mind.[28] At the same time, however, it is important to remember that the late-medieval practice of disputation shares one uncomfortable trait of sophistic: it is not exactly concerned with the truth. The formal integrity of a syllogism is often more important than its propositional content. In the later practice of *obligationes*, in which one disputant states a proposition to which the respondent is "obligated" to respond, the criteria are simply to observe the rules of inference and deduction as strictly as possible. Indeed, "interest lies no longer primarily, or even at all, in examining whether what is generally held is true. The thesis in an obligational disputation is often false."[29]

Indeed, fallacies are presented as if they are topics for invention, something with which the mind must be stocked before it ventures into the field

of logical disputation. Commentaries on *Sophistical Refutation* sound as if they are manuals on how to make sophistical arguments, not dismantle them. They assume the viewpoint, in other words, of the sophist, in Aristotle's terms, not the philosopher. Where Aristotle says that there are five ways to win for those who "compete and contend" in argument, medieval commentaries on *Sophistical Refutations* say that there are five errors (*metae*, goals, aims) into which the "opponent" would like to lead (*intendit ducere*) the "respondent."[30] The difference between the two is subtle but important: in Aristotle, we begin with someone protecting a valid syllogism against specious attack; in medieval commentaries, we begin with the assumption that the *end* (in all of Aristotle's various senses) is to create, or induce, fallacy. When a *methe* is reached, the disputation is over ("terminatur").[31]

Although the *techne* of argument in medieval commentaries is virtually identical to Aristotle's, the commentaries belong to the radically different ethos of scholastic disputation. In *obligationes*, the respondent can deny, affirm, or express doubt about the proposition that the opponent asserts. Although the opponent must follow the rules of logic, he uses techniques that seem sophistical, or, more strictly, that will force the respondent to make a sophistical response. According to Walter Burley's *Treatise on Obligations*, the opponent's technique is implicitly drawn from the fallacies *ex dictione*: the "opponent's job is to use language in a way that makes the respondent grant things that he need not grant."[32] Burley's is virtually an injunction to use the six fallacies that Aristotle says "produce a false illusion in connexion with language."[33] Rather than a manual encouraging a philosopher to continue in the face of spurious objections, then, the medieval *De Sophisticis* is more of a manual on how to encourage others to commit sophistical refutations. This is perhaps why one colophon to a treatise on the Aristotelian fallacies refers to it as a treatise on the mode of arguing ("quidam tractatus qui vocatur modus arguendi").[34]

Medieval disputation is certainly not the same thing as the sophistic against which Aristotle armed would-be philosophers. Sophistic aimed at obscuring the truth, at encouraging one to believe that the fallacy represented the way things really were in the world. *Obligationes*, however, were predicated on the relation of the initial statement (the *propositum*) to truth. To be precise, the relation between the proposition and truth is negative or inverse: if the proposition is false, the respondent is obligated to defend it as true, and to defend it as false if it is true.[35] This tangled but immovable relation to the truth is perhaps why late medieval logicians thought about the kind of wisdom that is demonstrated in disputation as different from mere sophistry. The goal (*methe*) in medieval disputation is reached by means of a rigorous and technical formalism true to its own demands, but that has wisdom in mind as an ultimate, if not proximate, goal. In his foundational

commentary on *Sophistical Refutations*, William of Sherwood says that the aim in sophistic disputation, which is to appear wise, comes about when one leads one's opponent into an *inconveniens*, an "absurdity."[36] But there are two crucial differences with Aristotle's definition of sophistic refutation, where an onlooker may not know that the sophist is making a sophistic argument. First, Aristotle says that syllogism and sophistic argument cannot be the same thing: "Some syllogisms are really syllogisms, but . . . others seem to be, but are not really, syllogisms."[37] William of Sherwood, on the other hand, says not only that the sophistical syllogism (*sophisticus syllogismus*) exists but also that it is the *same* as sophistical disputation. These crucial differences from Aristotle reveal a far wider latitude for sophistic refutation in the Middle Ages, and indeed for the syllogism: the genus of the syllogism includes the species of the sophistical syllogism, and sophistical disputation *is a part* of disputation in general, not an exception to it. Everyone knows that *obligationes* are *sophistical* disputations, and that everyone would know that the winner is merely clever and not *really* wise, but only seems so when set against someone who is forced to become a sophist. William also dignifies sophistical arguments in this form: they are not just useful instruments one can pick up during a disputation; they are part of a discourse whose goal is the discovery of truth.[38] Even if that truth is only an appearance, truth is still part of the target; it is just that it lies beyond the *methe* of sophistical discourse.

