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# *Temptation, Shame, and Guilt in Medieval Fables. English and Dutch in Comparison*

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## Foreword

*Temptation, Guilt, and Shame in Medieval Fables. Dutch and English in comparison* is a thesis that takes into consideration a series of literary works, written from the second half of the twelfth century to the end of the fifteenth century. These literary works belong to the genre of the so-called beast literature, characterized by the presence of animals acting and talking like humans as main characters. The main representative of this genre is the Aesopic fable, but it is not the only kind of text I have taken into consideration. Out of six literary works, three are fable collections, one is a tale, and two are long poems. They all stem from cultural elaborations and interpretations of the traditional fable genre. I have analysed how the three moral concepts of temptation, guilt, and shame were developed in all the examined works. I decided to perform my research within two contexts, English and Dutch literature, not only because these are my two main areas of study, but also because of the cultural exchanges that these two cultures have often had throughout history.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first one provides a definition of shame, guilt and temptation, trying to contextualize these concepts in the late-medieval time setting. The following chapters are all dedicated to the analysis of the six texts taken into consideration, and to the attempt to find contextual examples of the different authors' treatment of temptation, guilt and shame. Chapter two analyses the two poems *Ysengrimus* and *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, both belonging to the Dutch saga of the fox Reynaerd. The third chapter takes into consideration two works composed by English poets: "The Nun's Priest's Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer and the fable collection *Isopes Fabules* by John Lydgate, establishing a number of parallelism between them. The fourth chapter sees once again Lydgate's work as one of the two main research subjects, together with the Scottish poet Robert Henryson who is the author of another

fable collection, *The Moral Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian*. The fifth and last chapter provides an analysis of the Dutch fable collection *Esopet*, establishing some common points with the two collections taken into consideration in chapter four.

This work has been made possible not only by my efforts. I have a long list of people who stood by me in the months that took me to conclude it. First of all, I need to thank my parents, my brother, and my relatives for their unfailing support. Then, I wish to thank a long list of wonderful people: Alice, Elena, Erik, Jessica, Kelly, Lisa G., Lisa V.B., Lorenzo, Michele, Mirco, Ottavia, and Sara. Finally, one last “thank you” goes to Fabio, for all his patience and kindness.

## Chapter 1

### Setting a frame of reference

#### 1.1. Temptation, shame, and guilt in fables

Each of us has felt, at a certain point in their life, the familiar sensation we call shame. The “symptoms” are more or less the same for everyone: cheeks turning red, a sensation of heat, discomfort and awkwardness, suddenly increased self-awareness, wishing to be everywhere but there. And, if we have caused some kind of harm to others, we feel guilty as well. These two concepts, shame and guilt, are an unpleasant yet common part of our experience as human beings. People from all around the world and from cultures which are greatly different feel them. Still, what is arguable is that not everyone would feel the same way about the same circumstance: some of us would feel shame for even the tiniest *gaffe*, while others would barely realise they did or said something shameful. This depends on a large range of factors: how we were raised, our character, whether we are religious, and which culture we belong to. Regarding this last factor, we know that each culture has a different perception of what *must* make us feel ashamed and guilty, and I am using the verb *must* because shame and guilt are social needs. They are perfect deterrents to wrongdoing, and to causing physical or mental harm to others. They are also powerful means of control, and most religious cults that have been born through history have been quick to see the opportunity behind this factor. Many of our social and moral taboos derive from religious norms, and there would be no point for us to feel ashamed or guilty for having done something if that something was not against the rules of the religious belief that prevails in our culture.

Linked with this aspect, there is also the third concept which will be fundamental for this research: temptation. This noun is imbued with a religious connotation, but I will show how there are also social temptations which do not directly

derive from what is forbidden by divine law.

My aim in this research is to find actual examples of temptation and of the feelings of shame and guilt that can be provoked by surrendering to it in the re-telling and re-elaboration of a specific genre which flourished especially throughout the late Middle Ages: Aesopic fables. The great fortune and distribution this genre enjoyed during the late medieval period can be ascribed to its readability, its simplicity and its variety in characters and topics. More specifically, my focus will be on a few selected cases in English and Dutch medieval literature, all ranging in a period of time which goes from the early 12th to the late 15th century. I will illustrate the different directions that the Aesopic source has taken in these two different languages, creating different genres and styles.

This research was also inspired by what Edward Wheatley points out: modern English studies about the Aesopic matter are not so abundant, and he hypothesizes that this scarcity of interest is due to the lack of a proper collection of traditional fables and fairy tales similar to those which started to be collected from the early modernity in many European countries. It is a small but not insignificant gap in English literature and literary studies, especially if one thinks about prime examples such as Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (1695) in France, and the more recent Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812-1815) in Germany.<sup>1</sup> This interest found fertile ground in the Netherlands as well, where the attention for folkloric tales had a more regional quality: the variety of dialects that were (and still are) spoken in the various regions of the Low Countries and Belgium led to a diversification and to a rich number of fables. An example is the collection *De Warachtighe Fabulen der Dieren* (1567) by Pieter de Clerck.

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<sup>1</sup> Wheatley, Edward, *Mastering Aesop. Medieval Education, Chaucer and his Followers*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000, p. 62.



The examples I have given here were compiled much later than the period of time I am focusing upon. However, they show how the fascination for fables did not stop after the late Middle Ages: in fact, it seems rather that this interest remained constant. A good indicator that fables were popular and had an ample audience also in the early Renaissance is that an edition of Aesop's fables translated into English was printed by William Caxton in 1484, and after the first issue thirteen more followed.<sup>2</sup> Caxton was a known businessman, and he would print what he deemed to be more important, largely known and of public interest, and thus was sure to be sold.<sup>3</sup>

At this point, it is necessary to give more context to my research by providing an overview of the fable genre, of its importance, and of its circulation in the late Middle Ages.

## 1.2. The fable genre

So far, I have made use of the word "genre" in a way which is perhaps misleading: if it is true that the "original" fable form which I am about to illustrate is more or less always the same in its prominent characteristics, in time the narrations with animals as protagonists started to take the most various forms and length. As Jan Ziolkowski states, a better and more inclusive term for labelling this kind of fiction is "beast literature",<sup>4</sup> since it can include genres such as prose, romance, and epic poem. Originally, though, the term fable was reserved for a much more specific kind of

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<sup>2</sup> See Hale, David G., "William Barrett's 'The Fables of Aesop'", *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 64, (1970), pp. 283-94.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, A. S. G., "William Caxton and the Introduction of Printing to England", <https://www.bl.uk/medieval-literature/articles/william-caxton-and-the-introduction-of-printing-to-england> (accessed 16 January 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Ziolkowski, Jan M., *Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1150*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993, p. 1.

narration. Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636 A. D.), who wrote the *Etymologiae* at the beginning of the 7th century, defines fables as follows:

Fables can be of two main types: they are Aesopian fables when dumb animals, or inanimate things such as cities, trees, mountains, rocks, and rivers, are imagined to converse among themselves. But they are Libystican fables when humans are imagined as conversing with animals, or animals with humans.<sup>5</sup>

I will focus mainly on the first type, Aesop's fables. It is not clear if Aesop ever truly existed, although many ancient writers seem quite sure of his existence. Herodotus in his *Histories* tells us that he was the slave of a certain Iadmon in Samos,<sup>6</sup> while Isidore says that he was Phrygian.<sup>7</sup> Historic or not, and whatever his origins were, Aesop's fables became largely known in the whole of Europe in the centuries following his alleged existence. To better define this genre, Isidore can come once again to my aid. He writes:

Poets named 'fables' (fabula) from 'speaking' (fari), because they are not actual events that took place, but were only invented in words. These are presented with the intention that the conversation of imaginary dumb animals among themselves may be recognized as a certain image of the life of humans [...]. Poets have made up some fables for the sake of entertainment, and expounded others as having to do with the nature of things, and still others as about human morals.<sup>8</sup>

This last sentence opens a matter which was debated ever since late antiquity among scholars and writers. As Stephen Manning explains, what moralists like Thomas Aquinas asked themselves was: "does the fable teach, or delight, or both? Stern moralists cried that it only delighted [...], the man of letters tended to emphasize the moral content".<sup>9</sup> The mistrust towards fables was due, first, to its pagan origins, and, second, to the fact that literature was seen as inherently sinful. Fables made no

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<sup>5</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, edited by Barney, S. A., Lewis, W. J., Beach, J. A., & Berghof, O., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by George Rawlinson, Moscow (ID): LLC Roman Roads Media, 2013, p. 173.

<sup>7</sup> Isidore of Seville, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Isidore of Seville, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Manning, Stephen, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude toward Fables", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 59 (1960), pp. 403-16.

exception, and so it was questioned whether they were a source of distraction and temptation — and this is interesting enough, considering the topics I am exploring in this research. Fortunately, according to Manning, Aesop was saved from moral reprobation by Macrobius, who in his *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* catalogued fables in two kinds: those who delighted and those who taught, making Aesop's fall under the latter category on the ground that his morals were always explicit and thus unmistakably plain to see.<sup>10</sup>

During the late Middle Ages fables circulated in collections and translated into Latin, and Wheatley claims that the most famous recollection was the so called *Elegiac Romulus*.<sup>11</sup> The name comes from the fact that this Latin translation from the Greek original was allegedly made by the legendary Romulus, the first king of Rome. Although it is now known that the actual translator of Aesop's work was Phaedrus, who expanded the original collection adding some of his own fables,<sup>12</sup> the idea of the first Roman king being responsible for the first diffusion in the Latin culture of this genre must have been alluring to medieval scholars. Moreover, it was supported by a letter inserted at the beginning of the collection, which was supposedly written by Romulus himself to his son Tiberinus and which served as a sort of "preface" to the fables. According to Romulus, Tiberinus must read these stories, because "they will increase [his] laughter and duly sharpen [his] character".<sup>13</sup> What Romulus (or whoever wrote this letter) underlines in this sentence is crucial in defining what role beast literature played in the time setting I am taking into consideration: fables soon became a largely used pedagogic instrument.

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<sup>10</sup> Manning, p. 407.

<sup>11</sup> Wheatley, p.63.

<sup>12</sup> Champlin, Edward, "Phaedrus the Fabulous", *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 95 (2005), pp. 97-123.

<sup>13</sup> Österley, Hermann, *Steinhöwels Aesop*, Tübingen: Literarische verein, 1873, in Wheatley, p.64. Translated from Latin by Edward Wheatley.

### 1.3. The pedagogic function of Aesop's fables

As Isidore tells his readers, fables are short stories with talking animals or objects as character, ending with a usually explicit moral. It does not hurt that they are usually fairly pleasant and entertaining to read, precisely as moralists were afraid of. Wheatley underlines how these features made this particular genre appealing to children, and even though modern pedagogy and child psychology were still far from being developed, teachers were quick to understand how they could use children's predisposition to appreciate short stories to their advantage.<sup>14</sup> Fables were easy to be grammatically analysed detail by detail by young pupils. Teachers could read them, dwell on each verb to teach them its meaning, its paradigm and how to conjugate it, and the same with all the nouns, which are largely belonging to the first and second declensions and thus perfect for beginners.

A good indicator of how diffused must have been the use of fables to teach Latin and morality is that the amount of parchment scraps and loose sheets reporting single fables, sentences and even just the morals of some fables is incalculable. Generally, the more a text was copied down, the more it circulated.<sup>15</sup> Evidently, students and scholars would copy down those passages which interested them the most. What is most interesting, perhaps, are the annotations and glosses which accompany these manuscripts and fragments: they can be found in a wide range of vernacular languages.<sup>16</sup> This is a clear signal of what a large use must have been made of them: all over Europe pupils would try to access as closely as possible the true meaning of those texts. Angela Giallongo writes that children (usually from seven to fourteen years of age) were taught more or less at the same time about Cato's

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<sup>14</sup> Wheatley, pp. 95-6.

<sup>15</sup> Wheatley, p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> Wheatley, p. 59.

*moralitas*, Aesop's fables and Boetius' doctrine,<sup>17</sup> and this demonstrates how moral instruction through fables was just as important as the grammatical teaching they were the vehicle of, and how they were seen as the two sides of the same coin.

The medieval interest for fables did not stop at passive reception and consumption. The quantity of beast literature which was produced in the late Middle Ages is by far larger than the "original" production by Aesop and Phaedrus. Many authors and poets dedicated themselves to this genre, producing works which, although enriched, enlarged and originally re-elaborated, have their roots in the classical sources I have mentioned so far, and the cases I will take into examination make no exception.

#### **1.4. Fable writing in the late Middle Ages.**

The beast narrations I am focusing on are just a few of the very large number of fables and animal tales written in the time range I am taking into consideration. I will start by shortly focusing myself on the anonymous poem *Ysengrimus*, written in Latin in the Netherlands in the middle of the 12th century. This was among the main sources for "Willem die Maedoc maecte" ("William-who-wrote-the-Madoc", c.1200 – c.1250), author of the animal epic *Van den Vos Reynaerde (Of the Fox Reynaerde)*. I will then proceed to analyse Geoffrey Chaucer's (1343-1400) "The Nonnes Preestes Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales*, and the minor poems of John Lydgate (1370-1451), who is one of the poets who followed more closely Chaucer's literary path. I will then dedicate a chapter to the comparison between Lydgate and the Scotsman Robert Henryson (c. 1425 - c. 1506) with his *Moral Fabillis*, in which he retells many Aesopic fables in Scots. Finally, in the last chapter I will talk about the Middle Dutch collection

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<sup>17</sup> Giallongo, Angela, *Il Bambino Medievale: Educazione ed Infanzia nel Medioevo*, Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1990, p. 246.

of Aesopic fables called *Esopet*, attributed to the two Dutch poets Calfstaf and Noydekijn and which dates back to the last part of the 13th century.

The success that beast literature has had as a genre among poets and that has led to such a development during the late Middle Ages, is also imputable to the fact that they had animals as characters, according to Jan Ziolkowski. He notices this:

Animals permit authors to take risks that they cannot take in stories explicitly about human beings. [...] Through beasts they can comment upon the powerful, express their resentments and frustrations, and fulfill in fantasy dreams that they could not realize in life [...]. In fables and fairy tales [animals] do feel shame, guilt, and they can tempt and be tempted as well. [...]. Human motivation, characteristics, and behavior are attributed to them.<sup>18</sup>

This is because “in the mediaeval imagination ideas moved, as of course, from symbol to symbol”,<sup>19</sup> and animals were traditionally-charged symbols of humans’ vices and virtues which provided perfect cover to the intentions of medieval authors: they worked as “masks” for satirical and critical purpose, as Ziolkowski states.

The medieval interest for animal narrations seems to have been somehow linked to the phenomenon of the bestiaries as well, as Arnold Clayton Henderson suggests.<sup>20</sup> Many bestiaries have survived until today, making it clear that they might have been extremely diffused, along with herbaria and lapidaries. Medieval scholars were deeply concerned with cataloguing all of God’s creation, and they would compile long lists of animals, stones and plants with their relative characteristic, uses and properties, because “the medieval belief [was that] the natural world of beasts and birds is a book of lessons written by God for the edification of the human being”.<sup>21</sup> In bestiaries animals show the same features that are attributed to them in Aesop’s fables: wolves are vicious, foxes are cunning, dogs are faithful, and so on.

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<sup>18</sup> Ziolkowski, pp. 6-7.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, Henry Osborn, “Placing the Middle Ages”, *Speculum*, 11 (1936), pp. 437-445, p. 445.

<sup>20</sup> Henderson, Arnold Clayton, “Medieval Beasts and Modern Cages: The Making of Meaning in Fables and Bestiaries”, *PMLA*, 97 (1982), pp. 40–49.

<sup>21</sup> Hassig, Debra, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. xv.

Besides animals and the traditional characteristics they embody, another important feature of fables is, of course, the moral. The moral is the most innovative part of the beast narrations, because writers would read in their tale a meaning that varied greatly from author to author. Henderson points out that “in the explicit moralizations to the fables, authors reveal their own perceptions, not of what the traditional material does mean or has meant, but of what potential for meaning they found”.<sup>22</sup> I will show case by case how this proves true.

What I have focused on until now is the literary genre on which my research will be performed. As I have anticipated, what I am searching for in this literary field are concrete examples of temptation, guilt and shame. These three concepts are even nowadays widely recognized to be arduous to define and to extricate, especially guilt and shame: R.E. Lamb points out that “true distinction between shame and guilt is remarkably absent in our culture, because it is focused on the latter”.<sup>23</sup> However, it is important to remember that the concepts of shame, guilt and temptation, their perception we have of them and what we think can cause them to change over time, even though we have enough proof that “late-medieval literary treatments of shame suggest that it was considered just as painful in the later Middle Ages as it is today”.<sup>24</sup> I will thus attempt to give at least a broad definition of what it meant for medieval people to fall prey to temptation, to be ashamed, and to feel guilty.

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<sup>22</sup> Henderson, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Lamb, R. E., “Guilt, Shame, and Morality”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 43 (1983), pp. 329–346, p. 328.

<sup>24</sup> Flannery, Mary C., “The Concept of Shame in Late-Medieval English Literature”, *Literature Compass*, 9 (2012), p.169.

## 1.5. Temptation

An interesting observation made by Jean Delumeau is that among the many fears that medieval people had to face, one of the direst was themselves, meaning that a good Christian's life was a constant war against their own conscience, against their carnality and their own nature which, being human, is naturally prone to evil and to surrender to the temptation to sin.<sup>25</sup> Temptation can come from virtually all moments of the human experience and, as John Adams cleverly notices, "the potent force in temptation is suggestion".<sup>26</sup> This appears to be particularly true in the texts I will expound, where usually the tempter plants an idea in the head of their victims in a subtle and allusive way. For example, the fox Reynaerde tempts the other courtesans precisely by suggesting them what to do, evoking for them the prospect of free food, or of pretending to be erudite to make good impression on the king. The courtesans are undoubtedly wrong and morally reprehensible: good Christians must take inspiration from Christ himself, who resisted the temptations both of a physical and of a psychological nature offered in the most subtle ways by the tempter in Matthew 4:1-11, where he is fasting in the desert and the Devil appears to launch against him a "threefold assault upon the three parts of Christ's human nature - body, soul, and spirit".<sup>27</sup> Men and women as well must repel the triple nature of temptation, and have to fight against a subtle enemy such as the Devil. Just as Lucifer did in this Bible passage, the various tempters I will show are all insidious and try to take advantage of the victims' most hidden desires and sinful thoughts.

As we would expect, the Bible concerns itself with temptation quite often. The passage from Matthew that I have just mentioned is a prime example, but one may find

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<sup>25</sup> Delumeau, Jean, *Il peccato e la paura. L'idea di colpa in Occidente dal XIII al XVIII secolo*, traduzione di Nicodemo Gruber, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987, p. vii.

<sup>26</sup> Adams, John, "The Psychology of Temptation", *The Biblical World*, 27(1906), pp. 88-98, p.88.

<sup>27</sup> Fleming, J. Dick, "The Threefold Temptation of Christ: Matt. 4:1-11", *The Biblical World*, 32 (1908), pp. 130-137, p. 131.



mentions of temptation from the start: in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, Adam and Eve, “erant autem uterque nudi Adam scilicet et uxor eius et non erubescabant”.<sup>28</sup> But the situation is famously destined to change: Eve will listen to the Serpent's sweet-talk, which offers her one of the most tempting forbidden desires of mankind: knowledge. He wins her over with a few words: “scit enim Deus quod in quocumque die comederitis ex eo aperientur oculi vestri et eritis sicut dii scientes bonum et malum”<sup>29</sup> (italics mine). As Lucifer himself knows all too well, there is no greater sin than wanting to be like gods. Unsurprisingly, Adam and Eve will be harshly punished, and all their descendants (i.e., the whole of mankind) as well, world without end. The knowledge that Adam and Eve gain with the forbidden morsel includes a new awareness about their own bodies. They realise for the first time that they are naked and that they need to cover themselves, especially their genitals, to prevent others from seeing them: “et aperti sunt oculi amborum cumque cognovissent esse se nudos consuerunt folia ficus et fecerunt sibi perizomata”<sup>30</sup>. In short, they feel *shame*. This feeling, just as the concept of temptation, is central in the Bible and thus for Christians.

From this passage, it can be argued that the role of the woman in temptation, shame, and guilt was considered to be of prime importance. Since it was Eve who accepted the Devil's proposal, it was only natural that women were the most prone not only to be tempted, but to be temptresses. It was Eve's fault if men and women started to feel shame for the first time. Tertullian (155-230 A.D.), one of the great theorists of Christianity, deems women to be “the devil's gateway” and “the first deserters of the divine law”.<sup>31</sup> A few centuries later Augustine (354-430 A.D.), through whose work

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<sup>28</sup> “Now, both of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they felt no shame before each other.” Gn, 2:25. Latin Vulgate Bible.

<sup>29</sup> “God knows in fact that the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good from evil.” Gn, 3:5.

<sup>30</sup> “Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realised that they were naked. So they sewed fig-leaves together to make themselves loin-cloths.” Gn, 3:7.

<sup>31</sup> Tertulliano, *Gli Ornamenti delle Donne*, traduzione di Maria Tasinato, Parma: Pratiche, 1987, p. 19.

“the lines of religious thinking were set for the coming centuries”,<sup>32</sup> warns men that no matter how good a woman might appear, they must still be aware of the fact that there is a temptress Eve hidden in every one of them.<sup>33</sup>

## 1.6. Shame

Shame depends almost completely on the cultural frame of reference we belong to, our “collective self” as Ugo Fabietti calls it.<sup>34</sup> This collective self, along with our idea of our own individuality, is what gives us an identity. Shame comes into play when something disrupts the link between collective and individual self. “The shame genre”,<sup>35</sup> as Gregory Simons calls it, comprehends a wide range of feelings such as shyness and embarrassment which humans from every cultural background experience. Its resurfacing depends on our own “deference of the self” that, when violated (e.g. when we do something embarrassing in public), makes us feel we have lost our basic sense of human equality, or “our own self-respect”,<sup>36</sup> as Thomas Laurence calls it. It is important to stress the fact that the situation must be *public*: one of the most troublesome and dreaded events of our life is to lose our public face. As Anne McTaggart writes,

shame is experienced as a kind of “being seen” by others that produces in turn a kind of “being seen” by oneself [...]. Shame thus involves an experience of exposure—or, as Ruth Leys puts it, “shame is identical to exposure”; it is the feeling “of already having been exposed to the gaze of some real or fantasized other.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Taylor, Henry Osborn, “Placing the Middle Ages”, *Speculum*, 4 (1936), pp. 437-445, The University of Chicago Press, p. 438.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *Letter to Laetus* (Letter 243.10), in *Letters, Volume 5 (204–270)*, translated by Wilfrid Parsons, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1956, p. 226.

<sup>34</sup> Fabietti, Ugo, *Elementi di Antropologia Culturale*, Milano: Mondadori, 2015, p. 200.

<sup>35</sup> Simon, Gregory M., “Shame, Knowing, and Anthropology: On Robert I. Levy and the Study of Emotion”, *Ethos*, 33 (2005), pp. 493-498, p. 484.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, Laurence, “Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment by Gabriele Taylor”, *The Philosophical Review*, 97 (1988), pp. 585-592, p. 589.

<sup>37</sup> McTaggart, Anne, “Shamed Guiltless: Criseyde, Dido, and Chaucerian Ethics”, *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism*, 46 (2012), pp. 371-402, p. 375.

Simons claims that for a social group shame “seems to have no actual aim or purpose: [it is a] cultural discomfort”.<sup>38</sup> Understandably, it is inevitable to perceive it as negative. However, shame is not always inherently a negative state, as it can work as a prevention for wrongdoing. Flannery points out that if the studies of scholars were focused on shame in chivalric poems, it is because shame, both in its negative and positive aspects, is such a predominant concept in them. She underlines how, in *Le Roman de la Rose*, “Shame is said to be the daughter of Reason, who conceived her at the sight of Trespass (sin)”.<sup>39</sup> Shame thus is “positive, generative, productive, and crucial to defining one’s social status or identity”.<sup>40</sup> Shame was indeed an important feeling for Christians, because it is the first step towards repentance: “through the shameful exposure of sins to their confessors, Christians will be able to perform penance and, ultimately, to receive redemption.”<sup>41</sup> It was thus both a precautionary means which allowed to define correct and incorrect behaviour, and a tool for cleansing one’s soul.

Just as for temptation, shame was a concept closely linked to femininity, but perhaps in a more positive sense: “the ability to feel shame is a mark of female honor and chastity”.<sup>42</sup> Not only literature, but also manuals were produced to teach women more explicitly how to behave. One of the most beautiful examples in terms of language and composition is the *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* (14th century). This long poem is interesting as it gives a particular insight into what it meant to be raised as a bourgeois woman in the late Middle Ages. It contains a number of pieces of good advice that a mother should give her daughters, such as that, especially in the presence of men, women should “loke thou fle synne, vilony, and blame / and

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<sup>38</sup> Simons, p.496.

<sup>39</sup> Flannery, p. 167.

<sup>40</sup> Flannery, p. 167.

<sup>41</sup> Flannery, p. 172.

<sup>42</sup> Flannery, p. 167.

se ther be no man that seys thee any schame.”<sup>43</sup> Any form of behaviour against decency performed in public would have immediately excluded any woman from the only field in which she had any value: the marriage market, having put her to shame in front of possible suitors.

Shame, ultimately, has an ambivalent nature, today just as in the late Middle Ages. This factor contributes to the difficulty, already present due to its apparent interchangeability with guilt, to give it a final and universal definition. It is unlikely that it ever will be possible to do so, just like guilt, of which I will now try to give some general information as well.

### 1.7. Guilt

As far as this last concept, guilt, is concerned, Simon says that “it is knowledge of wrongdoing —harming others in particular— and it feels bad enough to punish us and prevent us from acting improperly”.<sup>44</sup> This makes it difficult to untangle it from shame, since it seems to have at least in part the same “preventive” scope. Perhaps a good starting point to distinguish them is noticing how guilt tends to be self-generated: we can accuse someone and make them feel ashamed, but true guilt depends totally on the subject’s inner situation. Anne McTaggart explains it with better words: “shame is performative; it is seen in the face, felt in the body, and enacted on a social stage [...]. True guilt, the truth of moral responsibility, however, is known only in relation to a law that is disembodied, impersonal, and ‘characterless’”.<sup>45</sup> Guilt is a state, and as such “it is required that the person in this state be in it in virtue of something he has done”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, edited by George Shuffelton, in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/shuffelton-codex-ashmole-61> (accessed 15 November 2019), vv. 55-56.

<sup>44</sup> Simon, p. 496.

<sup>45</sup> McTaggart, Anne, *Shame and Guilt in Chaucer*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, pp. 99-100.

<sup>46</sup> Lamb, p.332.

Feeling shame does not automatically equal feeling guilty as well, evidently. This will be clear in the beast literature I will examine, where the animal characters usually lose their public face and thus feel ashamed, but very rarely (or even never) feel the guilt they ought to for their immoral conduct, for which a good Christian should accuse them and mark them of immorality. Accusing is an important part in the process of guilt: according to Lamb, accusing requires of the accuser a “performance in which one's seriousness is displayed”,<sup>47</sup> but this appears to be true for guilt alone: shaming, indeed, is usually caused via mockery and laughter. But accusations of breaking a moral rule or a juridical law must be made with gravity to obtain the proper response, which goes beyond “plain” shame, and corresponds to guilt.

## **1.8. Conclusions**

What I wish to emphasize before going any further with the actual analysis of beast literature is the common thread that links all of the authors I am taking into account: their interest in animal stories and their use of classical sources to rewrite their version of it, or even to create something different, new and more elaborate. It will be interesting to see how they all point out the moral aspect of their stories, each in their own way. Their interpretation is often linked to their socio-political situation (Henryson and Willem-die-Maedoc-maecte are glaring examples of this) to uncover and condemn the moral and religious sins of the rich and powerful. Interestingly enough, during the reading and analysis of these works, one can find all kinds of temptations, each leading to one (or many) of the Seven Deadly Sins and followed by shame and some other kind of punishment. This regular succession of temptation-

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<sup>47</sup> Lamb, p. 337.

shame and/or guilt-punishment is particularly strong and evident in *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, as I will show later.

Setting aside *Van den Vos Reynaerde* and *Ysengrimus*, which are poems/epics rather than fables in the stricter sense, all the other texts follow the traditional fable-pattern introduced by the original Aesop: usually two (but sometimes more) animals, which are often a predator and a prey, end up discussing some issues, and one of them prevails on the other by force and/or cunning. The usual result is that the loser either gets eaten, or killed, or robbed. There are also cases in which the one which was initially losing manages to escape or take its revenge thanks to its wits (as in “The Nonnes Prestees Tale”), but it is a much rarer instance. What remains constant is the presence of the moral. The moral is the true focus of the story, the explanation of its meaning and its didactic core. It was deemed to be so important that often, in many collections, one can find a one-two sentence summary of the fable and then the whole moral, made explicit and carefully glossed and explained; often the morals are perfectly understandable by themselves, fit to be learnt by heart as any *sententia*, or proverb, would. These *sententiae* are a good means to understand the medieval frame of mind and attitude towards the handling of sins. They are the true and actual point of the whole narration: without them, the meaning of the characters, what and whom they are symbols for, and their actions, would all remain open to personal interpretation by every single reader. Henderson says:

Where the explicit moralizations of fable and bestiary allow us to detect authentic medieval meanings, we find that what was once meant need no longer be meant and that the process of reasoning may reason out many a surprise.<sup>48</sup>

If the moral were non-existent, it would indeed be possible for us to make suppositions about what we expect from the author to be the moral of his beast narration, basing our

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<sup>48</sup> Henderson, p. 46.

supposition on what we know about him, his style and his personal beliefs. But morals allow us to spare ourselves the effort and to obtain immediately the author's point of view, just as they allowed medieval readers to understand what was right and what was wrong in the narration they had just read.

Willem-die-Maedoc-maecte, the anonymous Ysengrimus' author, Chaucer, Lydgate, Henryson, and Calfstaf and Noydekijn, make no exception and explicit their vision about moral issues and about the world more in general. I will now start to explain for each of them what this vision is, and how they stage the various kinds of temptation and the corresponding shame and guilt that their characters must face because they have surrendered to it.

## Chapter 2

### Social Satire in the Medieval Netherlands

#### 2.1. Origins of the Reynaerd saga

The fox, as underlined by Joan Chadwick, “represents one of the most constant and enduring animals portrayed in the anthropomorphic fable”<sup>49</sup>. Along with the fox, the lion and the wolf are among the most recurrent characters in Aesop’s fables. These animals are usually associated with negative characteristics, and this is especially true of the fox: it is almost always depicted as a devious and malicious character. The wolf is generally an emblem of greed and viciousness. The lion, on the other hand, sometimes represents an exception: it may escape the negative connotation, as he is the animal primarily used to symbolize nobility, kingship, and even wisdom. Just as often, though, he represents the greedy and authoritative ruler rather than the wise one, or the vicious predator who spares no life.

These characteristics are to be found in both *Ysengrimus* and *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, the two main points of focus of this chapter. The former is among the antecedents of the latter, but it is not its only source. According to Jakob Grimm, the author of *Van de Vos Reynaerde* could have drawn material mainly from folkloric Germanic tales,<sup>50</sup> but this theory does not seem the most plausible. The German scholar based his claim on the high frequency of Germanic words in the French versions of the story, where there was no reason for their presence. However, as André Bouwman and Bart Besamusca write, the French philologist Paulin Paris had already

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<sup>49</sup> Chadwick, Joan V., “The Fox: A Medieval View, and its Legacy in Modern Children’s Literature”, *Between the Species*, 10 (1993), p. 71-75, p. 72.

<sup>50</sup> Grimm, Jakob, *Reinhart Fuchs*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1974, pp. 6-7.



refuted Grimm's hypothesis at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> Paris showed the correlation between the French medieval branches of the *Renard's* narration and the collection of Aesop's fables which were so popular at the time. Indeed, the clues directing towards the classical origin of *Van de Vos Reynaerde* are much more compelling than those given by Grimm to support the theory of the Germanic genesis. The characters of this beast epic have all the fixed features that Aesopic animals have. Besides, Lucien Foulet, in his *Le Roman de Renard*,<sup>52</sup> shows how all the authors of the Old French Renard poems have often taken material from the Latin *Ysengrimus*, which is also the most extensive source for *Van de Vos Reynaerde*. The anonymous author of *Ysengrimus* evidently made large and creative use of classical Latin and Greek sources. Although it is entirely possible for the Old French and Germanic materials to have met and influenced one another at some point in history, it would be unwise to follow Jakob Grimm's theory and ignore the much more significant presence and influence of the classical source materials constituted by Aesop's, Phaedrus' and Babrius' fables. There is no reason to suggest that the various authors of the narratives belonging to the Reynaerd genre may have done otherwise. Bowman and Besamusca speculate that the specific source for the whole fox epic genre could be Aesop's fable "The Wolf, the Fox, and the Ailing Lion":<sup>53</sup>

A lion had grown old and sick and was lying in in his cave. All the animals, except the fox, had come to visit their king. The wolf seized this opportunity to denounce the fox in front of the lion, complaining that the fox showed no respect for the lion, who was the common master of them all. Indeed, the fox had not even come to pay the ailing lion a visit! The fox arrived just in time to hear the end of the wolf's speech. The lion roared at the fox, but the fox asked for a chance to explain herself. "After all", said the fox, "which one of all the animals assembled here has helped you as I have, travelling all over the world in order to seek out and discover from the doctors a remedy for your illness?" The lion ordered the fox to describe the remedy immediately, and the fox replied: "You must flay a living wolf and wrap yourself in

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<sup>51</sup> Willem-die-Madoc-maecte, *Of Reynaert the Fox. Text and facing translation of the Middle Dutch Beast Epic Van den vos Reynaerde*, edited by André Bouwman, Bart Besamusca, translated by Thea Summerfield, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Foulet, Lucien, *Le Roman de Renard*, Paris: Champion, 1968, pp. 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Bouwman, Besamusca, pp. 10-11.

his skin while it is still warm.” When the wolf had been killed, the fox laughed and said, “It is better to put your master in a good mood, not a bad one”. The story shows that someone who plots against others falls into his own trap.<sup>54</sup>

It appears immediately evident how the core elements of *Ysengrimus* and *Van de Vos Reynaerde* are all there: the lion king, the enmity between a sly fox and a greedy wolf, the revenge that the former manages to get on the latter, even the flaying. With the spreading of the Catholic faith, religious elements have been inserted in the original short narration: in *Ysengrimus* the two characters become (shortly) monks.

Jill Mann underlines that *Ysengrimus* was popular from the beginning: a few decades after *Ysengrimus*, there appeared the earliest branches of the *Roman de Renard*. This is not a cohesive poem, but a “series of isolated episodes [...] mostly concerning the fox’s irrepressible attempts to hoodwink not only the wolf, but also other animals”.<sup>55</sup> In these episodes, the setting starts to change from monastic to courtly: in *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, for example, the king is no longer sick, but is holding court, and the animals are many more, each of them representing this or that kind of nobleman.

## **2.2. *Ysengrimus*: the wolf-monk**

*Ysengrimus* is a long poem written in Latin, consisting of 6,500 lines divided in seven books. It almost doubles its most famous offspring, *Van de Vos Reynaerde*. According to Mann, it is possible to set its date of composition between 1148 and 1149 thanks to some references made in the poem about a few figures and events of the time.<sup>56</sup> The author names Anselm, bishop of Tournai between 1146 and 1149, and

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<sup>54</sup> Aesop, “The Wolf, the Fox and the Ailing Lion”, in *Aesop’s Fables*, edited and translated by Laura Gibbs, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Mann, Jill, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> *Ysengrimus*, edited and translated by Jill Mann, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. xvii-xviii.

pope Eugene III (pope from 1145 until 1153), and makes reference to the disastrous events and consequences of the Second Crusade. The first accounts of the Crusade started to arrive in Europe about a year after its beginning in 1147. All this makes it quite easy to calculate the time setting.

The author has not been clearly identified: Mann informs us that some later manuscripts such as the *Florilegium Gallicum* (late 13th century) name one Nivard of Ghent (“Magister Niuardus de Ysengrino et Reinardo”) as the possible author.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, she says that other references call *Ysengrimus Apologia de actibus Ysengrini* and name as its author one Balduinus Cecus.<sup>58</sup> More interesting, but less probable, is what is said in line 1194, book 3: “et Bruno versus fecerat inde novus”,<sup>59</sup> which seems to suggest that the name of the author might have been Bruno. This seems quite difficult to demonstrate, because the episode that is being told concerns Bruno the bear, who has put into verse the (mis)adventures of Reynardus and Ysengrimus so that the lion king may read them. It is anything but certain that this could be a subtle pun on the part of the author to reveal his own name. It could simply be the name of the character that has, indeed, written the story of the two enemies for his king to read. What is certain is that the author is clearly well-learned. His mastery of the Latin language, as well as of his classical sources like Ovid and Aesop, is plain for everyone to see.

As far as the structure of the poem is concerned, it is divided into seven books, each telling one or more of the tricks that the fox has played on the wolf. The first

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<sup>57</sup> MS Diez B. Santen 60, Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Mann, p. xix.

<sup>58</sup> Mann quotes as her source Huygens, R. B. C., *Reynardus vulpes. De Latijnse-Reinaert-vertaling van Balduinus Iuvenis*, Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1978. See also Jonkers, Rien, “De Reynaert in het Latijn: De *Reynardus Vulpes* van Balduinus”, *Literatuur*, 14 (1997), pp. 371-388. Mann, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>59</sup> “And Bruno had already made verses of them”. All the quotations from *Ysengrimus* are taken from the edition by Jill Mann. The thesis which sees Bruno as the name of the author is supported by Gertsom, A., van, “Bruno, de auteur van de *Ysengrimus*”, *Verslagen en Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Taal en Letterkunde*, 76 (1962), pp. 5-73.

episode is extremely important, as it explains the origin of the enmity between the two characters, besides being the moment in which the anonymous author gives names to the characters. This makes these animals less generic than they were in the previous tales of Aesopic inspiration: they finally gain a true identity. These names became evidently so well known and so intimately connected to the two animals that Willem too would use them for his characters.

The story begins with Ysengrimus who has captured Reynardus and wants to eat him, but the fox promises him that if he will let him go, he will help him steal a piece of bacon from a passing peasant. Ysengrimus even accepts to share half the meat with the fox. Reynardus plays half-dead on the side of the road, so the greedy peasant will be tempted by the idea of selling his pelt — and here comes into play the important theme of the tempting fox who gets its gains through sinners. While the man is distracted, Ysengrimus steals the bacon and, when Reynardus escapes from the peasant and joins the wolf, he finds that the wolf has eaten all the loot. Ysengrimus even mocks his associate, offering him the rope that was used to tie the bacon to the raft. Reynardus, cunning and smart as always, knows that revenge must be served cold: he will spend the rest of the poem tricking the wolf in every possible way.

The various episodes that are subsequently told are linked with one another, but they do not correspond to the division in books: sometimes they start in one book and end in the next. This, along with the fact that the tales involve many characters, makes the structure of the poem very elegant and finely built, but quite complicated as well. The simple structure of Aesop's short fables is nothing compared to *Ysengrimus'* intricate plot. Most of the episodes are quite comical and end with Ysengrimus getting minor damages because of Reynardus' schemes; the result is mostly that the wolf is shamed by the other characters for his actions. However, as the story proceeds, and the wolf seems to feel no guilt or shame for his evil actions and their moral and social

outcomes, the beatings and the wounds that he receives get worse and worse. In Book Five (ll. 317-1128) he is tricked by Reynardus who pretends to have become a monk and tells him about the wealth of the monastery he is dwelling in and all the good food he gets to eat, so that the foolish wolf is convinced to become a monk as well. Once he enters the convent as a novice, Ysengrimus gets drunk and starts disturbing the monks' dinner. He will be badly beaten, in what can be considered a "mock consecration" to monkhood, and publicly shamed for his social inadequacy and inability to refrain from getting drunk. However, this does not stop the wolf at all: Ysengrimus has no scruples and tries everything he can in order to climb the social ladder and become first abbot, and then bishop. What the author seems to imply is that Ysengrimus manages to ascend the ecclesiastical hierarchy not despite of, but because of, his greed and his viciousness. The satirical core of the poem lies there: if, as I will show, in *Van de Vos Reynaerde* satire is directed mainly towards the nobility, in *Ysengrimus* it is against the selfish and hypocritical role of the medieval Catholic church, full of men using their power for personal gain. Mann underlines how the satirical element is the main aspect in which *Ysengrimus* differs from the classical fables, and not the long and complicated structure<sup>60</sup>. Reynardus has plenty of punishments for the wolf's sins already in store: for example, he goes to the wolf's house, urinates on his cubs and when Ysengrimus' wife tries to follow him into his den and gets stuck, he rapes her. In book three (ll. 1050-1065) Ysengrimus' ecclesiastical ascent will be mocked by Reynardus cruelly when the wolf, flayed by Bruno the bear by order of Nobel and finally publicly shamed, will bleed to death: all that red, claims Reynardus, must be the scarlet episcopal robe he was hiding under his pelt.

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<sup>60</sup> Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain*, p. 18.

Additional proof of the kinship between *Ysengrimus* and *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, and thus of their classical ancestry, is the content of Book Three. The whole episode is a retelling of the fable *The Sick Lion* reported previously. The poet inserts additional details lacking in the original fable, for instance, that Ysengrimus advises the sick king to eat goat's and sheep's flesh. The goats and the sheep, in order to save themselves, claim that what the king needs is Reynardus' expertise. Reynardus comes, pretending to be late in presenting himself to court because he was gone to study medicine in Salerno (l. 375). He asserts that the best solution is to cover himself with the skin of a three-year-old wolf. At this point a long and carefully articulated process to establish Ysengrimus' age starts, showing the author's knowledge about the judicial system (is it possible that he was a lawyer?). Here we find the line considered a pun on the poet's true name, Bruno, because the king wants to know why the fox and the wolf hate each other so much and asks the bear to tell their story. Ysengrimus in the end will receive a harsh punishment: he is flayed, as in the fable, and as will happen in *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, but with a sort of fairy-tale logic his skin will later grow back.

At the end of the whole poem, Ysengrimus will indeed die. In Book Seven he tries to convince a sow, Salaura, that he wants to give her a priestly kiss of peace (l. 27). When she gets closer to him and he bites her ear, she starts screaming. Her shrieks draw the attention of a horde of pigs, her relatives, who come running to her aid, surround Ysengrimus and eat him alive. It is then stated that what is left of Ysengrimus will be buried in an urn with the inscription "Ex merito quisque notandus erit"<sup>61</sup>. In Ysengrimus' case, his merits are nothing but being finally dead. The sarcasm with which he is being mocked is truly heavy, but he undeniably deserves his ultimate

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<sup>61</sup> "Everyone must receive the distinction appropriate to his merit" (l. 417).

punishment. He dies without learning a single lesson from his sins. The poem closes with Salaura's long lamentation at the disastrous outcome of the Second Crusade, caused by the greed and blindness of pope Eugene III, whom she accuses of having taken bribes (ll. 99-108). The moral could be seen in these final lines, and indeed Salaura is surely preaching that those who fall prey of greed will pay for this. Eugene III needs to be punished and to be publicly shamed for the ruinous consequences of his actions, of which he is fully guilty, just like Ysengrimus for being too greedy and gluttonous in his continuous search for food. The whole poem contains many proverbial elements and pieces of popular wisdom, as Mann notices, which all constitutes small "morals" on the most various topics.<sup>62</sup>

The final inversion of the predator-prey order which leads to Ysengrimus' death is significant. What happens to him follows the law of *contrappasso*: Ysengrimus is devoured because he has never tried to resist the temptation to devour and take advantage of those who could not defend themselves, and because he never felt an ounce of shame or guilt for his actions. Sure, Reynardus is no better, he is even readier to seize every opportunity to get his share and to wreak havoc, and he gets not gain from it but personal amusement, but the wolf completely lacks the fox's wits, and thus has no means to save himself.

### **2.3. The beast epic of Reynaert the fox**

*Van de Vos Reynaerde* one of the most famous Middle Dutch poems, and certainly it is among the most important descendants of *Ysengrimus*. Written probably around 1260, the poem is composed of 3,470 lines and was written by the self-

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<sup>62</sup> Mann, Jill, "Proverbial Wisdom in the 'Ysengrimus'", *New Literary History*, 16 (1984), pp. 93–109, pp. 96-97.

proclaimed “Willem die Maedocke maecte” (l. 1),<sup>63</sup> which means “William who wrote the poem Maedock”. Who this Willem was and the true reason why he wrote this poem, we will probably never know. The numerous attempts to give the author a true identity have been unsuccessful, and no copy of this “Maedock” has arrived to us, if ever one existed.<sup>64</sup> The only pieces of contextual information we have are those we can extract from the poem itself: Willem tells us that he composed it upon the request of an unnamed courtly lady (ll. 30-31), carrying on from the few lines that one Arnout, another poet, had started to write and then had abandoned (l. 6). Bouwman and Besamusca speculate that in all probability this Arnout did not exist, as the poem is clearly ascribable to a single author for style and unity. Furthermore, they argue that the noble dedicatee, the mysterious rich and educated woman, did not actually exist either. Willem’s pretence is plausibly explainable through the typical topos of the noble and generous patron which was used to give prestige to the author’s work.<sup>65</sup> Willem, in any case, was probably a member of the Flemish court, or was at least close to it. He seems quite self-assured and proud of his work: the initial letters of the last six lines of the poem are an acrostic of his name. Whoever he was, he really wanted his readers to know his name.

Whatever Willem’s social position, his poem must have been appealing both to a courtly and to a middle-class audience: the material is courtly, but the irony about the king and the nobles is definitely present, making it funny and entertaining for those who were by now becoming richer than the aristocracy but still excluded from it. The

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<sup>63</sup> All quotations and relative translations are taken from *Willem-die-Madoc-maecte, Of Reynaert the Fox. Text and Facing Translation of the Middle Dutch Beast Epic Van den vos Reynaerde*, edited by Bouwman and Besamusca, translated by Thea Summerfield.

<sup>64</sup> Further enquiry about the identity of Willem are Van, Daele, Rik, “De Robotfoto van de Reynaertdichter. Bricoleren met de Overgeleverde Wrakstukken: ‘Cisterciënzers’, ‘Grafelijk hof’, en ‘Reynaertmaterie’”, *Tiecelijn*, 18 (2005), pp. 179-204, and Muller, J. W., *Van de Vos Reynaerde, Inleiding met aantekeningen, lijst van eigennamen, tekst. Critisch Uitgegeven*, Leiden: Leidsche Drukken en Herdrukken, 1944.

<sup>65</sup> Bouwman, Besamusca, p. 15



story opens with the lion king, Nobel, holding court at Whitsunday. All the nobles — who are various kinds of animals— are present, except for Reynaert the fox because “die hem beschuldic kent, ontsiet”.<sup>66</sup> This underlines a very important element: Reynaert’s attitude towards his own guilt. As I will show, Reynaert is fully aware of his deviousness, and of the destructiveness of the evil tricks he plays upon those who are unfortunate enough to meet him. Quite interesting, moreover, is that Reynaert purposefully “ontsiet”: he stays away from court because he is conscious that what he does is wrong, that he is fully guilty. However, it is not the moral uneasiness of feeling guilty that keeps him away, nor the fear of being publicly ashamed by his peers and to be despoiled of his titles: he dreads only the corporal punishment he knows he will receive.

All those present begin their lamentations about Reynaert’s behaviour. The wolf Ysengrijn, his sworn enemy, makes himself especially heard, claiming that Reynaert has harmed his cubs and seduced his wife, Hersint, or possibly even raped her: apparently in the past the two used to be lovers but then he forced himself on her. A subtly comical element is then represented by the episode told by Pancer the beaver on behalf of the hare Cuwaert:

Want hi hem binnen sconinx vrede  
ende binnen des coninx gheleede  
ghelovede te leerne sinen crede  
ende soudene maken capelaen.  
Doe dedine sitt en gaen  
vaste tusschen sine beene.  
Doe begonsten si overeene  
spellen ende lesen beede  
ende lude te zinghene crede.  
Mi gheviel dat ic te dien tijden

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<sup>66</sup> “whoever knows to be guilty, is afraid” (l. 53).

ter selver stede soude lijden.  
Doe hoerdic haerre beeder sanc  
ende maecte daerwaert minen ganc  
met eere arde snelre vaerde.  
Doe vandic daer meester Reynaerde,  
die ziere lessen hadde begheven  
die hi tevoren up hadde gheheven,  
ende diende van sinen houden spelen  
ende hadde Coewaerde bi der kelen  
ende soude hem thoeft af hebben ghenomen  
waer ic hem niet te hulpen comen  
bi avontueren in dien stonden<sup>67</sup>.