Fallacy, in other words, isn't the negation of truth: it's an *appearance* of truth, its phenomenon. It's false in the sense that it *is* an appearance and not the thing itself, but then the thing itself would be unknowable if it didn't have some phenomenal aspect. A more positive way to put this is that the late medieval theory of fallacy is a technique of nonlogical discourse, the procedure of constructing sophistical syllogism. Treatises on fallacy talk about it not as a deviation from discursive norms but as a discourse in its own right. Against objections that a sophistical syllogism cannot be a form of knowledge (*scientia*) because it is not knowledge of something "true," Walter Burley points out that the *Liber Elenchorum* is a book in its own right, whose *materia* is the sophistical syllogism.[39] There are certain conditions "in dictione," says William of Sherwood, from which this semblance of truth is derived.[40] These conditions are *loci sophistici*: the stock of sophistries that the treatise will classify and explain. They are what William calls the *principium* of the discourse, its beginning and founding principle.

These *loci sophistici* do not have the same status as what medieval philosophers would call a discipline that contains knowledge. Indeed, several *questiones* on fallacy argue that sophistical refutation cannot be a *scientia* at all because it does not have being, or *ens*: half of its definition is *non-existentia*.[41] Yet it *is* a *sermo*, a discipline of language, and in the strictest sense, its genesis, as William's definition of the *loci sophistici* suggests, lies in the use of

language. The fallacies that are "in the language" (in Aristotle's words, *para ten lexin* [165b24]; in William's, *in dictione* [134]) depend upon distinctions of reference, such as equivocation (one word has several senses), amphibology (one sentence has several meanings), division (transferring the predicate from the parts to the whole—for example, five is two and three; therefore five is odd and even).[42] Commentaries often parse the possible referents of common words, as for the preposition *in*: it can mean *super*, as in *in mare* (on the sea); *intra*, as in *thesaurus absconditus est in terra* (the treasure is hidden in the earth); *contra*, as in *vado in hostem* (I rush against the enemy).[43]

Distinctions such as these (and these are some of the crudest, because finer distinctions would take up too much space here) testify to the exquisite capacity for nuance that the study of fallacies reveals. Given the reputation of medieval scholastics for logical severity, we have tended to lose sight of a remarkable corollary of this training: scholastics spent a large part of their time thinking about nonsense—not the nonsense of empty formalism (how many angels could dance on the head of a pin), but the nonsense of sheer verbal play.

A large part of the appeal of work on fallacy was its indispensability to one of the most popular genres of medieval philosophy, the literature of sophisms. *Sophismata* were statements that were obviously nonsensical, insoluble, or fallacious: "You have not ceased to eat iron"; "Nothing and a chimaera are brothers"; "The whole Socrates is less than Socrates."[44] Sophisms most immediately raised important questions about logic and theories of reference, but they were also used in natural philosophy, especially in Oxford in the fourteenth century, in the pursuit of the mathematically informed physics of motion and being.[45] Although the method of *sophismata* emerged at the same time that *Sophistical Refutations* was beginning to be used widely in the twelfth century (in Boethius's long-neglected translation and several newer translations), the sophisms are not sophistic in the sense of "sophistic" in *Sophistical Refutations*.[46] *Sophismata* are not putative refutations of arguments that otherwise stand on their own. They are genuine instruments of inquiry and occupy an important place in medieval philosophy. Nevertheless, the method of decoding or unriddling *sophismata* owed a great deal to Aristotle's classifications of fallacies. The fallacy behind the sophism "The whole Socrates is less than Socrates," for instance, was acknowledged to commit the fallacy of accident, even in the late and sophisticated work of Henry of Ghent, where he cites *Sophistical Refutations* on this point.[47]

Particular *sophismata* can be bizarre and absurdist. Solely on that basis they constitute a kind of literariness on their own terms, although medieval scholars would not have regarded them, for a host of reasons, as literature. They do seem to have relished the humor in them for its own sake, however: one early scholastic boasted to a friend how he had dazzled the king with

a *sophisma* during after-dinner banter: "'Do you have one eye?' I asked. When he answered that he had, I countered, 'Do you then have two eyes?' And when he again assented without reservation, I said, 'One and two are three. Therefore you have three eyes.'"[48] The king's response: educated men certainly do lead a "iocundam vitam," a jolly life. From the outside, at least, the domain of the *sophisma* allowed for a life of disinterested contemplation, unthreatening precisely because of its patent absurdity. That benign acceptance of *sophismata* suggests how much sophism had become detached from sophistical refutation. Exercises in *sophismata*, designed as limit cases for logical fallacy, concentrated more on explaining *how* they were fallacies than on recognizing that they *were* fallacies—that part was already taken care of with the choice of ostentatiously weird examples. Their exquisite attention to nuances of meaning and expression served, in other words, as a kind of literary criticism by proxy: divorced from immediate reference to reality, *sophismata* taught how to read the linguistic texture of propositions closely.