The idea of a hare-chaplain is quite ludicrous, and Cuwaert's selfish ambition to climb the social ladder through ecclesiastic office (making him forget his ancestral fear of the fox, so that he accepts to put himself between his legs), makes the readers think that he deserved to be bitten. Cuwaert, along with Pancer and many other nobles, does not appear to be particularly bright, a feature which belongs to Reynaert. In any case, whatever shred of intelligence the nobles might have, is obfuscated by their pettiness and vain ambitions. After all the witnesses' statements, only Grimbeert the badger, Reynaert's nephew, speaks up to defend him, pointing out—and probably distorting—the wrongs that the others have done to his absent uncle. He mentions the episode of the bacon which is told in *Ysengrimus*, making it seem as if Reynaert was completely innocent and Ysengrijn had deceived him, and that of Hersint's rape, depicting it as a backfire among the two former lovers. The other animals protest, so the king decides to summon the fox at court. Twice he sends envoys, Bruun the bear and Tybeert the

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<sup>67</sup> "He [Reynaert] promised to teach him [Cuwaert] the Creed / and to make him chaplain. / Then he made him sit / tightly between his legs. / Together they began / to practice spelling and reading / and to sing the creed loudly. / It so happened that at this moment / I passed that place. / Then I heard them singing together / and went in that direction, / at a great speed. / Then I found master Reynaert there / who had finished his earlier lesson / and was up to his old tricks / and he had Cuwaert by the throat / and would have bitten his head off / if I had not accidentally / come to his aid at that moment / if I had not accidentally come to his aid at that moment". (ll. 140-161).

cat, and twice Reynaert manages to escape the convocation by tricking both ambassadors into getting badly injured; they only have their own gluttony, pride and greed to thank for their failure. Bruun the bear will lose one of his ears and both cheeks due to his lust for honey: when Reynaert proposes him to steal some, Bruun accepts immediately and falls in the trap. All the protests about justice for the courtesans against Reynaert's crimes are worth nothing compared to delicious, free honey:

Een dorper, heet Lamfroit, woent hier bi,  
hevet honich so vele tewaren,  
ghi ne hatet niet in VII jaren.  
Dat soudic hu gheven in hu ghewout,  
heere Brune, wildi mi wesen hout  
ende voer mi dinghen te hove.<sup>68</sup>

Reynaert makes fun of him all the while:

Ghi sult noch heden hebben sonder waen  
also vele als ghi moghet ghedraghen.'  
Reynaert meende van groten slaghen;  
dit was dat hi hem beriet.<sup>69</sup>

After the first round of wounds, Bruun will be badly beaten by the enraged villagers who manage to capture him even though he has sought refuge on the riverbanks. Reynaert finds him there, and mocks him, evidently taking pleasure in it: he addresses himself to the bear calling him "Siere priester," (Sir priest, l. 937), because the blood flowing from his lost ear and cheeks makes him seem like a priest with his red hat. When Bruun gathers enough strength to get back on his feet, his first concern is that he knows how horribly disfigured he must look now. As the vain nobleman he is, his appearance is of prime importance to him, and the idea of having

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<sup>68</sup> 'A villager, who is called Lamfroyt, lives near here, / and he has so much honey, truly, that you could not eat it in seven years. / I would put it at your disposal, provided, / Lord Bruun, that you are prepared to take my side / and plead for me at court'. (ll. 602-607).

<sup>69</sup> 'Without doubt, this very day you will get / as much as you can bear.' / Reynaert meant a severe beating; / that was what he had in mind for him. (ll. 636-639).

lost it makes him ashamed, so that he considers the idea of never going back to court.

But his desire to revenge his lost honour is too strong, so he goes home and speaks to

Nobel:

Hi stan ende versuchte onzochte  
ende sprac: 'Coninc, edel heere,  
wreket mi dor hu selves eere  
over Reynaerde, dat felle *dier*,  
die mi mine scone lier  
met ziere lust verliesen dede  
ende daertoe mine *hoere* mede  
ende hevet mi ghemaect als ghi siet.' <sup>70</sup>

Tybeert, the second envoy that Nobel sends to Reynaert, is tempted by the fox with the promise of the fat mice dwelling in the village priest's henhouse. Once Reynaert makes him get inside, the cat falls in the trap prepared by the priest's son, tired of Reynaert's continuous thefts. Reynaert's devious plan works perfectly: Tybeert is beaten by the priest's whole family, that in the dark has taken him for the fox. The fact that the priest has a lover and children is of course not mentioned by Willem just for sport. At the time this poem was composed, celibacy had already been imposed on clergymen, although there was still a debate about the matter, which will be definitely settled only with the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Here the priest's family is one of the elements Willem uses to criticise the hypocrisy of society, and of the Church in particular. Hence, the priest represents the sin of Lust, curiously staged through a human figure, unlike the other Deadly Sins present in the poem, and he gets bitten in the testicles by Tybeert, who is blinded by pain and fear. The reason for this act, besides its evident comic effect, is that the clergyman needs to be punished for his

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<sup>70</sup> "He moaned and sighed loudly / and said: 'King, noble lord, revenge me for the sake of your own honour / on Reynaert, that vicious animal / who, with his nasty trick, / has made me lose my fair cheeks and my ear to boot, / and has made me as you see me.'" (ll. 990-997)

sexual trespass. Additionally, some lines earlier he had committed another grievous sin for the sake of his mistress: while beating Bruun the bear, the woman falls into the river and the priest promises full absolution for whoever will manage to save her, “selling” the indulgence. He fully deserves his ridiculous chastisement, and the punishment for his lust could not be a more explicitly retaliation for his sins than what Tybeert does to him.

Hunger and foolishness are not the only cause of Tybeert’s misadventure. The cat is somewhat suspicious of his uncle’s proposal, because he knows that the fox is always ready to play his tricks. But when he hesitates to enter the henhouse, Reynaert hits what is a sore spot for a nobleman: he calls him a coward and mocks him. Tybeert’s reaction is the same as Bruun’s: shame. This is what finally pushes him towards his ruin:

Tybeert scaemde hem ende spranc  
daer hi vant groet ongherec,  
want eer hijt wiste, was hem een strec  
omme sinen hals arde vast.  
Dus hoende Reynaert sinen gast!<sup>71</sup>

Just like Bruun, he goes back to Nobel, to whom he shows his wounds. But what must be underlined here is that, just as Bruun, Tybeert does not tell the whole tale: the two envoys hide the fact that the damages they have gotten are caused not only by Reynaert’s deviousness, but by their nature as sinners as well. They are just as guilty as the fox, and to the shame of their physical wounds it is added the pain caused by their moral (and penal) guilt.

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<sup>71</sup> “Tybeert was ashamed of himself and jumped into a place / where he experienced great misery, / because, before he knew it, a snare was very tight around his neck. / In this way Reynaert deceived his guest!” (ll. 1196-2000).

Only Grimbeert, finally, seems to persuade his uncle to come to court. Once they arrive, Reynaert admits to Nobel that everything that has happened is true, but as always, he tries to bend the truth. But all the animals step up, demanding that he be brought to trial:

Nye hoerde man van dieren  
so scone tale als nu es hier  
tusschen Reynaerde ende dandre dier  
orconde denghenen die dat horden!<sup>72</sup>

What they are all trying to do is not only to get Nobel to declare Reynaert legally guilty, but to shame him as well. They clearly want to make him lose his face definitively, just as he did with so many of them. Almost all of them fell for his tricks, in one way or another, because they have not only moral, but also social faults. They all feel ashamed, and the revenge they demand is double: both legal and moral.

Nobel finally declares him guilty, and orders Bruun and Ysengrijn to prepare the gallows. But Reynaert displays once again all his cunning. He confesses Nobel a conspiracy plotted years before by his now dead father and other animals to put Bruun on the throne. He tells how he stumbled upon the great treasure that his father was hiding to finance the rebellion, how he stole it and hid it in another place, to prevent it from being used for the scope it was intended for. Nobel is very quick to catch the hint: the temptation to get his hands on all that gold is too strong:

Reynaert nam een stroe voer hem  
ende sprac: 'Heere coninc, nem.  
Hier gheve ic di up den scat  
die wijlen Ermelinc besat.'  
Die coninc ontfinc dat stroe  
ende dancte Reynaerde zoe

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<sup>72</sup> "Never did anyone hear animals utter such eloquent words / as they did here in the case / between Reynaert and the other animals, / as witnessed by those who heard it!" (ll. 1869-1871a)

als quansijs: ‘Dese maect mi heere.’  
Reynaerts herte louch so zeere  
dat ment wel na an hem vernam,  
doe die coninc so gheorsam  
algader was te sinen wille.<sup>73</sup>

Clearly, Nobel, who cares much more about money than justice, is no better than his subjects. The only condition he imposes is that Reynaert’s family will be punished if the fox is lying to him about the treasure. The king is urged to caution by one of the few positive characters of the whole poem, his wife. She seems to reflect at least in part some traditional *motifs* regarding the figure of the queen in the Middle Ages. She loves her husband, and she is wise and sensible enough to warn him against their captive’s tricks and to push the fox into confessing all details about the alleged conspiracy plotted against Nobel. But she does this because she cares for her husband, and not for the gold. The additional clause concerning the “donation” of the treasure to the crown is conceived by Nobel’s greed alone. In a way that reminds us Guinevere in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and her treatment of the rapist knight, the queen will judge Reynaert, promising him safe conduct if he will vow to stay loyal to the king and to amend his ways.

In the end, the lion grants Reynaert full pardon plus the right to do what he wants with Ysengrijn, Bruun and the hare Cuwaert. As we could expect from Reynaert, the treasure was one of his devious tricks, just like the plot to overthrow the king. We do not know if the lion will actually go to the forest of Hulsterloe to search for the buried gold, but if he ever does, it is probable that he will meet an unpleasant fate,

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<sup>73</sup> “Reynaert held up a straw / and said: ‘Lord King, take it. / I herewith hand over to you the treasure / which earlier was in Ermelinc’s possession.’ / king received the straw / and thanked Reynaert / as if he meant to say: ‘This makes me its master.’ / In his heart Reynaert laughed so much / that it almost showed, / when the king so obediently / did entirely as he wished.” (ll. 2561-2571).

judging from the horror with which all characters react when the name of that place is mentioned, and thus he will be punished for his greed. Pulling another ingenious trick out of his sleeve, the fox tells Nobel that he had been excommunicated by the pope and has to start his journey to the Holy Land, so he cannot go with him to the forest of Hulsterloe. The reference to the pilgrimage he must undertake is interesting: Reynaert is so aware of his sinfulness that he uses it as a completely believable lie: all the other animals do not doubt for a second this papal imposition to be true. He claims to be needing new shoes, and Nobel orders that Ysengrijn's, Ysengrijn's wife's and Bruun's paws be flayed to make new footwear for the fox. This is a double punishment: besides the fact that it is cruel and awfully painful, if the three of them manage to survive they will bear a mark of guilt and shame forever.

Reynaert then goes back home with Belin the ram and Cuwaert; he tells his wife, Lady Hermeline, that he must go on a pilgrimage, and finally he kills and eats the hare. He proceeds to flatter the semi-illiterate Belin into being his ally: he pretends to write a letter to the king to assure that everything is in order for his journey, and tells Belin that he can tell Nobel that he, the ram, was the author, so the lion will believe that he is an educated courtesan and a proper secretary. Belin falls for the fox's flattery and goes back to the court carrying the letter in a leather pouch. Unfortunately for the ram, when Nobel opens the envelope, he finds inside only Cuwaert's head. The king, enraged, admits he was publicly shamed and dishonoured, the worse fate for a ruler:

Mi hevet een quaet wicht so verre  
bedroghen dat ics bem erre,  
ende int strec gheleet bi barate,  
dat ic recht mi selven hate  
ende ic mine eere hebbe verloren.  
Die mine vriende waren tevoren,  
die stoute heere Brune ende heere Ysingrijn,  
die rovet mi een valsch peelgrijn.



Dat gaet miere herten na so zeere  
dat het gaen sal an mine eere  
ende an mijn leven, het es recht!'.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, Nobel pardons Bruun and Ysengrijn, lifting the mark of public shame from them. He allows them full rights both on Belin's and Reynaert's families and declares Reynaert an outlaw once again.

#### **2.4. A community of sinners**

It is clear what *Van de Vos Reynaerde* is: a satire of the courtly feudal system, where the animal characters fulfil the traditional roles and characteristics that medieval bestiaries and Aesop's fables impose on them, and at the same time are barons and counts. It is a fusion of classical materials and contemporary social system, with the knowledge provided by bestiaries, producing "the most famous example [...] of sophisticated beast-fable".<sup>75</sup> Nobel the king is a lion, Reynaert, cunning and malicious, is a fox, Bruun, strong but not so smart, is a huge bear, Ysengrijn, hungry and vicious, is a wolf, and so on. At the same time, each of them fully represents the pettiness, the blind honour and the lust for power and gain embodied by the noble class throughout Europe, and one (or more) of the Seven Deadly Sins. They know all too well that every one of them is a sinner: they are all prey of gluttony, greed, wrath, and lust. Nevertheless, they all accept the situation to keep the balance in the game of power. Reynaert comes in as a full disruptor of this fragile balance, and indeed he prospers in an environment as such. He is smart and full of low cunning, and, as Niels Schalley

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<sup>74</sup> "I have been so terribly misled / by a scoundrel that I am beside myself, /and I have been trapped by a trick / so that I now have every reason to hate myself / and I have lost my honour. / A false pilgrim robbed me / of those who were my friends before, / bold Lord Bruun and Lord Ysengrijn. / It makes me very sad at heart / that it will cost me my honour / and my life, and rightly so!" (ll. 3401-3411).

<sup>75</sup> Chadwick, p. 73.

puts it, “een woordengoochelaar van de bovenste plank”.<sup>76</sup> As appears clearly from the narration, he seems to be performing his tricks just for the sake of them: he evidently takes pleasure in mocking Bruun. The dynamic is similar to that of Reynardus’ mocking of the flayed Ysengrimus in the homonymous poem.

Another example of how Reynaerd takes pleasure in tricking others is when the narrator tells us plainly that “dus heeft Reynaert groot delijt / dor Tybeerts ongheval”<sup>77</sup> when the priest and his family are beating the cat. It could not be clearer: Reynaert is no poor creature driven by need, nor someone who does not realize the consequences of his actions. He is a trickster and could not be prouder of it. This evil is no surprise: if one reads how foxes are described in medieval bestiaries such as the *Physiologus*, what he or she will find out is that the fox is a deceitful animal:

A wilde der is dat is ful of fele wiles:  
Fox is hire to namefor hire qweðsipe.  
Husebondes hire haten for hire harm-dedes:  
(De coc) & ðe te capun ge feccheð ofte in ðe tun  
&te gandre & te gos, bi ðe necke & bi ðe nos.  
(Haleð is to) hire hole: forði man hire hatieð,  
Hatien & hulen boðemen & fules.  
Listneð nu a wonder dat this der doð for hunger:  
Goð o felde to a furg & falleð ðarinne,  
In eriedlond er in (erð)-chine, for to bilirten fuzeles.  
Ne steredge nogt of ðe stede a god stund deies  
Oc dareð so geded were, ne drageð ge non onde.  
De rauen is swiðe redi, weneððat ge rotieð.  
& oðre fules hire fallen bi for towinnen fode.  
Derflike wiðten dred he wenen dat ge ded beð.  
He wullen on ðis (foxes) fel & ge it wel feleð:  
Ligtlikege lepeð up & letteð hem sone,  
Get hem here billing raðe wið illing,

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<sup>76</sup> “a top-shelf wordsmith”. Schalley, Niels, *Reynaert de Vos. Een Kleine geschiedenis van het Middeleeuwse Dierenepos*, Antwerpen: Kancelarij Phoebus Foundation, 2018, p.11.

<sup>77</sup> “In this way Reynaert delights / in Tybeert’s mishap.” (l. 1224-1225).

Tetoggeð & tetireð hem mid hire teð sarpe;  
Fret hire fille & goððan ðer ge wille.<sup>78</sup>

This passage, among other interesting things, talks about what was evidently considered one of the habits of foxes: the trick of pretending to be dead. It is a move that Reynaert uses in the first book of *Ysengrimus*. The behaviour and symbology of the fox are then explained from the moral point of view in the following section, which is a double *significacio*:

Twifold forbisnes in ðis der  
To frame we mugen finden her:  
Warspie & wisdom  
Wið deuel & wið ieul man.  
Ðedeuel dereð dernelike  
He lat he ne wile us nogt biswike,  
He lat he ne wile us [d]on non loð  
& bringeð us in a sinne & ter he us sloð.  
He bit us don ure bukes wille,  
Eten & drinken wið uns(k)il,  
& in ure skemting  
He doð raðe a foxing.  
He billeð one ðe foxes fel  
Wo so telleð idel spel,  
& he tireð on his ket  
Wo so him wið sending  
& for his sinfule werk  
Ledeð man to helle merk.  
  
Ðe deuel is tus ðe [fox] ilik,  
Mið iuele breides & wið swik,  
& m[e]n also ðe foxes name,  
Arn wurði to hauen same.

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<sup>78</sup> *The Middle English Physiologus*, edited by Henneke Wirtjes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 10.

For wo so seieð oðer god  
& ðenkeð iuel on his mod  
Fox he is & fend iwis  
Ðe boc ne legeð nozt of ðis.  
So was Herodes fox & flerd  
ðo Crist kaminto ðis middel-erd:  
He seide he wulde him leuen on  
& ðo-gte he (wulde) him fordon.<sup>79</sup>

In the case of the fox, thus, the meaning of its actions is twofold and needs two different exegeses. Firstly, the animals who try to attack the fox while it pretends to be dead are the sinners who fall for the Devil's temptations. Consequence of this is the second *significacio*: the fox is a symbol of the deceiver. Since the deceiver par excellence is the Devil, the association between him and the fox was commonly made. This animal had a bad reputation dating to before medieval bestiaries: the *Physiologus* states that "De boc" (the Bible) is very clear in telling that Herod was a fox, because he tried to kill the new-born Messiah. Moreover, Debra Hassig underlines that there is another passage in which a fox is used in association to a negative character.<sup>80</sup> In Luke's Gospel Jesus refers to Herod as "vulpi illi" ("that fox"),<sup>81</sup> using it as an insult since foxes were considered unclean animals according to Jewish tradition.<sup>82</sup> Another final figure that the fox could be compared to is that of the Heretic: the fox can be dangerous because of the diseases it can carry, just as the Heretic who can become a cancer to the faith spreading doubts about religious truths and interpretations. As Hassig writes:

The fox embodies a number of unpleasant traits that figuratively defined him not only as an undesirable member of secular society but also as an enemy of the Church. The fox's natural habit of deceiving birds became the focus of theological interpretation, as deceitfulness was

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<sup>79</sup> *The Middle English Physiologus*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>80</sup> Hassig, Debra, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 66.

<sup>81</sup> Luke 13:32.

<sup>82</sup> Hassig, p. 67.

the primary characteristic of all those who sought to undermine the faith from Old Testament times.<sup>83</sup>

The animals who fall prey of Reynaerd's temptations are like the birds in the passage from *Physiologus*: they are sinners who risk being taken by the Devil and being damned eternally.

Thus, the association between fox and Devil comes from biblical sources, but it probably has some socio-economic reasons as well. The fox is cunning, devious and capable to insinuate himself everywhere. It burrows underground, has nocturnal habits and is a voracious hunter, all elements that make it sinister and devilish. His deceitfulness was largely recognized and accepted, and this belief has its roots in commentators such as Isidore of Seville, who tells that the deceptive nature of foxes is shown by their very way of moving.<sup>84</sup> They are wild animals, quite hard to domesticate, and indeed Reynaert's reign is the wilderness, where chaos and danger are, and where he can do as he pleases and perform his tricks in total freedom. But his dual nature of feral beast and noble baron makes even more evident how civilization brings its own dose of danger, especially for the soul. Just as in the wild, Reynaert manages to leash out his disruptiveness in the place of civilization *par excellence*, the court. He knows full well that he is clever and a smart talker, he is aware of everyone's weaknesses and has no scruple. He lays bare the court's own self-destructiveness, caused by and displayed through the way in which all the courtesans readily accept his sinful proposals. Their public humiliation makes them feel a shame that will have no cure, since Reynaert will manage to escape his fate. Their environment is not only a place of civilization, but also a place of public exposure. In the court it is essential to maintain one's public face, and to hide all reasons of shame. If legal guilt is judged by

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<sup>83</sup> Hassig, p. 62.

<sup>84</sup> Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, edited by Barney, S. A., Lewis, W. J., Beach, J. A., & Berghof, O., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 253.

Nobel, moral guilt and the consequential shame can be detected and exposed by all the other members of the court. In the case of the king's court, Reynaert's victims have moral as well as legal guilt: Ysengrijn, whose enmity with our protagonist dates back many years, is a ruthless fool who has committed his share of crimes. Cuwaert is a good-for-nothing whose only hope for a place in society is to become a clergyman. Bruun becomes a thief as he accepts to steal Lamfroyt's honey. Tybeert is an intruder, since he enters the priest's henhouse. Belin is a traitor who lies to his king to obtain his favour. Nobel is a faulty ruler who places wealth above justice. Yet, the only one who in the end is judged guilty is Belin, who is not pardoned at the end of the story like Ysengrijn and Bruun, even though from a moral point of view their guilt is the same. The only matter that concerns the other three is the poor figure they have cut from a social point of view. But they are not even shamed by their peers, and they all seem to fail to perceive the moral guilt they should feel for their immoral behaviour. If they feel it—and Bruun and Tybeert probably do, since as I have shown before they hide their share of responsibilities to Nobel—they do not express it. They want revenge on Reynaert because they have lost their public face, since the physical signs left on them by their misadventures are visible for anyone. However, they do not reflect on the fact that their inability to withstand Reynaert's temptations is morally reprehensible and makes them well deserve the punishment they had to endure.

It is easy to see how all these factors must have come into play in the depiction of the fox as the Devil. Just like him, Reynaert tempts sinners and then punishes them for doing what he has told them. He can slither inside everyone's mind and wreak havoc in the whole community. He fulfils his role magistrally. His refined and subtle speech persuades every single one of the animals he faces. He wins them over with incredible ease, and perhaps what is most unsettling and at the same time entertaining is his absolute lack of repentance and empathy, even for his wife and children whom

he abandons to go into hiding. And he never gets punished: as much as he gets caught, imprisoned and sentenced to this or that sentence, he never gets what he deserves. His cunning and his deviousness save him every time, aided by the foolishness and blind pettiness of his prosecutors. This is the perfect representation of what the temptation worked by the Devil meant for medieval people: it can happen to everyone (from a village priest to a powerful king), it is potentially deadly and there is no proper way to avoid it. Paradoxically, in the end Reynaert is the only one who has remained true to his kind. He does nothing more than what could be expected from him, given the general features attributed to foxes. He is the Devil, and as such he behaves. Perhaps, the same could be expected by Ysengrijn (and Ysengrimus), because wolves are negative character as well, so the audience of the two poems I have examined would not be surprised by his regrettable actions. But Nobel, Bruun, Tybeert, Belin, Cuwaert, and all the other courtesans are the embodiment of socially (and religiously) reprehensible subjects.

## 2.5. Conclusions

A very important feature of the beast epic genre is its comical intent: as underlined by Mann, “the most obvious difference between beast fable and beast epic is that the latter is above all a comic form”<sup>85</sup>. The beast fable is by its very nature short and incisive, narrating a single episode with a humourless tone and offering serious wisdom. The beast epic, on the other hand, is decisively ironical. It might offer some kind of more or less explicit moral teaching, but it is not its prime aim. *Ysengrimus* and *Van de Vos Reynaerde* are both prime example of this. The former is openly against the corruption in the medieval church. The greed of the wolf becomes a symbol

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<sup>85</sup> Mann, *From Aesop to Reynaerd*, p. 52.

for the greed of the clergy: Ysengrimus is unable to stop himself from falling into temptations of every kind, and while in the end he receives the shameful ending he deserves, it could be hardly said that he ever felt guilty for his evil deeds. The latter aims at a more secular target, which is the ruling class. It is a social class among whose primary concerns there is public face and appearance. Reynaert's role as a trickster becomes thus even more disruptive than how it was in *Ysengrimus*, where the main victim of his tricks was, after all, only one character. The nobles at Nobel's court are forced to face humiliation because of Reynaert, humiliation which has roots in their social faultiness (they do not respect the rules that one is required to follow in order to live in a society) which often resolves in religious inadequacy (they are all sinners). The fact that religious and social norms are often overlapping, as happens in most societies, only worsens the situation.<sup>86</sup>

I have discussed at length what makes of Reynaert the perfect tempter. His devilish talent for deception is at the same time unsettling and entertaining, and especially we moderns tend to look at him with sympathy, and to find him quite likeable. As Schalley sensibly points out, Reynaert is "pijnlijk menselijk"<sup>87</sup> and can be simultaneously so cursed and so praised because he reminds us of our deceitfulness and at the same time our resourcefulness. I have no doubt that a medieval audience would probably have found his adventures just as enjoyable as we do. Linked to this, there is the fact that *Van de Vos Reynaerde* escapes the expectation of finding some moral *utilitas* in an animal tale: this story offers no moral sentence at the end, it teaches its audience nothing more than how in the end a villain, a malevolent tempter, can get away with his actions. Every sinner gets his own share of shame - everyone but Reynaert. He is subjected to temptation, to which he gives in whenever he can, but he

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<sup>86</sup> Middleton, Russell, Snell, Putney, "Religion, Normative Standards, and Behavior", *Sociometry*, 2 (1962), pp. 141-52, p. 142.

<sup>87</sup> "painfully human", Schalley, p.11.



does not even feel the shame that the other characters feel, let alone guilt. Therefore, I think he is a zoomorphic refiguration of the Devil, who was once tempted into defying God and afterwards felt nothing but desire for revenge. Reynaert “the red scoundrel” as he calls himself in *Van de Vos Reynaerde* (v. 1943), is an everlasting concept, a symbol. This masterpiece of Dutch literature survives thanks to his multi-faceted nature and its capacity to adapt through time and genres, just like its protagonist.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Chaucer, Lydgate, and beast literature**

#### **3.1. The Pilgrims’ attitude towards temptation, shame, and guilt**

*The Canterbury Tales* was written by Geoffrey Chaucer between, supposedly, 1387 and 1400, the year of his death. Consisting of over 17,000 lines and twenty-four narratives, this work is far from being finished. The original plan that Chaucer

had in mind envisaged a far larger number of tales. We know this thanks to the Host's proposal: each pilgrim must tell two stories on the way to their destination and two on the way back. The Host suggests it as a good way to pass the time, because "confort ne myrthe is noon/to ride by the weye doumb as a stoon" (ll. 773-774),<sup>88</sup> and states that whoever tells the most amusing and morally useful tale will win a dinner at his inn. However, only 22 pilgrims manage to tell a story each, plus the pilgrim Chaucer who tells two. Some of the tales remain unfinished or their narration is stopped by another character.

The number of characters, genres, and plots that Chaucer manages to gather in just one work is quite large. His pilgrims tell fairy tales, legends, treatises and — what is more important for this research— one of them tells a fable. The narrations cover a large range of themes, from love and lust (for example, the Miller's tale), to Christian virtues (the Parson's tale). Chaucer's excuse for writing this work is the pilgrimage, which was an important event in the life of a Christian. It allowed believers to go and visit the shrine of a saint, with the intention of asking for a manifestation of grace, for example healing one's illness, or in order to atone for one's sins. Moreover, in a society like the one Chaucer was living in and describing, pilgrimages were a good occasion to travel and to have a sort of "vacation" *ante litteram*. It is not strange then that, paradoxically, what was meant to be one of the moments of highest sanctity and purification became a chance to commit more sins. Donald R. Howard writes: "the sin of curiosity was an inevitable temptation to which almost all pilgrims gave way; [they] saw sights that were a distraction to worship".<sup>89</sup> It was a journey that was meant to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

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<sup>88</sup> All the quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry Dean Benson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

<sup>89</sup> Howard, Donald Roy, *Chaucer and the Medieval World*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, p. 403.

Thus, those men and women were understandably excited and more relaxed regarding social and moral norms than they were in their everyday life. Even when the journey was relatively short, pilgrims like those described by Chaucer were surely not letting this chance be wasted. The characters of *The Canterbury Tales* all seem prone to surrender each to their own temptation, and not to worry about sinning. This adds to their humanity, which makes them vivid examples of what kind of men and women formed English society at the time. People from various social strata can be found in *The Canterbury Tales*: from a carpenter to a knight, from a bourgeois woman to a prioress.

This display of typical Englishmen and Englishwomen is offered to the reader through the eyes of the narrator, the “I” who appears for the first time at line 20 of the Prologue and who is supposedly Chaucer himself. Howard notices how the narrator seems to apply the Augustinian principle “love for the sinner and hatred of the sin” in a distorted way: he is so ready to love his travelling companions that he approves and supports all their vices and sins, seemingly parodying Augustine’s words.<sup>90</sup> However, behind the apparently idiotic and hypocritical attitude of the narrator, there is Chaucer himself, who is in truth making fun of his contemporaries, bringing to light their moral inadequacies. According to Frederick Tupper the “sin motif”, as he calls it, is typical of Chaucer, who makes use of it in order to target the pilgrims. He does so in a way that does not escape the conventional moral faults that are attributed to their trades. The reader can see “the Summoner's exemplum of Wrath, the Pardoner's of Avarice, the Physician's of Lechery, the Second Nun's of Sloth”.<sup>91</sup> This is confirmed as soon as one takes a closer look at some of the

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<sup>90</sup> Howard, p. 411.

<sup>91</sup> Tupper, Frederick, “Chaucer's Sinners and Sins”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 1 (1916), pp. 56-106, p. 56.

aforementioned characters: for example the Pardoner, who is supposed to dispense pardons and sermons among the folk, takes advantage of his position to earn money from his parishioners' fear of damnation and desire for holy relics. Obviously, the relics he sells are false, and he could not be more aware of it. He even boasts about his deviousness: "By this gaude have I wonne, yeer by yeer / An hundred mark sith I was pardoner" (ll. 389-390). His tale will be about greed and avarice, just like his sermons. He is evidently an expert in the field, as he is self-admittedly guilty of those sins as well.

The narrator's subtle and ironic accusation of the pilgrims' faulty morality becomes openly evident only in the last tale, when it is the Parson's turn to speak. The Parson scorns poetry because he "kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre / Ne, God woot, rym holde [he] but litel better" (X, ll. 43-44). His self-declared poetic ignorance could simply be a way to make fun of him, as Chaucer often does when dealing with clergymen. However, the Parson's feigned inability to make use of "rum, ram, ruf" (alliteration), and of poetry in general, gives Chaucer the chance to turn the Parson's tale into a sermon—or, even better, a treatise—about penance. This treatise considers the cause and the remedy for the sins of each of the other pilgrims. In the three parts in which his tale is divided, the Parson gives a definition of penance, discusses the various causes of sin, contrition, and the distinction between venial and deadly sins. Finally, he talks about the seven deadly sins and their remedies: pride (cured by humility), envy (love of one's neighbours), wrath (meekness), sloth (strength), greed (pity, mercy), gluttony (abstinence), and lust (chastity). He is very subtle, as he almost never explicitly names the pilgrim who has committed the sin. Nevertheless, for the reader it is not difficult to understand that, for example, when he is talking about lechery, he is addressing the Wife of Bath, or when explaining Avarice, he is targeting the Pardoner. *The Canterbury*

*Tales* ends after his sermon, so we will never know if the pilgrims will recognize themselves in the Parson's scolding, and thus if they will feel any guilt or shame for their deeds. They seem to be generally unwilling to recognize their moral faults, with few exceptions, like the Wife of Bath. The Parson is aware of his own morals too, but in a different, positive way: he seems the only character true to his words and to what his social role implies. He lives in poverty and moderation, giving what he has to the poor of his parish, and follows Christ's word as best he can.

This short introduction is meant to give a general idea of the attitude towards temptation, shame, and guilt in Chaucer's masterpiece. As I have just said, most pilgrims have a relaxed approach to moral matters. It is understood that this is done purposely by Chaucer, who needed to portray the moral standing of his contemporaries. In the next sections, I will illustrate his use of the animal world, taking metaphors and similes from a wide range of animal species.

### **3.2. The animal element**

Chaucer's interest in animals is quite evident, as can be seen in most of his work. As Gillian Rudd points out, "it becomes quite a challenge to find a text by Chaucer that contains no animal at all".<sup>92</sup> One needs just to think about "The Parliament of Fowls" (c. 1380), which already in its title clearly states the presence of animals: the main characters are three eagles, and all the other characters are birds of various kinds. Another famous instance is represented by the three dreams that Chaucer inserts in *Troilus and Criseyde*: they all have animals.

These examples, which are only a couple of the many that could be used, show how Chaucer is aware of the symbology that lies under animal figures and knows

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<sup>92</sup> Rudd, Gillian, "Animals in Chaucer", *Geoffrey Chaucer in Context*, edited by Ian Johnson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 209-216, p. 209.

how to use it. This knowledge and this interest in animals manifest itself in *The Canterbury Tales* as well, where it becomes a valuable tool to portray the various characters. They are all finely described, both physically and psychologically, and this is often achieved through their association with a certain kind of animal by way of metaphors and similes. The Miller, for example, is described as a “stout carl” (I, l. 545) with a beard red “as any sorwe or fox” (I, l. 552). Chaucer tells his readers that “he was a janglere and a goliardeys / and that was moost of synne and harlotries” (I, ll. 560-561). Also, he carries a bagpipe, which, as suggested by Howard, is a phallic symbol.<sup>93</sup> His physical appearance and his boisterous nature make it clear that he will tell a bawdy tale, and this is amplified by the association with a pig and a fox. The Pardoner, in another instance, is said to have “glarynge eyen [...] as an hare” (I, l. 684). The characters that Chaucer’s pilgrims insert in their tales are often described through animals as well: in the Miller’s tale, the carpenter’s young and beautiful wife “koude skippe and make game / As any kyde or calf folwyng his dame” (I, ll. 3259-3260). The animals used in these descriptions do not escape the features conventionally attributed to them. The Miller is compared to a sow because sows are deemed to be dirty, gluttonous, and lustful animals, and to a fox because foxes are slick and treacherous. The hare is a cautious being, just like the Pardoner himself. From this point of view, Chaucer does not give unexpected new features to the conventional properties and characteristics attributed to animals by tradition and by bestiaries. He makes use of the animal similes to give the pilgrims and the tales’ characters a vitality that would not be complete otherwise.

The animal element is particularly strong in the Nun’s Priest’s tale. The Priest is strangely enough not described in the General Prologue, where it is only stated

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<sup>93</sup> Howard, p. 404.

that he is with two other priests and a nun, all in the Prioress' retinue (I, ll. 163-164). Only much later the reader will find out his name, John, and will be given a brief description of the man's appearance. Larry Benson theorizes that Chaucer had originally wanted to insert a fuller Priest's description at a later stage, and this missing part is probably one of those that the poet did not manage to finish before his death in 1400.<sup>94</sup>

Edward Wheatley suggests an interesting concept: the Nun's Priest could represent Aesop. It could be pointed out that, unlike the Greek fabulist, the Priest is, indeed, a priest: his status is nowhere near to a slave's, and in any case he is a man. His gender implies that he is somehow superior to the Prioress, even though he is in her retinue. Still, the clues that Wheatley brings to support this theory are interesting. First, his presence among the pilgrims is shadowy, like the existence of the Greek fable teller. Second, like Aesop, the Priest—who never seems to speak and interact anywhere else and, apparently, is there just to be among the *chaperons* of the Prioress and the nun that follows her—“creates an identity and freedom for himself through his storytelling”.<sup>95</sup>

What is certain in regard to the relationship between John the Priest and Aesop is that “The Nun's Priest's Tale” is undoubtedly of Aesopic nature, unlike the other tale which is usually considered to belong to the fabulist genre, “The Manciple's Tale”. The latter tale is indeed a moralistic narration with animals and humans talking to each other. However, as Wheatley points out, Chaucer's source in this tale is not Aesop, but rather Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,<sup>96</sup> hence why I have decided to focus on the Priest's tale.

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<sup>94</sup> Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Benson, Larry Dean, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 5.

<sup>95</sup> Wheatley, p. 100.

<sup>96</sup> Wheatley, p. 102.

Unsurprisingly, the animal element is present in John the Priest's short description as well. For example, the Host calls his horse "a jade" (X, l. 2812). This word indicates an old and down at heel horse and, with such a hint, one would expect John to be as old and in a bad shape as his horse. At the end of his tale, though, the Miller finally gives us John's full description:

But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,  
Thou woldest ben a trede-foul a right.  
For if thou have corage as thou hast myght,  
Thee were nede of hennes, as I wene,  
Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene.  
See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest,  
So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest!  
He loketh as a sperhawk with his yen;  
Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyen. (VII, ll. 3450-3458)

The presence of the animal association is evident throughout the entire passage: these few lines are almost completely occupied by it. According to the Miller, if John were not a clergyman, he would be like a rooster ("trede-foul") who would never lack hens, and his sight is just like that of a hawk. The two comparisons with a bird of prey and an animal that can easily become its prey are strangely placed together. Perhaps this is just one of the Miller's bawdy jokes, meant to associate the supposed Priest's sexual vigour to the proverbial concupiscence of roosters and the intelligence of hawks, not to mention the fact that love and sexual courtships are traditionally associated with the idea of hunting. It is also possible that these similes could simply be inspired by the animal narration that the Priest has just given. In any case, they have a sexual tone which fits the Miller perfectly, so it is not so uncanny to hear him deliver such a speech. However, the pairing of predator and prey fits perfectly the subject of the tale which the priest has just finished telling.



### 3.3. John the Priest's tale: a retelling of the Fall

Chaucer's sources for "The Nun's Priest's Tale" are "Del Cok e del Gupil" by Marie de France, Pierre de Saint Cloud's fox and cock episode in Branch II of the *Roman de Renart*, and the corresponding episode in Branch VI of *Renart le Contrefait* by an unknown "clerc de Troyes" (1328-42).<sup>97</sup> From Pierre de Saint Cloud and *Renart le Contrefait* Chaucer drew Chanticleer's and Pertelote's long discussion, but the final scene of the rooster's kidnapping by Russell is directly derived by Marie de France. These "ancestors" are in large part the same as *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, as shown in the previous chapter.

The tale opens with the description of the poor, old widow's life. Among her animals, there is the rooster Chanticleer (a name which briefly appeared in *Van de Vos Reynaerde* as well), and a few hens, among which Chanticleer's favourite is Pertelote. The first notable element is that, as R. T. Lenaghan points out, "the dominating feature of the tale is misplaced elegance".<sup>98</sup> For example, the hens and the rooster are portrayed as finely as one would describe a piece of art. Chanticleer in particular is presented as a splendid specimen, and the terms used to describe his colours are the same that were used in heraldry:

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,  
And batailled as it were a castel wal;  
His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;  
Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;  
His nayles whitter than the lylie flour,  
And lyk the burned gold was his colour. (VII, ll. 2859-2864)

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<sup>97</sup> Pratt, Robert A., "Three Old French Sources of the Nonnes Preestes Tale", *Speculum*, 4 (1972), pp. 646-668, p. 646.

<sup>98</sup> Lenaghan, R. T., "The Nun's Priest's Fable", *PMLA*, 78 (1963), pp. 300-307, p. 300.

Pertelote is no less beautiful: her colouring is just as beautiful, and most importantly she is “curteys [...], discreet, and debonaire / and compaignable” (VII, l. 2871-2872) as befits a proper lady.

One night, Chanticleer has a horrible nightmare about a frightful beast which wants to devour him, and he confesses it to his favourite wife:

Me mette how that I romed up and doun  
Withinne our yeerd, wheer as I saugh a beest  
Was lyk an hound, and wolde han maad areest  
Upon my body, and wolde han had me deed  
His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,  
And tipped was his tayl and bothe his eeris  
With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris;  
His snowte smal, with glowynge eyen tweye  
Yet of his look for feere almoost I deye. (VII, ll. 2898-2906)

After Chanticleer's nightmare, the couple discusses in the most courteous way what he has seen. It certainly sounds ridiculous to hear a couple of birds, usually deemed to not be particularly brilliant, talk in such a manner and making precise references to great philosophers and thinkers. However, while Pertelote seems to be not only very practical but also very shrewd, Chanticleer behaves like an empty-headed, pedant scholar who has learned his lessons by heart and can merely recite them aloud without understanding. He falls headfirst into the temptation to boast about his knowledge, becoming thus a rather ludicrous example of groundless intellectual pride. His foolishness and lack of learning become evident when he fails to do what every scholar had to be able to do: properly read the text that he has been presented with. This metaphor of the dream as text is proposed by Wheatley. He suggests that Chanticleer's inability to read and give interpretation to his dream has moral implications. He observes: “the ‘translation’ of a text into ethical behaviour was one of the purposes of

reading in the Middle Ages”.<sup>99</sup> Chanticleer fails to do this translation, and he does the same with the examples he brings to the table to convince Pertelote of the power of dreams: he just recites them. This lack of moral protection will make him even more subject to the temptation perpetrated by the beast he has dreamed about, and he will have to learn the hard way what it means to surrender to it.

The bickering among the two birds reflects the debate between authority and experience which can be found in the Wife of Bath’s prologue as well. Pertelote appears to be much more capable than her husband and much more knowledgeable about the possibility to use authority to confirm experience (as testified by her precise reference to Cato). However, one must remember that “even if it is true that Chanticleer and Pertelote are rounded characters, it is also true that they are chickens”.<sup>100</sup> Their animality makes all their knowledge and eloquence, whether true or just apparent, fail abruptly whenever it is becoming too scholarly, bringing them back down to earth, and thus paradoxically making them even more human. Pertelote’s medical reasoning is a prime example: during her long, elaborate medical discourse about the causes and nature of dreams, she abruptly exclaims “for Goddes love, as taak som laxatyf.” (VII, l. 2943). She is clearly disgusted by her husband’s cowardice and tries to shame him, suggesting then that bad dreams and nightmares are simply the result of some physical imbalance or discomfort:

Swevenes engendren of replecciouns,  
And ofte of fume and of complecciouns,  
Whan humours been to habundant in a wight. (VII, ll. 2923-2925)

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<sup>99</sup> Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop. Medieval Education, Chaucer and his Followers*, p. 112.

<sup>100</sup> Muscatine, Charles, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965, p. 238.

She brands her husband's dream as an *insomnium*, the category of dreams that, according to Macrobius, has no valuable significance.<sup>101</sup> Chantecleer finally believes her and, reassured, spends the rest of the day with his wives. The effect is quite strange: after having discussed at length using the most refined rhetorical argument, quoting examples taken by Cato, Macrobius, the Bible and even classical mythology, they search for seeds and copulate as every other normal chicken would do. As suggested by Charles Muscatine as well,<sup>102</sup> the duality man-animal typical of beast literature — a concept which I underlined also in *Van de Vos Reynaerde*— is continually blurred in this tale. Sometime later, Chanticleer's fears come true: the monster he had dreamed of appears on the stage. It is "a col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee," (VII, l. 3215). The fox, named Russell, has been waiting for Chanticleer to get far enough away from his wives in order to catch him. This is precisely what the Devil would do, waiting and watching until his chosen victims are distracted and he can take advantage of them.

At this point, the Priest inserts what could be considered one of the many morals that this long fable contains. Since it is Pertelote who tells Chanticleer not to worry, she is the one who has pushed him unprepared towards his worst enemy. Hence, the Priest's words are a reprimand against women and their role as temptresses at the expense of men. They are the ones who cause harm and discomfort in their companions, persuading them with their words:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;  
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo,  
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,  
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese. (VII, ll. 3265-3268)

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<sup>101</sup> Whatley, *Mastering Aesop. Medieval Education, Chaucer and his Followers*, p. 107.

<sup>102</sup> Muscatine, p. 239.

Russell the fox then reveals his presence to Chanticleer and addresses himself to him with courteous words and flatters the poor rooster into showing him if he is as good at singing as his sire was. The detail that he adds about the rooster's father who apparently used to sing at his best when he kept his eyes closed, should have made Chanticleer suspicious, but the rooster falls immediately for the fox's false praise. Russell manages to catch him and run away, with the rooster in his jaws. At this point, John the Priest adds another moral against flatterers and tempters to warn the powerful who surround themselves of false counsellors:

Allas, ye lordes, many a fals flatour  
Is in youre courtes, and many a losengeour,  
That plesen yow wel moore, by my feith,  
Than he that soothfastnesse unto yow seith.  
Redeth Ecclesiaste of flaterye;  
Beth war, ye lordes, of hir trecherye. (VII, ll. 3325-3330)

The situation is luckily resolved thanks not only to the widow, but also to Chanticleer's newfound wits. Still in the fox's jaws, he transforms himself in the tempter: he suggests that his captor insult his pursuers. Russell, strangely enough for such a wily creature, falls for the rooster's trick, opens his mouth to do as suggested, and allows Chanticleer to break free and to seek refuge upon a tree. The fox tries to take him back using, once again, his sly words, assuring the rooster he had taken him away from the farm without any bad intentions. But Chanticleer, finally wary of the danger of listening to a stranger, replies with a moral sentence:

'Nay thanne,' quod he, 'I shrewe us bothe two.  
And first I shrewe myself, bothe blood and bones,  
If thou bigyle me ofter than ones.  
Thou shalt namoore thurgh thy flaterye  
Do me to synge and wynke with myn ye;  
For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see.

Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!' (VII, ll. 3426-3432)

Chanticleer clearly feels ashamed of his foolishness and vainglory: he assures the fox that he will keep his eyes wide open and will not fall for his flattery again. Russell, equally ashamed of his failure, at this point has no other choice but to begrudgingly admit his defeat and curse those who open their mouth when they should keep it well closed (i.e., himself). The Priest concludes with one last piece of moral advice that sums up what the two characters have just said:

Swich it is for to be recchelees  
And necligent, and truste on flaterye.  
But ye that holden this tale a folye,  
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,  
Taketh the moralite, goode men.  
For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,  
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;  
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.  
Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,  
As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,  
And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen. (VII, ll. 3435-3446)

The fable ends as one could only expect from a priest, with a benediction. Indeed, the Christian element is strongly inserted in the narration, even if it might not seem completely explicit at first glance. The hidden meaning of the Priest's animal characters is not only humanity's vices and virtues, but also, as Rudd says:

The hen is a domestic soul, guarding her chicks under her wing; a fussing bird farmed in a group; and easy prey for foxes. But she is also a symbol of divine wisdom, a figure of the Church taking care of her congregation (chicks). Add to this the fable of the rooster and the Fox as found in Aesop and Marie de France, and it is immediately apparent that "The Nun's Priest's Tale" connects with a rich vein of animal literature combining moral fable (with the rooster representing the proud, gullible man) with Christian allegory (the bestiary tells us that the fox symbolises the devil).<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Rudd, p. 210.

Muscatine goes as far as to suggest that the Christian allegory represented here is “an allegory of the Fall — leaving Man, somewhat wiser, still in possession of his paradise, his chicken yard”.<sup>104</sup> It is true that the tale comprehends many elements that are told in Genesis. There is an initial stage in which man and wife live in perfect happiness in an environment that is perfect for them. This stage is disrupted by an element of personified temptation, which leads to a fall with potential deadly consequences. All this could be testified by line 3401: when all the animals are clamouring and watching the foxhunt, the narrator exclaims “it semed as that hevene sholde falle”.

In this view, the old widow could represent God, whose power is the only means for salvation that humans can hope for when they have fallen prey to temptation. Her intervention makes Russell fear for himself so much that he lets himself be deceived by his prey. This is absent in the biblical episode, though: God does not intervene to save Adam and Eve from their own fault, and indeed he punishes them afterwards. He does not manage to defeat the Devil and prevent him from getting what he wanted. However, one must remember once again that, after all, Chanticleer and Pertelote are just farm animals. Chaucer can allow himself to be more permissive with them and let them go back to their previous life.

Pertelote’s role is, of course, Eve’s: she advises her mate not to give much importance to the warning he has received, but by doing so, she pushes him towards the very danger from which she is trying to save him, tempting him into a dangerous situation. The Priest is ambivalent in his judgement against her: if it is true that “Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde”, a few lines later he adds that “[he] kan noon harm of no womman.” Muscatine notices how the focus of the Priest’s critique

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<sup>104</sup> Muscatine, p. 242.

is not well defined and is ever shifting.<sup>105</sup> It is not clear if he is targeting Chanticleer's pedantry, Pertelote's carelessness, or Russell's final and unforeseen falling into temptation. It is probable that they are all to blame, and they should all be facing the consequences of their idiotic actions. Chanticleer should have been devoured by Russell, thus making Pertelote lose her husband, and Russell should have been finally caught by the widow and killed. What happens, though, is that only Russell is somehow sanctioned by being deprived of his meal. As I said, the Devil, in this version of the story of the Fall, does not get what he wanted: after his intervention, Adam and Eve continue to have their serene life in the garden of Eden, and in fact, they are now wiser and less prone to fall for his tricks. Russell gets what Reynaert never does: a punishment. Just like his Dutch antecedent, Russell is perfectly aware of his evil nature, but his plans do not always end happily, and he admits his foolishness when things do not go as planned:

'Nay,' quod the fox, 'but God yeve hym meschaunce,  
That is so undiscreet of governaunce  
That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees.' (VII, ll. 3433-3435)

Chanticleer's idiocy should have made him at least deserve some public shaming by his hens. The Priest does not tell the audience if this will happen. It is all too probable that he will escape the hens' moral judgement: his companions are not much smarter than he is and so do not recognize his stupidity. One would hope that at least Pertelote will rebuke him. He does realise that he was foolish, though: the last words the audience hears from him are a self-inflicted malediction for having given in to his sin of Pride.

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<sup>105</sup> Muscatine, p. 239.



The Priest —although offering many moral sentences throughout the tale— “does not [...] specify precisely what that moral is. He affirms his general seriousness simply and pleasantly”.<sup>106</sup> His final lines are almost an apology for missing the only proper function a fable should have and having only entertained his listeners. Paul Shillers comments that the task of discovering the Priest’s story’s meaning is far more difficult than what he seems to imply with that “taketh the moralitee”.<sup>107</sup> One would be tempted to avoid this obstacle by acting literally as he suggests and taking one of the various themes he discusses (“wommennes conseils”, medical practice, flattery, and so on) as the fruit whose chaff (i.e., the rest of the whole tale) needs to be discarded. However, Shillers underlines, the reader must be aware of the irony that he makes extensive use of: it is the only way to avoid being tangled in the thematic abundance displayed by the clergyman.