Part of the reason that sophistical refutation took that turn was the dominance of disputation as the primary mode of intellectual inquiry. Disputation proceeds as if fallacy is the inevitable second step in dialectic. The working assumption is that one side or the other is *necessarily* fallacious: the opposing argument is chosen precisely because it seems to be the opposite of the first proposition, not necessarily because it represents the situation of reality itself. The work of the disputants is to show how the other argument really *is* a fallacy, in logic if not in reality. In the popular imagination, at least, the fallacy's habitation at the heart of philosophy gave scholasticism its reputation for empty formalism, uncoupled from reality. Rabelais's is probably the most devastating parody of the supposed—and literal—vacuousness of the *sophisma*: whether a chimaera buzzing in a vacuum can devour second intentions.[49]

But poets did recognize the tremendous comic and creative possibilities of *sophismata*. The supreme example is the question of how to divide a fart in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*. It is a spectacular mash-up of fallacies and of material from *sophismata*: the fallacies of composition and division (that is, the relation between part and whole, the question of whether the *buf* of the burp is a meaningful utterance, the echo of the word *bombinas* from sophisms, which means both buzzing and farting, its precise description as an *impossibilia*). As always with Chaucer, there is a hilarious and devastating critique of social relations behind these jokes: the parodic solution of the wheel with twelve friars sniffing the same fart as the wheel turns is a blasphemous inversion of Pentecost, but a blasphemy perhaps canceled by the scene's parody of the foundation of the Franciscan order—a parody that in turn fits into a vast body of antifraternal satire motivated by theological, ecclesiological, and economic tensions.

As the vista opening out from the *Tale*'s sophism suggests, sophism is imagined as the underlying logic behind deceptions of all kinds. The late fourteenth-century poem *Le Livre de Leesce*, a rebuttal by "Lady Gladness" of the author's previous misogynistic work *Lamentations de Matheolus*, begins by arguing that women deceive men through five means of temptation (the tongue, sight, touch, falsehood, and iniquity) that correspond to the five types of fallacies of language that Aristotle lays out in *Sophistical Refutations*. Along the way, Aristotle himself is attacked with the debased legend that he allowed himself to be ridden like a horse by a woman—the trope of sensuality overcoming reason—but *Sophistical Refutations* is an unusually important and prominent part of the poem.[50] It uses the extremely rare word *metes* for "means," a word that must come from Latin translations of *Sophistical Refutations* other than Boethius's.[51] Boethius uses the word *fines*, "ends," so the author of *Lamentations*, Mahieu of Boulogne, must have had a close acquaintance with another translation or a commentary like William of Sherwood's.[52]

The initial charge that the five temptations are like the five fallacies *ex dictione* explains why these temptations are overwhelmingly explained in literally linguistic (*lingua*, "tongue") terms. Several fabliau-like examples follow, illustrating how, for instance, the sight can be deceived by the tongue "par le sophisme": a wife persuades her husband that his eyes had deceived him when he caught her in the act of adultery.[53] Lady Gladness responds to this charge by defending Aristotle for his virtues and political strength, but above all for having written much "belle escripture" (line 880). The second text she names, after *On Interpretation* (the *Peri Hermeneias*), is the "Elenches" (line 881). As it happens, the only other texts by Aristotle that she does name are the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*. For Lady Gladness's purposes, Aristotle's most significant work, in other words, is four of the six books that make up the *Organon* (only the *Categories* and the *Topics* are missing). She is a relation of the famous figure of Reason in the *Romance of the Rose*, except that she embodies—really, internalizes—Aristotelian logic.