#### **3.4. Beast Literature after Chaucer: Lydgate’s *Isopes Fabules***

After Chaucer’s death, a number of English poets dedicated themselves to the study and imitation of his work and kept the interest towards beast literature alive. John Lydgate is perhaps among those who stand out the most. Lydgate was a great admirer of Chaucer and was majorly influenced by his work. He was an extremely prolific writer: his production is immense. Unsurprisingly —seeing he was a Benedictine monk— the other great influence on his work, besides Chaucer, is spiritual and religious poetry. Derek Pearsall, his biographer, writes that Lydgate took interest not only in religion and in his literary hero, but in many topics. The monk wrote about cookery, medicine, geometry and math, etiquette, history, and much more.<sup>108</sup> He took

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<sup>106</sup> Lenaghan, p. 301.

<sup>107</sup> Shillers, A. Paul, “The ‘Nun’s Priest’s Tale’: An Ironic Exemplum”, *ELH*, 42 (1975), pp. 319–337, p. 320.

<sup>108</sup> Pearsall, Derek Albert, *Gower and Lydgate*, Harlow: Longmans, Green, 1969, p. 25.

the concept of being an educated man in the Middle Ages to the extreme: one's knowledge had to be as encyclopaedic as possible, and a true erudite should be able to cover the largest possible number of topics.

However, notwithstanding his prolificacy, Lydgate is not renowned for being an innovator. His work shows no extensive intention to manipulate the form he was working with, apart from an element on which I will say more in a moment. His collection *Isopes Fabules* follows very closely the rules of fable composition. Wheatley argues that this may also be because the *Fabules* are likely among his first works, if not the first. This can be affirmed because, as is reported in the title of the last fable, Lydgate states that his work was “made in Oxforde”, where he spent a few years as a young student.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps he did not feel sure enough to experiment with his material. However, judging by his later production, it seems much more probable that his literary conservatism is simply imputable to his monastic intellectual upbringing. As noticed by Pearsall,

Medieval rhetorical teaching concerns itself almost exclusively with style, and dismisses ‘invention’ and structure very briefly [...]. The relative neglect of invention and structure is due to the assumption that the material of poetry is all ‘given’ —there is nothing new to be said— and that its form is implied in its very existence.<sup>110</sup>

Lydgate is perfectly comprised in this observation. His *Fabules*, seven narrations with a total of 959 lines, all have talking animals as characters. These animals present the traditional characteristics that are associated with them and end with a moral, as expected from fables. The only element that Lydgate seems to have taken from Chaucer's treatment of the fable genre is the interspersed moral sentences and philosophical concepts that he inserts throughout the narration and not only in the final lines. However, if Chaucer in “The Nun's Priest's Tale” takes the fable form and plays

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<sup>109</sup> Wheatley, p. 125.

<sup>110</sup> Pearsall, p. 27.

with it, stretching it into a long tale full of rich details that becomes a self-commentary, Lydgate just adds some commentary that he inserts in the narration itself rather than providing them later. He never reaches the level displayed by, for example, Chanticleer's and Pertelote's discussion.

Lydgate makes use of at least three sources for his *Fabules*: Chaucer, Marie de France, and Aesop. Marie de France's influence is clearly visible in that all seven fables Lydgate tells can be found in her *Ysopet* as well: "Le Coq et la Pierre Précieuse" ("The Tale of the Cok that Founde a Precyous Stone"), "Le Loup et l'Aigneau" ("The Tale of the Wolfe and the Lambe"), "La Souris et la Grenouille" ("The Tale of the Frogge and the Mouse"), "Le Chien et la Brebis" ("The Tale of the Hownde and the Shepe"), "Le Loup et la Gru" ("How the Wollffe Diseyvdyd the Crane"), "Le Mariage du Soleil" ("The Marriage of the Sun"), and, finally, "Le Chien et le Fromage" ("The Hound that Bare the Chese"). Many of these fables, as I will show in the next chapter, are included in Henryson's work and in the Dutch *Esopet* as well.

While Marie de France's style is relatively simple and her narrations are short and concise, Lydgate displays all his scholarly knowledge. He embellishes most of his fables with allusions and proverbial *auctoritates* that would not have been out of place in the medieval classroom, setting the vernacular fables in a scholastic context. His work on Aesop's fables is not only a simple translation, but also a translation enriched with what was usually done with the pedagogical reception of fables: providing them with commentary. Wheatley explains:

The practice of lengthening fables by enriching details, dialogue, and other elements, which was suggested by classical grammarians and taught in medieval grammar schools, was called *amplificatio*. In some scholastic commentaries on Latin curricular fables, prose plot summaries of the syntactically difficult Latin verse are given, and these offer the commentators the opportunity to "amplify" the fables through imaginative engagement with and embellishment of the original texts.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Wheatley, Edward, "Introduction to *Isopes Fabules*", Lydgate, John, *Isopes Fabules*, Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013, p. 2.

Clearly, Lydgate does not have the same approach to fables that Chaucer had: if John the Priest makes fun of scholars' gravity through Chanticleer, Lydgate fully embraces this gravity. As Wheatley underlines, Lydgate is so serious in his intentions that his *Fabules* are written in rhyme royal, in a clear homage to his literary hero. Rhyme royal is the metrical scheme that Chaucer uses in the works that he deemed to be more important, like *Troilus and Criseyde*, or the narrations in *The Canterbury Tales* which are richer in pathos.<sup>112</sup> Clearly, Lydgate thought that his *Fabules* were not a trivial work.

As far as Aesop's influence is concerned, Lydgate clearly makes his name while stating the aim of his work:

Vnto purpose þe poete laureate  
 Callyd Isopus dyd hym occupy  
 Whylom in Rome to plesse þe senate  
 Fonde out fables, þat men myght hem apply  
 To sondry matyrs, yche man for hys party  
 Aftyr þeyr lust, to conclude in substaunce  
 Dyverse moralytees set out to þeyr plesaunce.<sup>113</sup> (ll. 8-14)

As can be expected from him, Lydgate did not attach to his work a function different from what was usually expected from fables: they are a means to access to "diverse moralytees" while experiencing "plesaunce".

As suggested by Wheatley, the fact that he seems to think that Aesop was Roman and not Greek could simply be a superposition with Romulus,<sup>114</sup> since the collection attributed to him was the one through which pupils had access to Aesop's work. Additionally, mentioning a classical author was a sort of precautionary move: it gave *auctoritas* to his work, erasing at least in part the stigma associated with

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<sup>112</sup> Wheatley, "Introduction to *Isopes Fabules*", p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> All the quotations are taken from Lydgate, John, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, part II*, edited by Henry Noble MacCracken and Merriam Sherwood, London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1961.

<sup>114</sup> Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop. Medieval Education, Chaucer and his Followers*, pp. 126-127.

entertaining literature. As is to be expected, Lydgate places himself in a subordinate position in relation to his classical source. He states:

For whyche I cast to folow Pys poete  
And hys fables in Englyssh to translate,  
And Pough I have no rethoryk swete,  
Have me excusyd: I was born in Lydgate;  
Of Tullius gardeyn I passyd nat þe gate,  
And cause, why: I had no lycence  
There to gadyr floures of elloquence. (ll. 29-35)

The *excusatio non petita* is only to be expected from a medieval writer, who considered himself everything but an author. However, this excusing of oneself can be a reminder of what Chaucer's Parson does. The Parson's southern provenance excludes him from the possibility to work skilfully with words, just like Lydgate's being born in the small village of Lydgate makes him have no "lycence" to the "gadyr floures of elloquence".

Lydgate's focus in the *Fabules* is on two main topics: the first is the concept of *suffisaunce*, the second tyranny. He probably derived the theme of *suffisaunce* from Boethius. It seems fitting to him, considering the monastic order he belonged to. *Suffisaunce* is a "virtue whereby each individual eschews materialism and remains content with only the necessities of life",<sup>115</sup> meaning that it is the virtue that can contrast the sins of greed and gluttony, like in "The Hound that Bare the Chese". The other topic, tyranny, is "a vice that belongs to individuals in power but infects the larger social body".<sup>116</sup> The reason for focusing on tyranny is probably due to his dislike of king Richard II, as Wheatley suggests.<sup>117</sup> In his fables it is possible to witness the characters falling prey to the temptation represented by the thirst for power and dominance on the weak: this is what happens, for example, in "The Tale of the Wolfe and the Lambe", or in "The Tale of the Hownde and the Shepe". I have decided to

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<sup>115</sup> Wheatley, "Introduction to *Isopes Fabules*", p. 1.

<sup>116</sup> Wheatley, "Introduction to *Isopes Fabules*", p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Wheatley, "Introduction to *Isopes Fabules*", p. 2.

focus the following part of this research on the first of the two topics Lydgate addresses, because I deem it to be the one that is better suited to my purpose. In the next pages I will provide some detailed examples of Lydgate's treatment of *suffisaunce* and the consequences for those who do not comply with this moral concept.

### **3.5. The sin of greed**

Lydgate, as can be expected from a Benedictine monk, is greatly concerned with morality. To the concept of *suffisaunce*, Lydgate dedicates several of his seven fables, and he opens and closes his collection with two fables who deal with this topic: "The Cok that Founde a Precyous Stone" and "The Hound that Bare the Chese". The former is about a rooster who is, by now, an old acquaintance: Lydgate admits that this is the same rooster that Marie de France and Chaucer have written about. He clearly says that the animal "ys of poettis callyd Chauncecleer" (l. 101). Chauncecleer, who is described as a beautiful specimen, like his Chaucerian version, has a crest which is "shape lyke a crowne, token of gret noblesse" (l. 58), a "voyce so clere" (l. 64) and a good knowledge of astronomy that allows him to sing always on time every morning. But, unlike Chaucer's Chanticleer, he is "ayene all vyces þe morall champion" (l. 95), especially against sloth. This Chauncecleer shares with Chaucer's character only his beautiful appearance. He is not a fool, nor a craven or a pedant intellectual, and even though he was evidently schooled and is as erudite as Chanticleer, he knows how to make use profitably and wisely of his knowledge. Proof of this is that one morning, as he is searching for food as he was "taught by nature" (l. 114), he finds a precious stone, a hyacinth. At this point, Lydgate takes a completely opposite direction from his sources. Aesop's and Marie de France's roosters claim that they have no need for such a precious treasure because they are already rich of intellect and do not need anything

else. They represent the self-satisfied fool who thinks to be an erudite and refuses any novelty because he already knows everything. But Lydgate's Chauncecleer becomes a positive example: he refuses to collect his finding because he has no need for such a precious jewel, albeit recognizing its worth, since the simple life he leads is everything he wants. He addresses himself to the stone:

Precyous stones longen to jewellers  
And to princes, when Þey lyst wel be seyn:  
To me more deynté in bernes or garners  
A lytell rewarde of corn or good greyn.  
To take Þys stone to me hit were but veyn:  
Set more store (I have hit of nature)  
Among rude chaffe to shrape for my pasture. (ll. 169-175)

Nature is what leads his life: he knows his place, which is not the same as a jeweller's or a prince's. All creatures have needs and wants which they should not overreach: a rooster does not know what to do with a precious stone, just like a poor man. Chauncecleer does not surrender to a temptation which would make many wise men falter and avoids the sin of greed. He will thus suffer no shame, nor guilt, and will go on with his life as it was before, happily. The final lines offer the conclusive moral of the fable:

The worldly man laboreth for rychesse,  
And on the worlde he set all hys intent.  
The vertuos man to avoyde all ydelnesse  
With suffisaunce holde hymself content.  
Eche man Þerfore, with suche as God haþ sent,  
Thanke Þe Lorde, in vertu kepe hem stable,  
Whyche ys conclusioun of Þys lytyll fable. (ll. 218-224)

Quite different is the attitude of Lydgate's last character towards the same temptation. The fable that concludes *Isopes Fabules* is about a dog who has managed to find some cheese for his meal. While he is crossing a bridge upon a small stream, he glances down at the water and sees his own reflection. He foolishly mistakes the image for another dog with what seems a bigger piece of cheese in his mouth. Greedily, he opens his mouth to try to snatch the cheese away from what he thinks to be his adversary's mouth. Of course, the only result is a loss of his meal. The last two stanzas are fully dedicated to the *moralitas*: those who covet too much, will have nothing left. The only thing we can do is to be happy with what we are given:

Ther is no man that lyvythe more at ease  
Than he that can withe lytill be content;  
Even contrary, he standithe evar in disseasse  
That in his hert with covetyce is blent;  
Withe suche fals etykes many a man is shent;  
Lyke as the hownd, not content withe one chese,  
Desyryd tweyne, bothe he dyd lese. (ll. 953-959)

The fable is composed of only four stanzas, and thus the moral constitutes half the fable. Considering that the first stanza is entirely used by Lydgate as a sort of prologue that introduces the sin of *covetyce*, the actual action occurs in the space of a few lines. Unlike all the other fables, here there is no rhetorical embellishment, no philosophical enquiry or commentary to the event. It would seem as if Lydgate were in haste to finish his work. However, I would suggest that the dog's foolishness is recounted in a sudden way in order to underline and amplify the fact that it can take only a very brief moment of greed to lose everything one has. The dog acts in contrast to Chauncecleer, who is wise enough to know his place. He bears the brunt of his guilt with a punishment he deserves for having surrendered to temptation, although Lydgate does not explicitly tell us if he will feel ashamed for his idiocy.



One last example of the importance of *suffisaunce* can be found in “The Tale of the Frogge and the Mouse”, the third fable of the collection. The mouse and the frog are neighbours, and one day the former invites the latter to visit his dwelling inside a mill. He shows him the simple but comfortable place he has built for himself, and shares with him the plain but nourishing food he can find inside the mill. He is very happy with his life and is content to live following the principle of *suffisaunce*:

“See,” quoth the mowse, ”Pys ys a mery lyfe.  
Here is my lordshyp and dominacion.  
I lyve here esyly out of noyse and stryfe.  
Thys cloos all hoole ys in my subjeccion.  
Suffisaunce is my possessione.  
As I have appetyte, I dyne late or sone,  
For Gyb, the catte, hathe here nothyng to done. (ll, 400-406)

For a poor man, he continues, there is nothing better than a small but comfortable hut. There he can live just as well as the rich merchant in his mansion, if he can be content with what he has and does not pine for more. As Chauncecleer did before him, he recognizes that there is a natural order in things, and one should not try to overstep the borders of his condition. The frog, on the other hand, is of an entirely different opinion, but hides his displeasure and contempt for the mouse’s simplicity. He states that what he cares for the most is good drinking, and with fake enthusiasm and hospitality, he reciprocates the mouse’s invitation, asking him to come and drink with him. To get to his house, they must cross a small river. He promises to his neighbour, inexperienced in swimming, that he will help the mouse across. His actual intention, though, is to let the mouse drown. However, while they are swimming, a hawk comes down from the sky and aims for the frog, because “fatte was þe frosshe, þe mouse sklender & lene; / the frosshe deuouryd because of hys fatnes” (ll. 498-499). While the mouse reaches safely the other bank of the river, the frog pays with his life a whole life of excesses:

he never restrained himself from temptations, eating and drinking his fill, and finally becoming an appetizing prey. Besides, his punishment is well deserved for his falsity as well: lines 501-502 state very clearly that the frog “for hys falsnes / gweron receuþ of unkyndenes”. According to Lydgate, fraud committed out of pure evil and ingratitude such as what the frog has planned is a dire sin against which very little can be done: “Preservatyf made for pestylence / But agayn fraude may be no defence” (ll. 510-511). He finally concludes with a moral sentence: Nature determines that “who useth fraude, with fraude shalbe quyt.” (l. 525).

### 3.6. Conclusions

Both Chaucer and Lydgate explore morality through animals in a rather interesting way. Chaucer, as I have shown, plays with the genre, producing the one-of-a-kind and difficult to frame text that I have had the chance to examine. Lydgate, on the other hand, remains more faithful to Aesop, but focuses his *Isopes Fabules* on two selected moral and sociopolitical topics.

Interestingly, Lydgate gives a name only to one of his characters, the rooster Chauncecleer, and he chooses for him the same name that Chaucer had. He may have wanted to pay a little homage to his great literary hero. It could also be another stratagem to give further authority to his work using some evident reference to the work of an affirmed writer, besides the classical source provided by Aesop. What is certain is that this character makes more than one comeback in Lydgate’s production: he is the protagonist of another of his minor poems, along with Pertelote.

Another element which attracted my attention is that, while Aesop, Marie de France, Chaucer, and Willem-die-Madoc-maecte all make large use of the figure of the fox, in Lydgate this animal never appears. Other animals which usually are his prey—the rooster, the sheep, the mouse—or his enemy—the wolf, the dog—are abundantly present in the *Fabules*. Lydgate, on the other hand, never makes use of the

animal symbol for the Devil in this collection. Perhaps his intention is to show how all the other creatures can fall prey to temptation without any other intervention than each other's. Sometimes, like the dog in the last fable, all they need is themselves and their own sinful nature. Like them, men and women must beware not only the evident tempting presence of the Fiend, but also, if not more, that of their own kind. The only animal which escapes punishment and behaves in an irreproachable way is Chauncecleer, who refuses the jewel to go on with his modest life. Paradoxically enough, the rooster is the animal which falls prey to the fox *par excellence*. Without the fox's intervention, he manages to avoid guilt and having a reason to be ashamed, relying on the good side of his nature that his Creator gave him. Humans, thus, can behave according to the morality, even though they cannot save themselves, especially from the major enemy. They will always need God's intervention to escape temptation.

## Chapter 4

### Henryson and Lydgate. Chaucerian poets in comparison.

#### 4.1. Henryson and the Chaucerian influence

As Rose-Marie Silkens writes, "there are only two collections of animal fables from the medieval period of English literature, and each represents a different extreme of literary worth".<sup>118</sup> This chapter will be dedicated to a general comparison between

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<sup>118</sup> Silkens, Rose-Marie, *Middle English Animal Fable. A Study in Genre*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1972, p. 54.

these two fable collections, *Isopes Fabules* by John Lydgate and *The Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian* by the Scottish poet Robert Henryson. I have discussed Lydgate's life and style in the previous chapter, offering some examples taken from his fable collection that were meant to illustrate the similarities with Chaucer and the themes he explores. Before starting the comparison between him and Lydgate, I intend to draw an outline of Henryson. I will dedicate a few pages to the elements that influence his work and to his historical background, to better understand the themes he explores in his work.

Henryson lived and worked in Scotland, in the second part of the 15th century, a generation after Lydgate. The exact years of Henryson's birth and death are not known: some records have allowed scholars to establish that he was probably a doctor in law and studied at the University of Glasgow, since his name is quoted in the muniments of the University, where he was incorporated in 1462. It is supposed that he died around 1490, but again, this is only a hypothesis.<sup>119</sup> There is no established date of composition for his fable collection *The Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian* either. Henryson, like Lydgate, is considered a Chaucerian poet. His debt to Chaucer becomes quite evident if one takes into consideration one of his major works, *The Testament of Cresseid*. In the beginning, he states clearly that he was reading a book "writtin be worthie Chaucer glorious / Of fair Creisseid and worthie Troylus" (ll. 40-42).<sup>120</sup> The book he is referring to is clearly *Troilus and Criseyde*. Additional proof is that *The Testament of Cresseid* is written in rhyme royal, like *The Testament of Cresseid*. Lydgate too made use of it for his work, intending to pay homage to Chaucer, so it is reasonable to assume that Henryson made use of this metric device for the same

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<sup>119</sup> McDiarmid, Matthew P., *Robert Henryson*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> All quotations from Henryson's works are taken from Henryson, Robert, *Poems*, edited by Denton Fox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

reason.

Henryson was undoubtedly thinking about Chaucer while working at his *Morall Fabillis* too. This can be inferred by some elements he inserts in some of the fables: for example, in “The Cock and the Fox” a cock named Chantecler is tricked by a fox to close his eyes and sing, and saves himself only by tricking the fox in turn. However, as underlined by Robert L. Kindrick, “Chaucerian influence is doubtless present, but it is a mistake to read *The Morall Fabillis* only as an imitation of or a footnote to *The Canterbury Tales*”.<sup>121</sup> Florence Ridley too adds to the claim that Henryson does not simply follow Chaucer but is also well aware of the fable tradition before the great English poet. She claims that Henryson’s debt to this long tradition is even stronger than that with Chaucer: he is clearly aware of the existence of the Reynard cycle and the didacticism of the Aesopic fable.<sup>122</sup> Finally, David K. Crowne brings convincing proofs that Henryson drew material and inspiration from Caxton’s *Historye of Reynard the Foxe* (1481) as well. This means that he is somehow indebted to the Dutch Reynaert’s saga as well since *Historye of Reynard the Foxe* puts together several branches of Reynaert’s deeds.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, Henryson makes large use of the figure of the fox, unlike Lydgate.

Nevertheless, Henryson seems to share with Chaucer not only a preference for rhyme royal and a passion for beast literature but also a sense of humour and irony. Just like Chaucer, Henryson seems interested in pointing out the moral inadequacy of his contemporaries and the social issues of his time using strong irony. As pointed out by Ridley, “[Henryson] sought not merely to amuse, but to teach others, and to

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<sup>121</sup> Henryson, Robert, *The Morall Fabillis of Aesop the Phrygian*, edited by Robert L. Kindrick, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Ridley, Florence H., “The Treatment of Animals in the Poetry of Henryson and Dunbar”, *The Chaucer Review*, 4 (1990), pp. 356-66, p. 360.

<sup>123</sup> Crowne, David K., “A Date for the Composition of Henryson's ‘Fables’”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 3 (1962), pp. 583–590, p. 583.

commiserate with them. [His] central concern is a moral one".<sup>124</sup> This is the reason why the morals of his fables are always clearly pointed out: sometimes he gives to the fables a reading that differs from what is given in the original source. He often changes them to make them fit the contemporary sociopolitical Scottish situation and takes such pain to explain them that he recurrently produces morals that are way longer than the fable itself. This feature is so evident that Denton Fox writes that Henryson's morals "sometimes seem to have little genuine connection with the fables themselves".<sup>125</sup> This is also due to the fact that Henryson, as George Clark points out, is not merely translating the fables but recreating them, outgrowing the artistic and intellectual limitations of their traditional form. The simplicity of the Latin or French original excludes the possibility to give a complex moral judgment, but the world created by Henryson "makes easy black and white evaluations inadequate, a facile assumption of individual responsibility unconvincing".<sup>126</sup> In the next section, I will show how Henryson manages to shine a light on the problems that afflict his country, giving a moral evaluation of those who cause them.

#### **4.2. Henryson, Aesop, and the social value of the *Moral Fabillis***

As Lydgate does in his *Isopes Fabules*, Henryson too states his presence as the narrator, making it clear that he is not Aesop. What he is doing is "ane maner of translatioun" (l. 32), as he states in the Prologue, revising Aesop's work. Clark suggests that the narrator works rather as a reporter than as an author, and the two figures are clearly distinguished. The author is still Aesop, and this must be read as part of the usual convention which saw medieval poets as lacking the authority needed

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<sup>124</sup> Ridley, p. 360.

<sup>125</sup> Fox, Denton, "Henryson's Fables", *ELH*, 29 (1962), pp. 337-356, p. 338.

<sup>126</sup> Clark, George, "Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transformed", *ELH*, 43 (1976), p. 2.

to be considered authors.<sup>127</sup> Henryson indeed calls Aesop “My author” (l. 43), “nobill clerk Esope” (l. 57), and puts himself in a subordinate position. He meets him in a dream in the prologue of “The Mouse and the Lion”. It is a hot day of June, and Henryson seeks shelter in the shadow of a hawthorn. He falls asleep and he sees “the fairest man that ever befoir [he] saw” (l. 1348). The man is richly garbed and has the appearance of a nobleman. Most importantly, though, he is clearly a writer. He is sporting all the objects that a writer needed for his work

Ane roll off paper in his hand he bair,  
Ane swannis pen stikand under his eir,  
Ane inkhorne, with ane prettie gilt pennair,  
Ane bag off silk, all at his belt he weir. (ll. 1356-1359)

The man is clearly Aesop. The Scottish poet reveals his admiration for him and gives the Greek fabulist the title of “Meister” (l. 1377). Henryson then asks him to tell him a fable. Clark notices: “the narrator has been reporter [...] to four of the preceding six fables, but he immediately welcomes Aesop as the author “that all thir Fabillis wrate” (1379)”.<sup>128</sup> Being a “reporter” allows Henryson to give his moral stand on the content of the fables, and to comment on the events managing to be simultaneously a protagonist and an external observer. Edward Wheatley notices how in the prologue Henryson manages to play the role of a “learned but modest man playing the student before his superiors while addressing spiritual concerns superior to his listeners”.<sup>129</sup> The fables this learned man is putting in front of us “are at once Aesop's “ffeinyeit fabils” and the narrator's truth, even his own experience”.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, Henryson’s experience is definitely present in this collection. He manages to turn these fables into

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<sup>127</sup> Clark, p. 2.

<sup>128</sup> Clark, p. 3.

<sup>129</sup> Wheatley, Edward, “Scholastic Commentary and Robert Henryson's ‘Morall Fabillis’: The Aesopic Fables”, *Studies in Philology*, vol. 91 (1994), pp. 70–99, p. 78.

<sup>130</sup> Clark, p. 4.

a reprimand against the sociopolitical situation of 15th century Scotland, a topic that is dear to him.

Many social and political events took place during his life. The Stewart monarchs tried to consolidate their power at the expense of the nobles and the middle class, which was becoming increasingly stronger. But the Scottish kings failed because of a long series of misfortunes: James I was imprisoned in England and eventually assassinated. James II was killed by a malfunctioning cannon during a siege. James III was captured and imprisoned by his own nobles and subsequently killed. Henryson probably died before the death of James IV, a king who gave importance to art and literature, hence he did not manage to appreciate fully the positive consequences of his wise ruling. The ancient and constant conflict with England contributed to the impoverishment of the Scottish state. The poor were, as always, the first to suffer the consequences of wars and corruption.<sup>131</sup> This appears particularly clear in “The Trial of the Fox” and in “The Sheep and the Dog”, two fables that have reinforced in scholars the idea that the Scotsman must have been an expert of the law.<sup>132</sup> In these two fables, and in almost all the others, Henryson openly condemns the vices and sins which have led to all the troubles of his country, greed and prevarication above all. Clerk claims that “the intention of the fables, their very origin is simply, categorically, and exclusively to reprove man's depravity”.<sup>133</sup> This is proved at the very beginning: in the first stanza of the prologue Henryson offers the reason why he has written these fables:

And als the caus quhy that thay first began  
Wes to repreif the of thi misleving,  
O man, be figure of ane uther thing. (ll. 5-7)

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<sup>131</sup> “Scotland in the 15th Century”, Britannica, Encyclopaedia. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998, *sub voce*.

<sup>132</sup> Kindrick, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> Clark, p. 4.



According to him, there is no better tool to achieve his aim than fables: not only “Their polite termes of sweit rhetore / Richt plesand ar unto the eir of man” (ll. 3-4), but they have animals as main characters as well. Animals shine a light on mankind’s horrible actions: Henryson has no doubt that “mony men in operatioun / ar like to beistis in conditioun” (ll. 48-49). In fiction, beasts can behave like men, but men, especially his countrymen, behave worse than beasts:

Na mervell is ane man be lyke ane beist  
Quhilk lufis ay carnall and foull delyte  
That schame cannot him renye nor arreist  
Bot takis all the lust and appetyte  
Quhilk throw custum and the daylie ryte  
Syne in the mynd sa fast is radicate  
That he in brutal beist is transformate. (ll. 50-56)

#### **4.3. Henryson and Lydgate: the theme of tyranny, similarities and differences**

Many scholars underline how Henryson’s work is indebted not only to Chaucer, and to Aesop for the *Fabillis*, but to Lydgate as well. Marshall W. Stearns clearly states: “Henryson probably knew the works of Lydgate in general and his *Fables* in particular”.<sup>134</sup>

The first thing that a reader encounters in both collections is obviously the prologue. Both Henryson and Lydgate feign modesty, using the topos of the *excusatio non petita*. They claim that what they are doing is a simple translation of Aesop’s work, and their only intent is to give some useful moral lessons. However, as underlined by Silkens, their attitude towards their works is different: Lydgate insists on the pleasure that is given not by poetry itself, but by the sweet fruit it offers, wisdom. According to the monk, “wisdom is more in prise then gold in cofers / to hem that have savour in lettrure” (ll. 1-2). He hopes that his audience will learn from what he is writing,

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<sup>134</sup> Marshall W. Stearns, “A Note on Henryson and Lydgate”, *Modern Language Notes*, 2 (1945), pp. 101-103, p. 101.

because the moral messages that his fables can convey are like “ryche saphyres and charbuncles full ryall” (l. 23) that one can find only under the ground, or “perlys whyte, clere, and orientall” (l. 26) that are often hidden in small black shells. The fables’ morals are just as precious, and like the precious materials he has named, they must be extracted with some effort. Henryson, on the other hand, praises the beauty of the fable as a literary genre and the pleasure it can give: words, even when they are pure fiction, “plesand ar unto the eir of man” (l. 4) and this can become an apology for the triviality of literature.<sup>135</sup> This triviality is not necessarily negative: the mind that is “ay diligent / in ernistfull thochtis and in studying” (ll. 24-25) needs distractions, or it might ruin itself and lose all her power, like a bowstring that is always stretched.

Both poets place at the beginning of their collections the same fable, “The Cock and the Jasp”. Lydgate’s version has been discussed in the previous chapter: his rooster is a positive character, who refuses the precious stone he has found because he follows the principle of *suffisaunce* and the order of things that nature has imposed on him: a cock does not know what to do with a jewel, unlike a rich jeweller or a prince. In Henryson’s version, the cock is a fool. The key to understanding this different use of the same figure is situated in the moral: since Henryson gives the precious stone the meaning of “perfite prudence and cunning”<sup>136</sup> (l. 128), refusing it means being a presumptuous idiot. The rooster, like his counterpart in Lydgate, claims that such precious treasure is not fit for him, but he does not so out of modesty:

To grit lordis thocht thow be leif and deir,  
I lufe fer better thing of les availl,  
As draf or corne to fill my tume intrail. (ll. 89-91)

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<sup>135</sup> Silkens, p. 57.

<sup>136</sup> All quotations from Lydgate are taken from *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, part II*, edited by Henry Noble MacCracken and Merriam Sherwood, London: Oxford University Press: 1961.

The only thing he cares about in life is to find food, and he believes he is wise because he is content with what he has got. In truth, he is being blind to the precious lesson that is being offered to him because he is a glutton. Silkens explains: “the cock’s greed for food makes him blind, and his confidence in his wisdom is thus made all the more ridiculous for the truth that he misses”.<sup>137</sup> This animal believes he is escaping the temptation of giving in to his greed, but actually commits another dire sin: that of pride. Henryson and Lydgate manage to convey two completely different messages and to treat two different topics using the same fable. Lydgate shows a modest man acting wisely in front of unexpected wealth, Henryson shows a fool who refuses wisdom because he believes he has it already.

In other instances, the two poets use the same fable to tackle the same subject. One of the main topics both authors explore is what Lydgate calls tyranny, the actions that evil rulers and powerful men perform on the weak to establish their cruel dominance. Tyranny is faced —albeit not referred to with the same name— by Henryson too, and he is concerned with the consequences that the evil actions of rulers can have on the life of their subjects. One fable that shows quite clearly the strong feelings of both poets towards this issue is “The Wolf and the Lamb”. Henryson’s version is longer than Lydgate’s and has a more articulated moral. In the first half, the plot is the same in the two renditions: in the beginning, both show a wolf and a lamb drinking from the same stream. The wolf tries to take advantage of the situation by deceit and prevarication. He tries to blame the lamb of soiling his water, but the lamb answers that he is downstream, so he could not possibly be touching any of the water the wolf is drinking. At this point, Lydgate’s wolf, angered, kills the lamb and eats it. Henryson’s wolf performs a second attempt to find a reason behind the crime he wants

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<sup>137</sup> Silkens, p. 76

to commit: he claims that it was the lamb's father who had soiled his water the previous year. The lamb underlines how it is not fair to blame a father's faults on his offspring. At this point, the wolf simply devours him. In the second exchange between the two animals the lamb proposes a reasonable solution: go to trial to establish who is in the right.

Set me ane lauchfull court; I sall compeir  
Befoir the lyoun, lord and leill justice,  
And be my hand I oblis me rycht heir  
That I sall byde ane unsuspect assyis.  
This is the law, this is the instant wyis;  
Ye suld pretend thairfoir ane summondis mak  
Aganis that day, to gif ressoun and tak. (ll. 2686-2792)

The vicious wolf, however, does not listen to the lamb's words, and replies with fake logic:

"Na," quod the wolff, "thou wald intruse ressoun  
Quhair wrang and reif suld duell in propertie.  
That is ane poynt and part of fals tressoun,  
For to gar reuth remane with crueltie.  
Be Goddis woundis, fals tratour, thow sall de  
For thy trespas, and for thy fatheris als." (ll. 2693-2698)

The lesson we learn from this fable, concludes Henryson, is that there are three kinds of "wolves" that rule Scotland. The first is corrupt judges and lawyers who twist the law in order to keep the status quo and allow the powerful to mistreat the poor. The second is the rich who already have plenty of wealth but still do everything they can to get more. The third are noblemen, who torment and vex their tenants even when these have nothing left to give them. The tone of these last stanzas is aggressive, and the three kinds of people are addressed directly with a series of pressing questions, aimed at making them feel ashamed of their sins. They are among the main causes of Scotland's dire situation, and the poet prays God "all sic wolfis to banes of the land" (l. 2776).

Lydgate too uses this fable to address issues of a political nature. Since he is a

monk, he tackles the matter with a more religious approach. After the wolf devours the lamb, he comments:

The lambe was sleyn, for he seyde soth.  
Thus was law tornyd to ravyne  
Dome execute by the wolfis tothe,  
By whyche lawe Naboth lost hys vyne,  
Whylom commandyd by law, whyche ys dyvyne,  
No ravenous beste (the Bible doth devyse)  
Shuld be offred to God in sacryfyse. (ll. 295-301)

The whole stanza is composed of religious and biblical elements: the lamb is not only one of the two main characters of the fable, but also one of the symbols of Christ. The parallelism instituted with the episode of Naboth, whose vineyard was stolen by Ahab and Jezebel through false accusations (1 Kings 21), highlights how greed can bring death and injustice, but also underlines that those who give in to it will eventually be punished. A few stanzas later, Lydgate states that the consolation of the poor is that evil people will be damned: “as men deserve, they receve theyr guerdon. / onrepentaunte the tyraunt goth to hell.” (ll. 344/345).

What perhaps strikes as most different between Henryson’s and Lydgate’s attitude towards prevarication, though, emerges from the very first lines of the monk’s version. In the second stanza he writes: “Who hath most myght the febler gladly sewes / The pore hathe few his party to socour.” (ll. 241-242). These words seem to suggest that, while it is a moral duty to condemn evil actions and to hope for punishment for those who commit them, this is the natural order of things. The rich and powerful will always torment those who are in their power, just as the “grete pykes” quoted in the line before devour “smaller fysshe”, and a poor lamb will inevitably succumb to a “strong lyon” at line 235. This is how it has always been, and what can console us is the thought that we will be rewarded in the afterlife. This is not surprising, after all, coming by a monk. Henryson, on the other hand, feels much more anger about the issue, and spares no words against the “thre kynd of wolfis”, who deserve a legal

punishment as well as a religious one. Henryson and Lydgate use the same fable to expose the same issue: the treatment reserved to the poor and the weak by the ruling class. They use two sets of imagery taken from two different fields —respectively, legislative and religious— to achieve the same aim. Both men were concerned with justice, albeit of two different natures: Lydgate with the divine one, Henryson with the earthly one. Still, the final accusation towards unjust and evil men is the same and leaves no doubts that they are “war than ane wolf”. (Henryson, l. 2736.)

Another fable that displays the different mindsets of the two poets is “The Dog and the Sheep”. The essential plot is once again fairly similar: a dog claims that a sheep has never given back a loaf of bread that he had lent to him, and in the end the dog will manage to prevail on the accused innocent. However, the details are quite different. Henryson’s version once again is the more complex and richer. The number of animals that appear in his rendition is larger: at the trial against the sheep there is a wolf as the judge, a fox as the notary, a raven as a summoner, a kite and a vulture as prosecutors, and a bear and a badger as arbiters. From the beginning it is clear that it will not end in favour of the sheep: the wolf is “fraudfull” (l. 1150) and the raven “pykit had full mony scheipis ee” (l. 1161). The rest of the animals are of no better avail to the sheep, since Henryson claims that “they had na conscience” (l. 1180). The sheep tries to defend himself: he protests that the wolf has slain many of his relatives, so he is evidently biased against him, and all other attendants are by nature his “ennemies mortall” (l. 1197) too. The outcome is inevitable:

This cursit court, corruptit all for meid,  
Aganis gude faith, gude law, and conscience,  
For this fals doig pronuncit the sentence. (ll. 1241-1243)

The sheep must pay the dog for the bread, which he did not even borrow, has to sell all his fleece and remains naked. As always, Henryson’s moral is explicit and harsh, and he names many public figures that were often guilty of accepting bribes, such as

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the “schiref stout” (l. 1265) and the “fals crowner” (l. 1272). The last words are spoken by the sheep, who is now left to shiver in the freezing cold. His plea lasts almost four stanzas and is directed to God, to whom he asks why he has to suffer and to punish the evil and corrupted men of law, tracing everything back to the “cursit syn of covetice” (l. 1300).

This sin is one of the topics Lydgate explores as well, as it is the other side of the coin to the virtue of *suffisaunce*. The sheep in his fable suffers the same fate as his counterpart in Henryson’s fable. The dog has brought as witnesses a “faithful wolf” (l. 592) and “genti foul, the kyte” (l. 593). By using these positive words in association with his witnesses, he is already manipulating the judge. It is a detail that Lydgate, erudite as he is, has inserted knowing what power speech can have. However, the two witnesses and the dog himself “al thre were false by oon assent” (l. 617) and perjure themselves. The legal terms and the trial are still present, but they are not as accurate and lengthily discussed as they are in Henryson. What Lydgate cares most about is the moral aspect. The kite and the wolf help the dog to win the trial because they hope for personal gain, which they earn shortly after: the sheep, who has to sell his wool, as in Henryson’s version, dies of exposure and they can eat his corpse.

The sheepe thus deyde, his body al to-rent;  
The ravenous wolf the kareyne did assaile,  
The hound recovered his part by jugement,  
The false kyte cast hym nat to faile  
To have a repast upon his adventaile.  
Thus in this world by extorcion verliche  
Poore folk be devoured alwey by the riche. (631-637)

Lydgate openly feels pity for the sheep, as testified by lines 610-611, in which he wishes the three perjurers to be hanged for their greed and malice. Again, though, the underlying message is that what happened is inevitable: poor folk will “alwey” be devoured by the rich. This is reinforced in the next stanza, where once again the metaphor of the big fish devouring the small ones appears as a natural and inescapable

course of events. What seems to concern him most is the fact that perjurers and liars offend God: they are an abomination in his sight and as such they must be treated. He concludes by asserting that the evil characters of this fable have given in to the temptation offered by wealth and gluttony, and deserve eternal punishment for their sins and their legal guilt. They now belong to the Devil:

Who is forsworn settith God behynde  
And settith the fiend in ful possessioun  
Of soule and body, under his dampnacioun. (ll. 745-747)

To conclude, Henryson and Lydgate both openly condemn tyrants and bullies. The two poets have different concerns regarding the outcome of their evil actions: Lydgate claims they will be punished in the afterlife, Henryson wishes that they could all suffer the punishment envisaged by human law. They agree on the fact that the temptation offered by material possessions has caused great damage for mankind, and those who must suffer the consequences of it are the innocents and poor. They are shamed by those who should feel ashamed in the first place: for a character such as the sheep losing all his wool is not only a matter of survival, but a mark of shame as well. It is the unjustly imposed proof of his guilt in the eyes of society, a proof that the evildoers should be bearing.

#### **4.4. The figure of the fox in Henryson**

Lydgate, as stated in the previous chapter, does not make use of the fox character. In Henryson's fables, on the other hand, this animal makes more than one comeback. I think that it is worth dedicating this section to what this character means in Henryson's work, since it is an important figure in most beast literature analysed so far.

The fox appears in five of the thirteen fables; in three he is associated with the wolf. In almost all of these instances, the devious fox —named not Reynaert or



Russell, but Lowrence— tricks the obtuse wolf. One of the most significant examples is constituted by the fable “The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger”. The fable opens with the wolf who obliges the fox to serve him and help him to steal food, a clear metaphor for the arrogant lord who makes his servant obey him in everything. Initially, Lowrence the fox tries to resist the wolf’s order, inventing all sorts of excuses. Interestingly enough, these justifications all make clear that Lowrence possesses a certain degree of self-awareness: the other animals all know he is devious, and have learned to recognize him by his red coat, his pointed ears, and his scent. He knows that he will not be able to trick anyone because everyone has already been deceived by him at least once. The wolf, though, is obstinately obtuse: he is too proud of his idea of involving a smart creature such as the fox to admit that his plan might have some weak point. Thus, Lowrence must oblige, and devises a plot that appeared in *Ysengrimus* as well: he pretends to be dead on the side of the road, so that they will be able to trick a passer-by into stopping. So it happens: a cadger, with a cart full of herrings, sees the apparently dead fox and immediately decides to collect his pelt to make himself a pair of gloves. He loads the fox on the cart and takes off again. The following scene is comical: while the cadger sings happily for the unexpected precious finding, the fox starts throwing out all the fish. Meanwhile, the wolf is following them and collects the herrings. Once the cadger realises that he is losing his load, he threatens the fox with a good beating, a “neck-herring” (l. 2089), but Lowrence runs quickly away. The cadger cannot do anything: he is being punished for giving in to the temptation of personal gain and has nothing left to do but to feel shame for falling into such a stupid trap. In the meantime, Lowrence goes back to the wolf. The latter is happy with the loot, but not completely satisfied: he had heard the cadger saying the word “neck-herring” and now believes that on the cadger’s cart there was also a much bigger

herring, heavier than all the others they have stolen put together. Lowrence immediately takes advantage of the wolf's stupidity and encourages him:

"Schir," said the foxe, "that I can tell trewlie:  
He said the nekhering wes in till the creill."  
"Kennis thou that hering?" "Ye, schir, I ken it weill,  
And at the creill mouth I had it thryis but dout:  
The wecht off it neir tit my tuskis out.

"Now suithlie, schir, nicht we that hering fang,  
It wald be fische to us thir fourtie dayis." (ll. 2114- 2120)

Like any lord, the wolf cares only about getting the most prestigious and richer prize and proving himself more capable than the fox. In order to get the giant herring, he tries to play the same trick as the fox, lying down on the street and pretending to be dead. The cadger, who is still going back and forth in search of the fox, sees him. The man now is much warier: the first thing he does is hitting the wolf on the head with his staff, and the animal barely manages to escape alive. The fable ends with the fox laughing at the sight of the beaten wolf and running away with all the fish.

Both wolf and cadger are to be blamed: it is easy to find the reason for their failure in Lowrence's deceitfulness, but the truth is that both are greedy and, according to Silkens, "stupid in their greed [...]. Both these characters believe in Lowrence's ruse; they are blinded not by the fox, but by their own shortcomings".<sup>138</sup> Once again, those who fall for the fox's trick become a perfect example of how mankind is perfectly capable of falling into temptation, and would do so even without the devil's help.

The moral makes explicit who the three protagonists stand for: the wolf is the greedy lord, the fox is the world and the cadger is Death. The world lets the rich man believe he is its master and makes him thirst for gold. In the end, though, Death will come for everyone, but it will come faster for those who covet too much. Every greedy man must beware:

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<sup>138</sup> Silkens, p. 63.

The micht of gold makis mony men sa blind,  
That settis on avarice thair felicitie,  
That thay foryet the cadgear cummis behind  
To stryke thame, of quhat stait sa ever thay be:  
Quhat is mair dirk than blind prosperitie?  
Quhairfoir I counsell mychtie men to haif mynd  
Of the nekhering, interpret in this kynd. (ll. 2224-2230)

In another fable, “The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman”, the fox has the same role as Reynaert: he is a trickster who instigates everyone else to perform shameful or wrong acts but never gets punished. He and the wolf want to steal some oxen from a farmer. The wolf, following the advice of the fox, tries to persuade the man that he had promised to him a few oxen in the past. The poor farmer, confused, asks for an impartial witness, and at this point, Lawrence the fox makes its appearance on the stage. Lawrence persuades the farmer that the wolf will not relent, but he has a solution: the man needs only to give him something in exchange. The farmer is quick to understand the fox’s word, and promises him some of his hens as a bribe:

“Schir,” said the man, “ye sall have sex or sevin  
Richt off the fattest hennis off all the floik -  
I compt not all the laif, leif me the coik.” (ll. 2326-2327)

The fox then tells the wolf that the farmer has settled for a solution: if the wolf will renounce his claim, he will receive a huge wheel of cheese, a “cabok” (l. 2353). The wolf accepts, and he and the fox go in search of the man’s farm. Lawrence, who has obviously obtained no promise of cheese from the farmer, stops at a well in front of a house. Pointing at the moon’s reflection on the water, he tells the wolf that the cheese is in the well. The wolf falls for the trick and lowers the fox inside one of the two buckets to take the cheese for him. Lawrence pretends he is unable to come up: the wolf has to get down to help the fox to lift the cheese up. The obtuse wolf, blinded by greed, accepts and lowers himself down inside of the other bucket, but realizes that he has made a mistake when he sees that Lawrence, meanwhile, is getting up in his

bucket. Astonished, he asks the fox why he is going down while Lowrence is going up. Lowrence cruelly mocks him: "thus fairis it off fortoun: / as ane cummis up, scho quheillis ane uther doun." (ll. 2418-2419).

Once again, the wolf represents the oppressing lord who tries to take away everything he can from poor and hardworking people, even with deceit. Henryson gives the fox a role which this animal has often been associated with, the Devil:

The foxe, the feind I call into this cais,  
Arctand ilk man to ryn unrychteous rinkis,  
Thinkand thairthrow to lok him in his linkis. (ll. 2431-2433)

Following his logic, the farmer is "ane godlie man" (l. 2434) that the Devil has tried to lead astray. The hens that the man has promised to Lowrence are penance, necessary to avoid the further spreading of any evil. The well in which the wolf is trapped is hell. Finally, the cheese: this stands for covetousness. Henryson warns against this dire sin, which is merely an illusion —just as the moon's reflection— that can make men perform the vilest and most foolish acts. Those who expose themselves for such a reason will be punished by God:

Wa worth the well of that wickit vyce,  
For it is all bot fraud and fantasie,  
Dryvand ilk man to leip in the buttrie  
That dounwart drawis unto the pane of hell -  
Christ keip all Christianis from that wickit well! (ll. 2450-2453)

One final fable worth mentioning in regard to the fox's role is "The Trial of the Fox". This is the longest and perhaps the most humorous of the whole collection. The opening reveals that this is one of the fables for which Henryson possibly drew material from Reynaert's saga. The lion king holds court and calls all animals, and at this point the poet takes evident pleasure in naming all the creatures who attend: five full stanzas are dedicated to a long list of them, both real and fantastic. They are so many that Henryson stops the list and concludes: "and mony kynd off beistis I couth

not know, / befor thair lord the lyoun thay loutit law.” (ll. 920-921). Among them, of course, there is the fox. Unlike his Dutch counterpart, this fox has come to court, but is equally afraid: he suspects they have all gathered to capture and execute him. The king realises that not all animals are present: a “gray stude meir” (l. 991) is missing. He commands Lowrence to go and fetch her, accompanied by the wolf who is “cunning in clergie” (l. 997). When they find the mare, she claims she has a license that allows her to ignore the king’s call, hidden right under one of her hooves. The wolf, obtuse despite all his “practik of the chanceliary” (l. 1014), bows down to look at the license, only to receive a blow on the head by the mare’s hard hoof. While the wolf rests for a bit, Lowrence finds a few lambs and kills and devours one of them. Then he goes back to court with the wolf. Once there, Lowrence jokes about the wolf having finally completed his degree, now that he has the theologian’s red cap. Everyone laughs, and it would seem as if the story is about to end. At this point, however, there is a plot twist: a ewe, the mother of the lamb slaughtered by Lowrence, tells the court what the fox has done. The real trial starts only at this point, and it is quite fast: Lowrence’s snot is still wet with the lamb’s blood, and everyone knows that he is evil and tricky. He is found guilty and is hanged. This detail is particularly interesting since Lowrence is the only fox so far that is actually caught and punished for his crimes and sins. In the moral, which establishes a series of complicated associations between each character and the concept they actually represent, Henryson says “this tod I likkin to temptationis” (l. 1132). It could be inferred that, according to Henryson, temptation is a powerful evil force, but it can be defeated if one tries hard enough.

#### 4.5. Conclusions

Henryson's and Lydgate's collections share a number of contents and themes. The great concern that seems to guide both poets is social and moral justice, and their choice of genre, animal fable, is without any doubt motivated by it. Animals, with their traditionally imposed characteristics, offer plenty of chances to expose mankind's vices, virtues, behaviours, and dynamics in relationships. They provide a way to condemn those who commit sins and crimes without explicitly making the name of any political figure, even though it is true that Henryson seems to have no fear to point the finger at some specific figures, as he does in "The Sheep and the Dog".