The *Romance of the Rose*, as it happens, also uses logic as a critique of social deviation, and thus may stand as an example for subsequent treatments of logic, and particularly fallacy, in vernacular literature. The *Romance of the Rose* is especially interested in the play between appearance and reality that characterizes medieval commentary on fallacies. The figure Faus-semblant in the *Romance of the Rose* represents the false religious, who make a living by pretending to be what they are not. No one, says Faus-semblant, can challenge the argument that they use to justify themselves: "Cist a robe religieuse, / Donques est-il religieus" (This one has the robe of a religious, therefore he is a religious).[54] This supposedly unimpeachable argument is

recognizably a *sophisma*, but, according to Faus-semblant, it is impervious to any of the critiques of fallacious argument in *Sophistical Refutations*: "No one knows how to reply to the argument, no matter how high he tonsures his head, even if he shaves with the razor of the *Elenchis*."[55] Faus-semblant's critique of critique, a sophistical refutation of the *Sophistical Refutations*, wittily reproduces the fallacy that he is celebrating. If robes make the religious, logic makes the cleric: logic, which characterizes the cleric, is a kind of razor, and a razor is used to make the tonsure on a cleric's head.[56]

Faus-semblant's sophisms trouble several professions and modes of living simultaneously but not seriously, because his fallacies are so patent. A later and hugely influential poem, *Le Roman de Fauvel*, takes the celebration of sophism—and of anticlericalism—to an exuberant extreme. The poem recounts Fortune's installation of Fauvel the donkey in a palace where clergy come from far and wide to pay obeisance to him, and humiliate themselves by keeping him clean ("currying Fauvel," or currying favor). The poem is a carnivalesque riot of subversion and impiety, but it is informed, and indeed contained, by the evident apparatus of clerical knowledge. The very name of the central figure comes from one of the most widespread sets of sophisms featuring donkeys (William Heytesbury and Jean Buridan both wrote a whole set of sophisms just on donkeys), some of whom are named Favellus. Indeed, Fauvel is called the "roy de fallace."[57] The riotous transformation that the poem describes is, in a sense, a fantasia triggered by the recurrent substitution of donkeys for people in sophismatic literature. Even simple sophisms like "A man is a donkey" demand the interrogation of categories of identity, animality, and referentiality. But they can also trigger mind-bending thought experiments. Buridan solves the "Man is a donkey" sophism by imagining a world transformed only slightly less radically than the world in *Fauvel*. The sophism could be made true, he says, "by positing that, by a deluge or by divine power, the whole of the Latin language is lost, because all those who knew Latin are destroyed, and then a new generation following them imposes by convention . . . the utterance 'donkey' to signify the same as the utterance 'animal' signifies to us now."[58]

If sophism and fallacy could furnish the subject and structure of an entire poem, it could also lie at the heart of the critique of poetry itself. Although the question of whether the discourse of poetry met the criteria of *apparentia* and *non-existentia* is already answered at the outset (fictionality is the very state of mere appearance and nonexistence), the possibility that it might harbor some degree of truth remained live.

In a masterful poem criticizing the poetry of his rival Guittone d'Arezzo, Dante's famous poetic interlocutor Guido Cavalcanti appeals to the syllogism as the normative form of poetic argument. The poem begins with the obscure claim that "from the many to the one makes a syllogism" (Da ppiù a uno, face

un sollegismo), a line that has not really been unraveled before.[59] It alludes to a debate surrounding syllogism that goes back to Aristotle and, once recognized, underscores Cavalcanti's implicit argument that poetry's most urgent model is logic. In the *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle said that the syllogism is a *logos*, and subsequent interpreters understood this to mean that it was a single discourse, as opposed to multiple discourses.[60] Thomas Aquinas's teacher Albertus Magnus points out that, although the major and minor premises are "diverse" (or *plures*), they refer to the same conclusion and are "related to one End."[61] The taunting point of Cavalcanti's cryptic reference is perhaps that Guittone will miss the reference entirely, thus proving how devoid of logic his poetry is. A few lines later Cavalcanti says that Guittone would be hard pressed even to construct a sophism ("E come far potresti un sofismo / per silabate carte, fra Guittone?").[62] But Cavalcanti's poem suggests a larger principle of literary criticism: that poetry is a unified discourse—or, to put it more precisely, poetry is made by a unified discourse. Just as a syllogism unites diverse propositions, a poem unites the pages of scattered syllables into a single discourse. Guittone obviously fails on many counts, and Cavalcanti's criticism of him is a grab bag of vices and failings. But more significant is the middle term, so to speak, of Cavalcanti's criticism: Cavalcanti's charge that Guittone can't write even a sophism suggests that Cavalcanti equates the sophism with the minimal condition of poetry. If the sophism is what Foucault calls the "inverted image of reasoning," it still maintains an orientation toward reasoning.[63] At least a sophism can yield sense; Guittone's poems have nothing but a kind of illogical nondiscursivity. According to the implicit logic of Cavalcanti's poem, sophism lies at the heart not just of literature's interrogation of its own immanent falsity, but also of the possibility that literature can construct plausible argument—and plausible poetry—by excising poetry that is only apparently poetry.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 164a20, in *Sophistical Refutations, On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away, On the Cosmos*, ed. and trans. E. S. Forster (Cambridge, MA, 1955). All subsequent citations of this work will be to this edition.
2. William of Sherwood, *Introductiones in Logicam*, ed. Harmut Brands and Christoph Kann (Hamburg, 1995), 168. English quotations (except where noted) will be taken from William of Sherwood, *Introduction to Logic*, trans. Norman Kretzmann (Minneapolis, 1966).
3. William of Sherwood, *Introductiones*, 168.
4. Ibid., my translation.
5. "Esti gar he sophistike phainomene sophia, ousa d'ou"; Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 165a21–22.

6. Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1970–1971*, ed. Daniel Defert, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, 2013), 43.
7. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 166a15–17.
8. Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know*, 44.
9. The distinction between homonym and synonym (which becomes the distinction between univocity and equivocity) begins the *Categories*, the first work of the *Organon*. In his commentary on the *Categories*, Porphyry introduced the terms "polyonym" and "heteronym" to refer to what we typically think of as synonyms: different names for the same thing; Porphyry, *On Aristotle Categories*, trans. Steven K. Strange (London, 1992), 39.
10. Quoted in Octavius Freire Owen, *The Organon, or Logical Treatises, of Aristotle* (London, 1889), 1:1n2.
11. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460a12–13, in *The Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. and trans. S. H. Butcher (London, 1922).
12. Ibid.
13. Plato, *Theaetetus* 155c–d, in *Plato, with an English Translation*, ed. and trans. H. N. Fowler (London, 1921).
14. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460a20. For additional comment on this passage see Richard Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago, 2010), 106.
15. Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington, 1997), 87.
16. Ibid.
17. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 164a20.
18. Ibid. 164a25.
19. "The sophist is one who makes money from apparent and not real wisdom"; ibid. 165a22–23. The metaphor of fraudulent accounting, which runs through the introduction, further reflects this critique.
20. See Aristotle, *On the Athenian Constitution*, trans. F. G. Kenyon (London, 1895), chap. 56.
21. On the staging of comedies in Athens, see Andronike Makres, "Dionysiac Festivals in Athens and the Financing of Comic Performances," in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, ed. Michael Fontaine and Adele C. Scafuro (Oxford, 2014), 70–92.
22. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 165b27.
23. See Arthur Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford, 1960), 34–38.
24. See Hayden Ausland, "Forensic Characteristics of Socratic Argumentation," in Gara Alan Scott, ed., *Does Socrates Have a Method?* (University Park, 2002), 37; James H. Lesher, "Parmenidean *Elenchos*," in *Does Socrates Have a Method?*, 21–24.
25. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 183b35.
26. The earliest known version of the verses is in William of Sherwood's *Introductiones*.
27. Paul Thom, *Logic and Ontology in the Syllogistic of Robert Kilwardby* (Leiden, 2007), 14.
28. Walter Burley, *The Purity of the Art of Logic*, ed. Paul V. Spade (New Haven, 2000). Paul Spade and Stephen Menn argue that the word "purity" is taken from Avicenna's word "lubāb," "pith" or "core," in their essay "A Note on the Title of Walter Burley's *On the Purity of the Art of Logic*," published on the website of Paul Vincent Spade, http://pvspade.com/Logic/docs/BurlNote.pdf.
29. Thomas Ekenberg, "Order in Obligational Disputations," *Disputatio* 5 (2002): 25.
30. See, for example, Sten Ebbesen and Yukio Iwakuma, eds., "*Anonymi Fallaciae Lemovicenses*," *Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen-Âge Grec et Latin* (*CIMAGL*) 63 (1993): 12.
31. Ebbesen and Iwakuma, "*Anonymi Fallaciae*," 12.