The two collections show some significant differences as well. I have pointed out how Lydgate, being a man of the Church, focuses on the moral faults and sins of greedy people and tyrants, underlining how they will receive a heavenly punishment. His imagery is largely taken from the Bible, his style is highly rhetorical and his tone is overall grave. Very rarely does he make any attempt at obtaining a comic effect, even though in the prologue he had excused himself because his work is of a trivial nature, and declares that his only hope is "to do pleasaunce to theym that shall it rede" (l. 38). It has already been pointed out that Lydgate does not want to make of his collection just a pleasant series of tales that one can read to pass the time. His aim is primarily, if not exclusively, didactic. His excuses for the triviality of the chosen literary genre are nothing more than a topos. Henryson, on the other hand, has a different attitude towards his *Fabillis*. It is true that he wants to point out the hardship that poor people in Scotland have to go through, and how it is all due to the greed of men of power, and in this he can be compared to Lydgate. However, as Silkens notices, "Henryson teaches *and* delights: the *Moral Fabillis* are moral, but they are also excellent fables, excellent narrative poems, and there can be no doubt that Henryson

intended them to be such”.<sup>139</sup> One needs just to read them to realise that this is true: Henryson’s finesse is never pedantic, never exaggeratedly rhetorical. It is clear that he wants to make the audience laugh in many of his fables: there is no lack of jokes and puns. He is well aware of the truth that it is more profitable “amangis ernist to ming ane merie sport, / To light the spreit and gar the tyme be schort.” (ll. 20-21). Another substantial difference that has emerged is the use of some characters: a good instance is the cock of the first fable of both collections. The meaning of this character, and how we must hold it in consideration, change drastically when we take into consideration the message expressed by the moral. Another example of this is the character of the fox: completely absent in Lydgate, it appears in Henryson as one of the main characters, retaining his traditional role of trickster, and of a tempting devil.

Keeping in mind all the differences in style and in the cultural and social background between the two poets, it is hardly surprising to find so many different elements in their works. What is more interesting is the fact that they both decided to use the fable as a form for their works. Once again, it appears evident that fables were a famous and common genre and part of the education of every literate person. This genre found many diverse applications, based on the aim of the user and the message they wanted to convey.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Esopet, a Dutch fable collection**

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<sup>139</sup> Silkens, p. 56.

## 5.1. The authorship of the collection and its main features

I wish to conclude my research with the analysis of one last work, the Dutch fable collection called *Esopet*. I have dedicated the previous chapter to the comparison between two fable collections of English and Scottish origins composed in the 15th century. What I am doing in this chapter is not only a shift in place but also back in time: *Esopet* was allegedly composed in the second half of the 13th century. I have decided to insert this chapter as last because, despite its date of creation, due to its nature of fable collection and for the themes it touches, *Esopet* shares similarities with Henryson's and Lydgate's works more than with *Van de Vos Reynaerde* and with *Ysengrimus*. Placing its analysis at this point in my research allows me to establish parallelisms with the other two fable collections I have examined so far.

*Esopet* is traditionally attributed to the two poets Calfstaf and Noydekijn. However, the paternity of the collection is anything but certain. Scholars have always attributed it to them because these two figures are quoted as *Esopet*'s authors in two different works: *Spieghel Historiae* by Jacob van Maerlant and *Leken Spieghel* by Jan van Boendale. Especially the first one, composed in the last decade of the 13th century, has always constituted a strong point for those who saw in Calfstaf and Noydekijn the true authors. Jacob van Maerlant (c. 1230 – c. 1300) is among the most prominent Dutch poets. He claims that Aesop's verses "hevet Calfstaff end Noydekijn / Ghedicht in rime schone ende fijn".<sup>140</sup> This claim was reinforced by Jan van Boendale a few years later, but as Davide Bertagnolli underlines, one must remember that van Boendale was a great admirer of van Maerlant. It is not unreasonable to say that he was probably just following his hero's theory.<sup>141</sup> There are no other known records of

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<sup>140</sup> "have been put by Calfstaf and Noydekijn / in beautiful and fine rhymes". Maerlant, Jacob, van, *Spieghel historiael*, edited by Philip Utenbroecke, Lodewijk van Velthem, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1863, part I, book III, chapter III, ll. 11-12. My translation.

<sup>141</sup> *Esopet: una Raccolta di Favole in Nelandese Medio*, edito da Davide Bertagnolli, Trento: Tangram, 2017, p. 41.



the two poets, and no other piece of information about their alleged existence. Another strong element of doubt is that, while it is true that Maerlant quotes the name of the fable collection, it is all but certain that he is referring to this work in particular. As Jan te Winkel explains, “esopet” was a general term, meaning “small Aesop”, used to call any collection of fables of Aesopic nature, of which there were plenty during the late Middle Ages.<sup>142</sup> The debate among scholars has been going on for a long time and is continuing still today.

*Esopet* is the only existing fable collection in Middle Dutch literature. It consists of sixty-seven fables, and there is only one surviving manuscript, probably dating from a century later than its actual composition. The fact that there are no other manuscripts makes it difficult for scholars to establish not only who the author is, but also who the intended audience might have been. Bertagnolli suggests that this collection is to be ascribed to the long tradition of translations and commentaries of the Latin prose texts such as the *Elegiac Romulus*.<sup>143</sup> Indeed the fables included in *Esopet* are very faithful to the original, both in form and style: short narrations with animals as main characters, a simple plot, a final explicit moral. This does not mean that they are a simple translation: the author rewrote the fables using rhyming couplets and eliminated all introductions, which had the function to anticipate the *moralitas*. Because of these characteristics, which are found in Marie de France’s work as well, Hendrik van Wijn suggests that the *Esopet* could simply be a Dutch translation of the French collection.<sup>144</sup> This theory, however, was disproven a few years later by Jacob Arnold Clignett: the differences between the two fable collections are too many and

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<sup>142</sup> Winkel, Jan, te, *Esopet. Opnieuw naar het handschrift uitgegeven en van eene inleiding en woordenlijst voorzien door Dr. Jan te Winkel*, Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1881, p. 4.

<sup>143</sup> Bertagnolli, p. 11.

<sup>144</sup> Wijn, Hendrik, van, *Historische en Letterkundige Avondstonden*, Amsterdam: Johannes Allart, 1800, p. 263.

too significant: *Esopet* is longer, has a different prologue, and the fable order is not even remotely similar.<sup>145</sup>

While it is true that the fables included in *Esopet* are quite traditional in their form, they do present some differences compared to the classical fable. The most evident change is the fact that some of the animals have a name. Bertagnolli underlines how animals in fables usually do not have a name because what matters is their actions: their primary purpose is to act as symbols for mankind's behaviour.<sup>146</sup> However, in this case, this is a rather meaningful detail: the names given to *Esopet*'s characters are the same that appear in the various branches of the Reynaerd's saga and in *Van de Vos Reynaerde* as well. This indicates the existence of a connection between the fables and the stories about the fox Reynaerd. Indeed, a recurring character, appearing in seven fables, is the fox.<sup>147</sup> Even more interesting, this character is associated with the name Reynaert in most cases. For example, in the fable "The Eagle Kidnaps the Fox's Cubs", when the fox manages to set his cubs free with an ingenious ploy, it is said that he played a "Reinaerts spele" (l. 16).<sup>148</sup> However, Bertagnolli also states that while the connection is evident, it is not possible to establish whether the anonymous author knew about *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, since there is no clear date of composition for *Esopet*.<sup>149</sup> The fable collection could have been composed anytime between 1250 and 1350, the year in which its only surviving manuscript was produced. H. K. Heeroma suggests that the use of names appearing in *Van de Vos Reynaerde* depends on the fact that *Esopet*'s author knew about the various previous branches of the saga and its

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<sup>145</sup> Clignett, Jacob Arnold, *Bydragen tot de Oude Nederlandsche Letterkunde*, 's-Gravenhage: Erve J. Thierrij en C. Mensing en zoon, 1819, pp. 9-13.

<sup>146</sup> Bertagnolli, p. 49.

<sup>147</sup> Bertagnolli, p. 52.

<sup>148</sup> "Reynaert's trick". All translations of *Esopet*'s verses are mine.

<sup>149</sup> Bertagnolli, p. 53.

forebears. Some of them were already circulating since the late 12th century, like *Ysengrimus*.<sup>150</sup>

In any case, in contrast to Willem-die-Maedoc-maecte, the author of *Esopet* had in mind a didactic aim for his work. In the general prologue, he states very clearly that he wants “bedieden / die nature van den lieden” (ll. 3-4),<sup>151</sup> through animal characters: he will “exemple maken / van beesten, recht of si sprachen” (ll. 17-18).<sup>152</sup> He exhorts his audience to “ontdoet elc wort, ghi vinter in / redene ende goede sin” (ll. 21-22).<sup>153</sup> He has not completely lost his faith in mankind yet and hopes that exposing its moral faults through animal behaviour and habits will help redeem sinners while giving positive examples to follow. There is no man or woman so mean that they cannot find some useful lessons in his work. In this respect, the author can be compared to Lydgate, whose use of the fable is just as traditionally oriented. Henryson is less close to this perspective: the Scottish author does not seem to share the same faith in mankind’s essential goodness and does not appear to believe that evil, greedy, and arrogant people can be taught how to behave. Henryson’s aim was to condemn them and to expose their crimes, while Lydgate and *Esopet*’s author still have some shred of hope.

## 5.2. Temptation, shame, and guilt in *Esopet*

For the most part, the fables included in the collection are concerned with the betrayal of one’s words, or with the abuse of power that rulers often commit. In the

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<sup>150</sup> Heeroma, K. H., “Reinaert en Esopet”, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, 88 (1972), pp. 236-251, p. 236.

<sup>151</sup> “To teach / the nature of men”.

<sup>152</sup> “make examples / of beasts, as if they spoke”.

<sup>153</sup> “Interpret every word and you will find / wisdom and a good meaning”.

case of the latter topic, bad rulers mostly find themselves paying for their unjust deeds. In fable 16, “The Weak Old Lion”, it is shown how an old lion, who was once a powerful king and was often mean towards his subjects, is now bullied and ridiculed. Rulers, concludes the ashamed lion, should beware of their actions. The author gives the final moral, asserting that they will pay the consequences of their guilt:

Ten ghenen spreect dit bispel  
Die vele mach ende dan es fel;  
Else hi tsine heefts verloren,  
Hi moet sijn sachter te voeren.<sup>154</sup>

Indeed, this collection contains many instances of guilt, which plays an important role: besides the lion in fable 16, many characters who have committed evil actions are found guilty of what they have done and must face the consequences. In particular, if we take into consideration moral guilt, pride and envy seem to be those that the author cares particularly about. Fable 44, “The Proud Horse and the Donkey”, shows a beautiful horse who proudly wears his rich golden harness. When a donkey passes by and accidentally touches him, the horse haughtily accuses the donkey of disrespect and humiliates him with harsh words. The horse will soon pay for his pride: he falls ill and, now skinny and ugly, must do humble work. The donkey makes fun of him, reminding him that fate “na tsoete ghevet sure”.<sup>155</sup>

Moral guilt is not the only kind of guilt that is addressed in *Esopet*. The animals sometimes commit actual crimes, such as theft, murder, or kidnapping. In fable 4, “The Dog, The Wolf, the Kite and the Hawk against the Sheep”, an actual trial takes place. The plot is very similar to Lydgate’s and Henryson’s versions. A dog accuses a sheep

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<sup>154</sup> “This tale is about those / who have much power and are cruel; / when they have lost it, / they must be gentler than before” (ll. 19-22).

<sup>155</sup> “gives bitter things after the sweet ones” (l. 28).

of having stolen the bread he had only lent him. The dog gathers some witnesses: a wolf, a kite, and a hawk that all swear they have seen the sheep borrowing the dog's bread. Clearly, the dog has bribed them. Their deposition persuades the judge to rule against the sheep, who must sell all his fleece to pay his debt back. The author openly condemns the dog and his accomplices: they are “quade, die de goede quellen”<sup>156</sup>, taking advantage of their position of power over the poor and the weak. The same fable is used to condemn the same kind of injustice by Lydgate and Henryson.

Shame often comes into play as well. It seems that this emotion plays an important role in the actions of many characters: some of them feel ashamed for their condition as poor or ugly animals, try to escape it through various kinds of stratagems, but almost inevitably obtain only scorn from others, and in the end they have even more reasons to feel shame. A good example is fable 38, “The Proud Greenfinch”. The greenfinch is ashamed of himself because he is small and ugly, but he is also “hoeverdich” (l. 1), meaning “proud”, a word that is used many times in the collection. He finds some peacock feathers and uses them to decorate his plumage. When the other greenfinches see him, they attack him, stripping him of his ornaments, all the while making fun of him and his vainglory. He goes back to his family, ashamed and beaten, and receives only more scorn. One of his relatives offers him a precious lesson:

Dies en hadstu ghenen noet,  
haddi ghenoeghet dijn ghenoeet  
ende diere naturen cleder.<sup>157</sup>

This opinion could be found in any of Lydgate's fables: those who are content with their lot, and live following the principle of *suffisaunce*, do not have any reason to

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<sup>156</sup> “evildoers / who torture good people” (l. 29).

<sup>157</sup> “You would not have suffered / if you had been satisfied with your condition / and of your natural plumage” (ll. 17-19).

worry or to suffer. The narrator reinforces the lesson with a concise moral: those who boast about the empty and vain wealth they have gained by fraud, will lose it, and will be more miserable than before.

The last of the three main concepts I am investigating, temptation, is present also in this collection. Unsurprisingly, it appears on the stage through the figure of the fox. In *Esopet* this animal shows no particular novelty: he is devious, smart, and ready to wreak havoc in order to achieve personal gain. For example, he appears in fable 15, “The Crow and the Fox's Flattery” which has no need for presentations: a fox manages to steal a piece of cheese from a crow through false praises for the bird’s beautiful voice. When the crow opens his beak to sing, the cheese falls and the fox takes it. Flattery is a trick that the fox plays more than once, and to more than just one kind of bird: I have shown how the cock Chanticleer in Chaucer’s “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” falls for it too.

The fox appears as Reynaert in fable 48, “The Wolf’s Supplies and the Fox’s Betrayal”. The wolf is not named Ysengrijn, Reynaert’s historic enemy—he is not given a name at all—, but the antagonism between the two animals is the same as always. Reynaert tries to trick the wolf into letting him enter his lair to steal all the supplies that the wolf has gathered. The wolf chases him away, calling him a liar and a thief. Reynaert prepares his revenge: he reveals to a shepherd, enemy of the wolf, where to find the animal. The shepherd kills the wolf, and Reynaert can enjoy all the food. The fable, though, ends badly for the fox as well: he will be mortally wounded by a dog. As he lies dying, he repents of his sins, allowing the author to deliver the final moral: evildoers will pay for their actions. This is one of the few instances of the character of the fox actually being punished for his behaviour.

Reynaert, however, is not a completely negative figure in *Esopet*. He becomes a rather positive example of cunning in one of the fables. Number 23 is about a sick

lion, who calls all the animals to his den so that they can pay him visit before he dies. When they enter, he kills and devours them. When Reynaert's turn comes, he refuses because he has noticed that all the paw prints of other animals go inside the lion's den, but not a single track ever comes out. The author praises his intelligence, commenting that "hi es vroet die hem selven can / castien bi i andren man".<sup>158</sup> Reynaert, thus, is capable not only of tempting others, but also to recognize it when temptation is presented to him: he is twice as smart and wary as the other animals.

### 5.3. Positive *exempla*

The author of *Esopet*, as I have said, does not completely despair about the human condition. The animals can be not only an exemplification of mankind's vices and flaws, but also of its good qualities. Not everyone is evil: if given a chance, most men and women will act justly, avoiding falling into the temptation of acting following their personal interests. He provides a few examples, such as the lion in fable 18, "The Lion and the Mouse". A mouse disturbs a lion's sleep, so the big feline captures the him. However, he decides to spare the mouse's life: the author says that "Hoec docht hem scande, dat hij hilde".<sup>159</sup> What stands behind the lion's reasoning is, on the one hand, a matter of personal reputation: no honour comes from killing such an insignificant enemy. On the other hand, the mighty beast feels compassion and pity as well: no one should take advantage of their power to harm those who cannot defend themselves. His decision proves itself to be wise sometime later. He falls into a trap, but to his luck, the mouse passes by and cuts the ropes that were holding him. The two animals become thus a good example of how to behave: everyone should help those who are in trouble, pay their debts back, and avoid abusing the weak.

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<sup>158</sup> "Wise is the one who / can learn from what happened to another man" (ll. 15-16).

<sup>159</sup> "He thought it was a shame to be holding him" (l. 9).

Another instance is offered in fable 58, “The Peacock’s Envy for the Nightingale”. A peacock confesses to his wife that he is dying of jealousy because the nightingale sings so much better than him. His wife, who appears to be very reasonable and wise, reminds him that he is much more beautiful than the nightingale. Everyone has received a gift:

God, die alle dinc bi redened doet,  
heeft hier in verlicht u leven  
een deel graciën ghegeven.  
Du best scone, die swaluwe snel,  
die nachtegale singet wel,  
die duve es sempel, die aren sterc.<sup>160</sup>

What matters is that everyone must make good use of the skills and qualities they have been gifted. Complaining about what you were not given and ignoring what you are capable of doing is a sin. Those “die meer begeert dan hem God an”<sup>161</sup> should feel ashamed. The peacock’s wife is intelligent enough to understand this moral truth and she can teach it to her husband, becoming a positive instance. She saves him from falling into the temptation of trying to become something that he cannot be because it would break the natural order. Interesting is her use of birds as the only elements of comparison: using animals that are different and yet belonging to the same kind, she reinforces the fact that everyone, notwithstanding the inevitable differences of status and appearance, is held in the same consideration by God.

#### **5.4. Conclusions**

*Esopet* shares many points with all the other works examined in this research. The similarities that appeared more evident are those with Lydgate’s and Henryson’s

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<sup>160</sup> “God, who makes everything with a good reason / has given light to your life / and has given you many gifts. / You are beautiful, the swallow is fast, / the nightingale sings prettily, / the dove is meek, the eagle is strong.” (ll. 12-17).

<sup>161</sup> “who desire more than what God gave them” (l. 28).



collections. This inevitably depends at least in part from the common genre: all three works are fable collections, and as such, they are bound to present a number of fixed characteristics. However, their common points extend to the content as well. The main concern of all three authors is providing moral lessons through a relatively easy and accessible literary form. With Henryson, the anonymous author shares the extensive use of the fox and the wolf. Arguably, Henryson's reason behind this choice of characters is that they are particularly fit to his agenda: both fox and wolf are greedy and often cruel creatures, just like Scotland's lords and rulers. The *Esopet's* author uses them to condemn greed powerful people too, but he also has a cultural reason behind this choice: fox and wolf seem to be recurrent characters of Dutch folklore and fabulist tradition.

Lydgate does not employ the figure of the fox, but the wolf appears multiple times in his fables, and this animal displays the usual negative characteristics. With him, the *Esopet's* author shares a moral principle, that of *suffisaunce*. Both collections are greatly concerned with this virtue, which allows men and women to avoid temptations, to suffer no shame for their condition, or for the consequences of their guilt. Those who can be content with what they got are the happiest people on Earth. In a sense, this is present in Henryson's work too. His characters who exploit others are those who cannot adhere to the principle of *suffisaunce*. This becomes a reason for unhappiness not only for themselves, who feel the need to collect more and more wealth but for others as well because they must suffer the consequences of rulers' greed.

One last interesting point is the "authorial presence": Henryson's and Lydgate's presence can be clearly perceived in their works. Lydgate even names himself, making it clear that, under his pretence of modesty, he is unequivocally the author of the *Isopes Fabules*. In Henryson's collection, more than once the narrator makes his appearance

on the scene, talking in the first person. Even though he does not name himself, there is clearly a narrator whose presence constitutes a guiding thread that links all fables. The *Esopet's* author, on the other hand, manifests himself in the Prologue, where he declares his didactic aim, and then disappears. All the fables are told in a rather hasty manner—the longest ones consisting of no more than thirty lines—and are arranged one after the other without any kind of personal commentary. The author simply delivers the final moral, and never allows himself to write it as if it were his personal opinion. Never once does the first person make a comeback. Perhaps this can be explained through a simple chronological reason: Lydgate and Henryson lived and worked between the second half of the 14th century and the second half of the 15th century. Henryson, especially, is writing on the threshold of the Renaissance. *Esopet's* anonymous author probably composed his work at the beginning of the 13th century. It is arguable that the idea of letting the writer's presence emerge was still not acceptable for him. This could also be due to the fact that *Esopet* is indeed a commentary exercise, a translation that was enriched but whose author did not consider a proper work, worthy of being signed.

All things considered, all the differences between the three fable collections I have examined are less important than the similarities. The *Esopet's* author, Lydgate, and Henryson all offer valuable instances of how temptation, guilt, and shame were perceived in the late Middle Ages, and of how the fable genre was widespread, popular, and appreciated in different parts of Europe.

## Conclusion

Fables —and the various genres of beast literature deriving from them— offered fertile ground for my research. As Silkens says, their strength comes from their ability to “combine narrative fiction with a reflection on the human world”<sup>162</sup>. They

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<sup>162</sup> Silkens, Rose-Marie, *Middle English Animal Fable. A Study in Genre*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1972, p. 171.

offer a vision of the world that shifts on the base of the multiple interpretations that can be given to human characteristics as they are shown in animals. They portray mankind's best and worst features. Shame, guilt, and the inclination to fall into temptation are undoubtedly part of the human experience, and as such, they abound in beast literature.

All the authors taken into consideration in this research did not simply perform a translation of the fable, be it Dutch or English. They all added some element of their own, producing fables with new moral content, giving a name and personality to the characters, and even creating new genres. The final results produced by each of them show not only many and significant similarities, but some great novelties as well. For example, *Van de Vos Reynaerde* is a literary *unicum* that escapes any classification and stretches the fable form with new and unexpected results. Its characters are animals showing the traditional features they sport in classical fables, but this is the only feature that the Dutch poem has in common with the fable tradition. The long and complicated plot, the articulated structure, and the well-rounded characters make it an extremely modern piece of literature. Temptation, guilt, and shame are central in *Van de Vos Reynaerde*: set in a courtly environment, it shows the consequences that giving in to temptation can bring on men and women and describing the guilt and shame they feel afterward. The traces that Reynaert's victims bear of their guilts are visible and become a tool for public shaming. No moral is offered at the end of the story, no villain is punished: unlike the fables, the author of this poem has no wisdom to offer to his audience, and his only intent is offering entertainment. A similar text is Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale", which refuses to provide a clear, simple, and straightforward moral: the priest invites his travel companions to "take the morality" out of his tale. His invitation becomes ambiguous when one realizes the large range of topics touched by the clergyman. In this sense, Chaucer's fable is nothing like the

tradition would demand a fable to be. What was the true kernel of the fable, the moral, disappears, but still the reader is invited to take it: Chaucer, like Willem-die-Maedoc-maecte, offers no certainty.

The rest of the works taken into consideration are closer in form and content to the traditional fable, and this is especially true of *Esopet*. The three collections I have examined come from three different countries and cultures: the Dutch *Esopet*, the English *Isopes Fabules*, and the Scottish *Moral Fabillis*. The first two are more strictly adherent to the original fable form. Henryson's work, on the other hand, is more personal, in the sense that, while writing them, the Scottish poet has in mind the condition of Scotland more than mankind's in general. His accusation of the dire conditions that poor people have to live under results in more elaborated fables, rich in details and in characters, often ending with a moral that becomes longer than the fables itself and that need to be made explicit to be fully comprehended. Yet, the general range of topics that the three authors share is quite similar: the main concern is showing what happens when men and women give in to temptation, mainly that of greed and gluttony. They show how this not only brings upon them shame and guilt but also has dire consequences for those they have trampled on to reach their selfish and immoral goals. The tyranny that Lydgate accuses so vehemently is often not only merely political, but it can become moral as well: it is not only what rulers often do—taking advantage of their condition at the expense of their subjects—but also what evil people, in general, do to those weaker than them. Quite often the two symbols for these two kinds of abuse of power are the lion and the wolf: the former can be a wise king, but often he just wants to oppress his subjects. The wolf is a bully who only cares about gaining food or wealth from his victims.