32. Quoted in Ekenberg, "Order in Obligational Disputations," 25.
33. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 165b26.
34. Lambeth Palace MS 70, fol. 144r, Lambeth Palace Library, London. Quoted in Sten Ebbesen, "Burley on Equivocation in His Companion to a *Tractatus Fallaciarum* and in His Questions on the *Elenchi*," *CIMAGL* 74 (2003): 153.
35. See Eleonore Stump, "William of Sherwood's Treatise on *Obligations*," in E. F. K. Koerner et al., *Studies in Medieval Linguistic Thought* (Amsterdam, 1980), 251.
36. William of Sherwood, *Introductiones*, 166; *Introduction*, 133.
37. Aristotle, *On Sophistical Refutations* 164a24–25. I have substituted "syllogisms" (the word in Aristotle's Greek) for Forster's "reasonings."
38. See Robert Kilwardby, "The Nature of Logic" [from *De Ortu Scientarium*], in Norman Kretzmann and Eleanore Stump, *The Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts*, vol. 1, *Logic and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, 1988), 271.
39. Mischa von Perger, "Walter Burley, Quaestiones libri Elenchorum: Quaestiones XVIII de fallaciis, quae 'in dictione' nuncupantur. Qq. 1–3, 13–18," *CIMAGL* 76 (2005): 172.
40. William of Sherwood, *Introductiones*, 168.
41. See Sten Ebbesen, *Commentators and Commentaries on Aristotle's* Sophistici Elenchi (Leiden, 1981), 121; Walter Burley, "Utrum de syllogism sophistico est scientia?," in von Perger, "Walter Burley, Quaestiones libri Elenchorum," 168–75.
42. Aristotle names six of these fallacies, and medieval commentaries divide each of these into as many as three subtypes.
43. This example from "Fallacie Parvipontane," in *Logica Modernorum*, ed. L. M. de Rijk, vol. 1, *On the Twelfth-Century Theories of Fallacy* (Assen, 1962), 559.
44. Master Richard, *Sophista, Abstractiones* (Oxford, 2016), 260, 214, 136.
45. For an overview, see Edith Dudley Sylla, "The Oxford Calculators," in Norman Kretzmann, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1982), 540–63.
46. See Paul V. Spade, *Sophismata*, in Robert Pasnau, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2011), 1:187.
47. Henry of Ghent, *Syncategoremata*, ed. H. A. G. Braakhuis, G. J. Etzkorn, and G. A. Wilson (Leuven, 2010), 8.
48. An example of the fallacy of composition. Quoted in Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Humour of Logic and the Logic of Humour in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 3 (1993): 11. For more on the evident pleasure that logicians derived from *sophismata*, see Philip David Baker, "Literature, Logic and Mathematics in the Fourteenth Century" (doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2013), Durham e-Theses, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/7716/.
49. It is a brilliant distillation of a number of topics in *sophismata* literature, but it also refers to the real-world problem of papal politics during the Great Schism, which the 1414 Council of Constance convened to resolve.
50. The Aristotle anecdote: Jehan Le Fèvre, *The Book of Gladness/Le Livre de Leesce*, ed. and trans. Linda Burke (Jefferson, NC, 2013), 82.
51. Jehan Le Fèvre, *Le Livre de Leesce*, line 593, in ibid.
52. Jehan Le Fèvre, *The Book of Gladness*, 111n77 in *The Book of Gladness / Le Livre de Leesce*.
53. Le Fèvre, *Le Livre de Leesce*, line 608.
54. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Ernest Langlois (Paris, 1921), lines 11,054–55.
55. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton, 1971), 194–95.

56. See Virginie Greene, *Logical Fictions in Medieval Literature and Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2014), for discussion of this passage in the larger context of logic.
57. Gervaise du Bus, *Le Roman de Fauvel*, ed. Arthur Långfors (Paris, 1914), line 855.
58. Quoted in Gyula Klima, *John Buridan* (New York, 2008), 16.
59. Guido Cavalcanti, *Rime*, ed. Letterio Cassata (Anzio, 1993), line 1.
60. Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* 1.1.
61. Quoted in Thom, *Logic and Ontology in the Syllogistic of Robert Kilwardby*, 58n64. Whether the *oratio* (or, sometimes, *scientia*) of syllogism was *una* or *plures* was sometimes a *questio* in *Sophistical Refutation* commentaries. See, for example, Andrea Tabarroni and Sten Ebbesen, "A Fragmentary 13th-century Commentary on the Sophistici Elenchi in ms Paris BN Lat. 16618," *CIMAGL* 60 (1990): 121–28.
62. Cavalcanti, *Rime*, lines 7–8.
63. Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know*, 44.