An interesting element that has crossed all the centuries and the works I have taken into consideration is the use of a particular figure, the fox. This character is

absent only in Lydgate's *Isopes Fabules*, while it appears consistently in all other works. This animal remains always true to its nature, never escaping his role. Unlike the lion and the wolf, the fox seems to be uninterested in any kind of moral or legal power over the other animals. Even the wolf can change his role, becoming a well-intentioned friar in one of Henryson's fables. The fox only wants two things: food and entertainment. He is not happy when he manages to just steal a lamb or a chicken: he wants to have a good laugh at the expense of his victims. The more ridiculous and harsher what his enemies must suffer is, the more he is satisfied. It could be argued that what he cares more about is, in truth, mockery: better to lose his loot than having it without making fun of his enemy. Whenever he does not manage to win, as at the end of "The Nun's Priest's Tale" he is ashamed because he has lost his public face, that of being a trickster, rather than his meal. He represents temptation: he is ubiquitous, extremely hard to escape, and just as difficult to recognize, not until his victim has fallen in his trap. I would argue that he is never actually being the one tempted: the fox never perceives her action as surrendering to a wrong stimulus, a perception that is necessary to feel guilty. He does what he does because this is his nature, and he is content about being this way. Paradoxically, he lives a much happier life than many other animals, being free from having to follow every hypocritical principle. He escapes any moral boundaries and refuses to take part in the social body. This is what makes him such a dangerous creature, and what has gained him the reputation of being the Devil.



## **Riassunto**

I concetti di tentazione, vergogna e colpa, nonostante le differenti definizioni che ne vengono date, sono presenti in ogni cultura e fanno parte dell'esperienza umana. Spesso la loro concezione e la loro percezione derivano dalla religione dominante nella cultura in cui vengono espressi, specialmente nel caso della tentazione. Tuttavia, esistono anche colpa, tentazione e vergogna di natura più laica. La vergogna, in particolare, deriva dalla rottura tra la percezione del proprio io che ciascuno di noi ha

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e la percezione collettiva che abbiamo di noi stessi in società: quando avviene un fatto che causa questa rottura (ad esempio, la classica “figuraccia”), noi proviamo vergogna. La colpa, spesso, viene percepita quando qualcuno ci fa notare di aver sbagliato ma, rispetto alla vergogna, è più difficile spingere l’altro a provarla. Il vero “senso di colpa” proviene esclusivamente dal soggetto e dalla sua percezione di giusto e sbagliato.

Lo scopo di questa ricerca è quello di trovare esempi concreti di questi tre concetti in uno specifico genere letterario: la favola esopica. Esso ha avuto terreno fertile in una specifica epoca storica, il tardo Medioevo. Questo successo dipende da alcune caratteristiche proprie della favola: essa è un racconto breve, ha come protagonisti animali che presentano caratteristiche e comportamenti umani, e termina quasi invariabilmente con una morale. Veniva spesso usata come strumento di educazione dato che presentava un doppio vantaggio: da un lato offriva delle lezioni di comportamento e degli esempi positivi da seguire insegnando al contempo come ciascun atto sbagliato o peccato siano destinati a ricevere una giusta punizione; dall’altro, essendo così breve e scritta in un latino molto semplice, rappresentava lo strumento perfetto per far approcciare gli allievi più piccoli allo studio del latino. Le favole sono così diventate parte del bagaglio culturale della classe istruita di gran parte d’Europa. Gli autori affrontati in questa ricerca non fanno eccezione: in quanto uomini istruiti, hanno probabilmente iniziato l’apprendimento del latino tramite le favole, dalle quali hanno poi evidentemente tratto materiale per comporre i racconti, i poemi e le poesie che sono stati analizzati. Ciascuno di essi ha prodotto una rielaborazione della forma originale della favola che non è mai una semplice traduzione, ma diviene spesso un vero e proprio genere nuovo, come nel caso di *Van de Vos Reynaerde*. Per questo motivo è più adatto l’utilizzo del termine *beast literature*, o “letteratura animale” per indicare le opere analizzate in questo elaborato. La ricerca prende in considerazione due ambiti letterari specifici: quello nederlandese e quello inglese.

Le prime due opere prese in considerazione sono il poema in lingua latina *Ysengrimus*, composto in Olanda nella prima metà del Dodicesimo secolo da un autore sconosciuto, e quello in nederlandese medio *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, risalente alla seconda metà del secolo successivo e opera di un poeta che si autoproclama Willem-die-Maedoc-maecte (“Willem che scrisse il poema Maedoc”). Il primo costituisce una delle fonti principali del secondo: personaggi e ambiente sono gli stessi, nonostante la trama sia molto diversa. In entrambi il motore della vicenda è costituito dalla rivalità tra il lupo Ysengrimus/Ysengrijn e la volpe Reynardus/Reynaerd. I loro scontri vedono quasi sempre l’avidò e brutale lupo cadere nelle trappole che l’astuta e subdola volpe gli tende. Nessuno dei due è immune dalle tentazioni, ma inevitabilmente l’unico che riceve punizioni per le proprie colpe e soffre per la vergogna che ne deriva è il lupo. *Ysengrimus* è un’opera molto raffinata per stile, lessico e struttura: sette libri che contengono un gran numero di articolati episodi che raccontano delle disavventure dei due protagonisti principali. La trama procede con ordine iniziando dall’origine della rivalità tra i due personaggi, nata dalla mancata condivisione di un prosciutto rubato assieme, che l’avidò lupo tiene per sé, e proseguendo con la volpe che riesce a convincere il lupo a compiere folli e stupide decisioni come entrare in convento perché ci sarà sempre un lauto pasto assicurato. Alla fine, *Ysengrimus* viene sconfitto dalla sua stessa ingordigia: una scrofa che aveva tentato di mangiare chiama a raccolta i suoi parenti e tutti assieme sono loro a divorare il lupo. Reynardus diviene in questo lungo poema il simbolo della tentazione: sono infatti i suoi subdoli suggerimenti a provocare gran parte degli eventi. *Ysengrimus* viene ripetutamente umiliato, ma quando alla fine paga per le proprie colpe, deve espiare anche il fatto che nel corso della storia non ha mai dimostrato il minimo senso di colpa. L’unica cosa che gli è sempre interessata è vendicarsi su Reynardus per averlo più volte svergognato e per avergli portato via il cibo. La volpe invece rimane inafferrabile e riesce sempre astutamente a convincere

tutti, il re leone Nobel in primis, di essere innocente, nonostante sia altrettanto feroce e privo di scrupoli. Uno dei principali bersagli della satira dell'anonimo autore è il clero: Ysengrimus fa di tutto per scalare i vertici ecclesiastici, tanto che infine diventa vescovo. Nel mentre però, è costantemente ridicolizzato da Reynardus, che non perde occasioni per fare battute e per metterlo in ridicolo.

Il focus della satira in *Van de Vos Reynaerde* è diverso, pur venendo altrettanto bersagliato: questo poema epico è infatti ambientato alla corte del re leone Nobel. Tutti gli animali, compresi Ysengrijn e Reynaerd, sono dei nobili, e nessuno di loro è un esempio positivo. Ciascun personaggio si macchia di almeno un peccato capitale, che molto spesso è la gola. L'autore non risparmia colpi, e coglie ogni occasione per mettere in ridicolo gli arroganti nobili. Ovviamente, il primo strumento che egli utilizza nella sua satira è Reynaerd, che ancora una volta incarna la tentazione alla quale nessuno può resistere. Quando la volpe non si presenta alla pubblica udienza con il re, gli vengono mandati due emissari in due volte consecutive. Dapprima è il turno dell'orso Bruun, di cui Reynaerd si libera spingendolo a provare a rubare del miele da un contadino: Bruun si ferisce gravemente nell'impresa, e viene poi malmenato da una folla inferocita di abitanti del villaggio lì vicino. L'orso prova profonda vergogna per il suo aspetto: così conciato, non vorrebbe apparire di fronte agli altri nobili e al suo sovrano. Si dimostra così non solo avido e ghiotto, ma anche vanesio. Il secondo emissario, il gatto Tybeert, non resiste alla tentazione di rubare dei topi che si nascondono nel pollaio del prete. Reynaerd lo aiuta ad introdursi, e rimane a dileggiarlo quando il gatto finisce nella trappola il prete e la sua famiglia avevano piazzato per liberarsi dalla volpe. Svegliati dal trambusto, gli umani picchiano Tybeert senza pietà, e l'animale riesce a salvarsi per un pelo. Anche lui, sfigurato e malmesso, è costretto a tornare dal re e a farsi vedere da tutti in quelle condizioni, portando su di sé i chiari segni provocati dall'aver ceduto alle proprie debolezze. Finalmente, il tasso

Grimbeert riesce a convincere Reynaerd a recarsi a corte. Apparentemente, per la volpe le cose si mettono male: le testimonianze di Tybeert e Bruun si aggiungono a quelle degli altri nobili, tutti in qualche modo danneggiati da Reynaerd, Ysengrijn in primis: la volpe avrebbe violentato sua moglie e accecato i suoi figli. Ma la volpe si salva grazie alla sua furbizia: racconta a Nobel di un tesoro che sarebbe servito a finanziare un colpo di stato ordito da Ysengrijn e Bruun, ma che lui è riuscito a sventare rubando l'oro e nascondendolo in una foresta lontana e pericolosa. Nobel, dimostrandosi tanto avido quanto i suoi sudditi, lo perdona, punisce Ysengrijn e Bruun e concede alla volpe di recarsi in pellegrinaggio verso la Terra Santa. Prima di partire, Reynaerd mostra per un'ultima volta la sua vera natura di *trickster*. Afferma di voler tornare a casa per avvertire sua moglie, e il re gli dà come scorta l'ariete Belin e la volpe Cuwaert. Reynaerd uccide e divora Cuwaert di nascosto, e consegna la sua testa dentro ad un borsellino di cuoio a Belin, dicendogli che contiene la lettera che aveva promesso al sovrano per assicurargli che tutto fosse in ordine per il pellegrinaggio; adula il semi illetterato ariete, dicendogli che può dire al re di essere stato lui l'autore del contenuto del borsellino, così da fare bella figura col sovrano. Ma ciò gli costerà la vita: Nobel, irato dall'ennesimo trucco della volpe e dal crimine apparentemente compiuto dall'ariete, condanna Belin e la famiglia di Reynaerd a divenire servi di Ysengrimus e Bruun.

In entrambe le opere emerge chiaramente la potenza della tentazione, che può portare a compiere ogni genere non solo di peccato, ma anche di crimine: Reynaerd è impossibile da catturare, proprio come la tentazione è difficilissima da evitare. Come quest'ultima, anche Reynaerd si insinua dappertutto e colpisce soprattutto chi non è innocente ed onesto. La volpe, animale fin dall'antichità descritto come subdolo, furbo e ingannevole, diviene qui un potente simbolo per questa forza estremamente negativa, ed incarna addirittura il diavolo stesso. Il diavolo trova terreno fertile per i suoi scopi

in ambienti come quelli descritti da Willem-die-Maedoc-maecte e dall'anonimo autore di *Ysegrimus*, ricchi di peccatori incapaci di provare vera colpa, dato che si limitano a vergognarsi del loro aspetto e di cosa penseranno gli altri. In questo senso, Reynaerd diviene però uno strumento utile: porta allo scoperto l'ipocrisia di clero e nobiltà.

Lo stesso ruolo di tentatore viene ricoperto dalla volpe anche in uno dei *Racconti di Canterbury* di Geoffrey Chaucer. Composta verso la fine del quattordicesimo secolo, questa raccolta incompiuta contiene molto spesso riferimenti ad animali: essi sono usati in metafore e similitudini, aiutando ad attribuire determinate caratteristiche ai personaggi. "Il racconto del cappellano delle monache" è una favola, e come tale gli animali ne sono i veri e propri protagonisti. I protagonisti animali hanno tutti un nome: il gallo Chanticleer, la sua compagna Pertelote e la volpe Russell. Chanticleer e Pertelote vivono una vita lieta e pacifica nell'aia di una povera vedova, fino a che il gallo non ha un terribile incubo in cui viene divorato da una bestia. Dopo un lungo dibattito con sua moglie, spinto dalle rassicurazioni di Pertelote, mette da parte le preoccupazioni e dimentica dell'incubo. Ma esso si rivela realtà quando appare in scena la volpe Russell: quest'ultima racconta a Chanticleer che conosceva suo padre, il quale cantava splendidamente, specie quando chiudeva gli occhi per concentrarsi al meglio. Invita quindi il gallo a fare altrettanto, adulandolo con complimenti e dicendo di essere sicuro che anche lui abbia una voce meravigliosa. Chanticleer cede alle lusinghe e, non appena chiude gli occhi, viene afferrato da Russell, che scappa via. Per fortuna Pertelote e le altre galline si sono accorte del fatto, e grazie al loro strepitare la vecchia vedova si lancia all'inseguimento della volpe. Chanticleer nel frattempo ha un colpo di genio: dice a Russell che, se dirà alla sua inseguitrice che lui e il gallo sono amici, lei lo lascerà in pace. Russell apre la bocca per fare ciò che gli è stato consigliato, e così facendo Chanticleer riesce a scappare. La volpe ammette la propria sconfitta, e il gallo può tornare a casa, un po' più saggio di

prima. La tesi che qui si sostiene è quella che vede la vicenda come un nuovo racconto della Genesi: la pace e la perfezione iniziali vengono interrotti dall'intervento di un tentatore, e l'uomo è spinto a cedere per colpa della donna, che in questo caso ha sottovalutato i segnali premonitori e ha spinto il suo compagno verso la tentazione. Pertelote, infatti, proprio come Eva che ribatte alle obiezioni di Adamo e gli fa mangiare dall'Albero della Conoscenza diviene tentatrice: sostenendo che il sogno di Chanticleer è niente più che un disturbo causato da qualche cibo indigesto, ha privato il marito della protezione necessaria per non cadere nella trappola di Russell. La volpe alla fine è l'unica a pagare le conseguenze delle sue malefatte: deve andarsene con la coda tra le gambe, senza il suo pasto e con la vergogna di aver fallito il suo piano.

Il *fil rouge* offerto dalla volpe si interrompe con l'opera di John Lydgate, *Isopes Fabules*, composta negli ultimi anni del quindicesimo secolo. Lydgate, grande ammiratore di Chaucer, ne imita spesso stile e temi. Le sue favole sono incentrate su due temi: *suffisaunce*, ovvero "l'aver abbastanza", o "l'accontentarsi", e tirannia. Le favole che parlano di *suffisaunce*, in particolare, offrono molto spunti per questa ricerca: ad esempio, il gallo Chanticleer in una di esse trova una pietra preziosa, ma non vuole tenerla, simboleggiando così l'uomo saggio che sa di avere abbastanza, conosce il suo posto e sa che qualcuno del suo status non se ne farebbe nulla di un tale tesoro, più adatto a grandi principi. Il gallo evita così la tentazione, che lo porterebbe solo a doversi vergognare della sua condizione di animale povero e modesto e a volersi macchiare della colpa dell'invidia. Un personaggio che invece si comporta in modo diametralmente opposto è il cane nella favola "The Dog that Bare the Cheese". Il cane, che ha in bocca un pezzo di formaggio, vede se stesso riflesso in un fiume e lo scambia per un altro cane con un pezzo ancora più grande del suo; quando apre la bocca per cercare di rubare il cibo al presunto rivale, il formaggio gli cade in acqua, e il cane non può fare altro che accettare la perdita e vergognarsi per la propria avidità, che lo ha

portato a perdere ciò che aveva. Anche per la rana nella favola “The Frogge and the Mouse” non andrà a finire bene: mentre il topo vive lieto nella sua tana dentro ad un mulino, nel quale trova tutto quello che gli serve, alla rana interessa solo bere. Lo stile di vita semplice ma gratificante del topo le causa invidia, tanto che decide di invitare il topo a casa sua con l’intento di farlo annegare nel fiume che separa le loro dimore. Ma mentre si accingono ad attraversare la corrente, un nibbio arriva dall’alto e punta la rana, che a causa dei suoi vizi e della sua smoderatezza è molto più grassa e appetitosa del topo, che invece si salva: la rana non ha mai provato a resistere ad alcuna tentazione, mangiando e bevendo a sazietà, e ciò le è costato la vita.

Il capitolo successivo si basa su un confronto tra Lydgate e un altro poeta di ispirazione chauceriana, lo scozzese Robert Henryson, vissuto alla fine del quindicesimo secolo. Come Lydgate, anche Henryson è autore di una raccolta di favole intitolata *Moral Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian*. Della vita di Henryson sappiamo molto poco: si suppone che si sia laureato in legge all’università di Glasgow, ma non è un dato certo. Questa ipotesi sembrerebbe trovare terreno fertile nel modo abile in cui egli usa terminologia di tipo legale nelle sue favole, le quali sono nella maggior parte dei casi mirate ad uno scopo ben preciso: mettere in luce e condannare l’abuso di potere che spesso i potenti scozzesi compivano a danno della parte più povera della popolazione. In questo senso, Henryson si avvicina a Lydgate per la tematica della tirannia e dei danni che l’avidità può creare non solo al singolo, ma ad un’intera comunità. L’approccio che i due hanno nei confronti del proprio lavoro appare diverso fin dall’inizio, nel prologo: Lydgate dichiara esplicitamente la sua intenzione di offrire utili lezioni morali, da trovare nel guscio della letteratura, usato solo perché possa rendere il contenuto più piacevole e più gradito ai lettori. Henryson, nonostante voglia anch’egli offrire della moralità da prendere d’esempio, è di altro avviso: la poesia è di per sé un piacevole strumento, e possiede una propria innegabile bellezza, utile ad

alleviare le fatiche della mente sempre al lavoro. Le favole da cui il confronto tra Lydgate ed Henryson risulta più proficuo sono tre: “The Cock and the Jasp” (“Il gallo e il diaspro”), “The Wolf and the Lamb” (“Il lupo e l’agnello”), e “The Dog and the Sheep” (“Il cane e la pecora”). Nella prima il gallo di Lydgate rappresenta l’uomo saggio che sa che non deve desiderare più di quello che ha, evitando così la tentazione offerta dalla ricchezza. Quello di Henryson è lo sciocco che crede di sapere tutto e rifiuta ogni nuova conoscenza, preferendole il cibo e macchiandosi così del peccato di gola. I due autori hanno deciso di dare un significato diverso alla pietra preziosa, cambiando così radicalmente il senso della favola. La seconda favola parla della disputa tra un lupo e un agnello che bevono allo stesso fiume: il lupo accusa l’agnello di sporcargli l’acqua, nonostante esso si trovi più a valle rispetto a lui. Con questa ingiusta accusa, il lupo ha la scusa per punire l’agnello, divorandolo. La favola presenta alcune differenze di trama tra le due versioni, ma per entrambi i poeti serve a puntare il dito contro i prepotenti e il male che fanno ai deboli con i pretesti più infondati. La morale rivela però una differenza di pensiero tra i due: Lydgate, da uomo di chiesa, invoca la punizione divina per i malvagi, ma sa che l’ordine delle cose è questo: il potente ha sempre sfruttato il povero, e così sempre sarà. Solo nell’aldilà ciascuno riceverà punizioni e colpe adeguate. Henryson invece si scaglia contro i “lupi” che governano la Scozia e che causano tanto male alla popolazione. Essi meriterebbero di sopportare le conseguenze delle loro colpe, e di provare la vergogna che fanno ingiustamente sentire a chi è sotto di loro. L’ultima favola rivela la stessa mentalità: il cane che riesce ad estorcere il pagamento di un falso debito alla povera pecora corrompendo dei testimoni è indubbiamente un malvagio, ma mentre Lydgate sottolinea come il mondo funzioni così, Henryson critica aspramente la corruzione dilagante nel suo paese. Le differenze tra i due autori, infine, riguardano l’uso di un personaggio in particolare: la volpe. Essa è totalmente assente in Lydgate, il quale



potrebbe voler in tal modo sottolineare come la tentazione non sia necessaria all'uomo per compiere atti criminali e peccaminosi; in Henryson invece appare frequentemente, ed è sempre associata al suo classico ruolo. Essa incarna come sempre il *trickster*, un furbo diavolo, e la tentazione; i suoi trucchi spesso servono a mettere in ridicolo il lupo, animale prepotente per eccellenza, e a dimostrare come esso sia uno sciocco che ascolta solo la propria pancia, proprio come la classe dirigente scozzese. A differenza di altre narrazioni, in una delle favole di Henryson la volpe riceve la ben meritata punizione: colpevole di aver divorato un agnello, viene processata e condannata. Anche i prepotenti e i furbi, sembra voler dire Henryson, prima o poi possono essere fermati. I due autori, in conclusione, condividono una serie di valori e di temi che però vengono declinati in modo molto spesso diverso, se non addirittura contrastante.

Nella parte finale, la ricerca si concentra su di un'altra collezione di favole, sebbene di ambito ed epoca diversi: *Esopet*, composto in nederlandese alla fine del tredicesimo secolo. Tradizionalmente, *Esopet* è attribuito a Calfstaf e Noydekijn, nominati da altri autori di poco successivi all'epoca di composizione di *Esopet*. In realtà, la vera paternità dell'opera è indimostrabile: essa non viene citata da nessun'altra fonte ed è arrivata a noi solo grazie ad un manoscritto prodotto circa un secolo dopo la sua presunta data di composizione. La teoria più probabile è che *Esopet* sia da ascrivere alla tradizione medievale di riassunto e commento delle favole latine, pur tenendo conto che chiunque sia l'autore, egli ha compiuto una certa rielaborazione. Egli non offre mai una vera e propria opinione, ma inserisce elementi non presenti nei testi latini d'origine: ad esempio, alcuni animali hanno un nome, ed il prologo esprime una visione personale dell'umanità, dei suoi vizi e delle sue virtù. Questa collezione condivide con quelle di Lydgate e di Henryson alcuni temi fondamentali, quali la condanna della tirannia e dell'inganno di cui i potenti spesso si servono ai danni degli indifesi, e l'avidità contrapposta al farsi bastare i propri beni. Anche qui, tentazione,

vergogna e colpa trovano spesso spazio: molti degli animali protagonisti si macchiano non solo di peccati, ma anche di veri e propri crimini, per i quali vengono puniti. La vergogna è un potente motore per le azioni di molti di essi: ad esempio, il verdone della favola numero 38, si vergogna di non essere bello. Il suo tentativo di agghindarsi con delle piume di pavone gli porterà solo dileggio e violenza da parte dei suoi simili, i quali gli rinfacciano che chi troppo vuole nulla stringe, e che il volersi dimostrare più belli o più ricchi di quel che si è, è un grave peccato. Il verdone, alla fine della favola, si vergogna ancora più di prima. Immane è la presenza della volpe, che qui appare col suo nome più classico, Reynaerd; non è possibile stabilire se la raccolta di favole sia antecedente o successiva a *Van de Vos Reynaerde*, ma è probabile che l'anonimo autore fosse a conoscenza dei vari episodi collegati alla volpe che già circolavano dall'inizio del secolo precedente e abbia preso spunto da essi. In *Esopet*, Reynaerd è presente in un numero significativo di favole, e non sfugge al suo ruolo di furbo tentatore. Interessante è però come in una di esse, la numero 23, questo animale divenga esempio di furbizia positiva: la sua astuzia lo porta a notare che le impronte di tutti gli animali che entrano nella tana di un leone morente per porgergli un ultimo saluto portano tutte verso l'interno, ma non tornano mai indietro. La sua acutezza gli salva la vita: il leone, ingordo e feroce, chiaramente ha divorato chiunque sia entrato nella sua casa. L'autore loda la volpe, la quale capisce che non bisogna fidarsi dei prepotenti che si fingono improvvisamente buoni. Oltre a questa svolta positiva, ve n'è anche un'altra: in una delle favole in cui la volpe si scontra col lupo e lo inganna, facendolo uccidere da un pastore, e alla fine muore a sua volta per una grave ferita. Le sue ultime parole sono di vergogna e pentimento: riconosce le sue colpe e ammette che la punizione è meritata. In conclusione, nonostante le favole incluse in *Esopet* siano molto più vicine alla forma tradizionale, e presentino una minore elaborazione da parte dell'autore, esse hanno molti punti in comune con quelle di Lydgate e Henryson. La

distanza temporale ha sicuramente un ruolo nella minor raffinatezza e complessità della più antica delle tre, che comunque si dimostra un importante esempio di letteratura medievale e di come la forma letteraria della favola fosse presente e apprezzata in varie parti d'Europa, non solo in Inghilterra, Francia o Germania.

Le conclusioni partono proprio da questo fatto: la favola risulta popolare durante il Basso Medioevo (e oltre) perché è una forma versatile, adatta ad essere modificata nel modo più adatto agli intenti del suo autore, tanto da poter essere usata per sviluppare nuovi generi. La sua forza narrativa si basa su caratteristiche antropomorfe tradizionalmente imposte ai suoi personaggi, le quali possono essere però interpretate ed applicate con una certa libertà. Il messaggio finale della favola è da ricercarsi nella morale, che può variare in base al significato che il favolista decide di attribuire a ciascun personaggio: autori diversi daranno interpretazioni diverse alla stessa favola, proprio come fanno Lydgate ed Henryson. Tentazione, colpa, e vergogna, nelle loro accezioni più negative, ma anche in quelle positive, fanno parte dell'esperienza umana, in ogni cultura e in ogni tempo. Il fatto che la loro presenza sia così costante nel genere favolistico, è indice di come esso sia stato importante, diffuso, e apprezzato.

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### **Critical Literature**

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