MIDDLE ENGLISH ANIMAL FABLE - A STUDY IN GENRE

by

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B. A., University of Victoria, 1969

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department

of

English

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

The University of British Columbia

May, 1974
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ABSTRACT

This study examines animal fables written in Middle English. While the purposes and methods of these narratives differ widely, an examination of them bears out the thesis that the characterization peculiar to animal fable is the basis of the fulfillment of these several purposes.

Middle English animal fables extant range in type from brief Aesopic prose narratives in homilies and treatises to sophisticated narrative poems, and in time from the thirteenth century to the late fifteenth century, although some exempla in homilies are believed to have earlier origins. Many of the brief exempla fables are the work of anonymous compilers, while the poets Chaucer, Langland, Lydgate and Henryson also used the genre, the two latter having written collections.

The Middle English animal fables are not exclusively didactic. Indeed, Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale and the thirteenth-century The Vox and the Wolf are predominantly comic in tone, as are Lydgate's "The Churl and the Bird" and many of Henryson's Morall Fabillis. Satire also plays an important part in a definition of the nature of fable, and the use of animal characters for the purposes of political and social criticism is common to medieval manifestations of the genre.

The depiction of animal characters combining traits both bestial and human is the basic characteristic of the fables. In the simple exempla or in heavily didactic or satirical narratives, the characterization is not developed beyond what is necessary to clarify the implications for the human world. The best fables, however, develop the ironies of fable characterization, usually in a comic way, into lively and entertaining animal tales that reflect in various ways upon the human beings who serve as models for the
Although the Middle English animal fable includes brief narratives in the style of the Aesopic apologue as well as lengthier poems similar to the continental beast epic cycles, the common manner of portraying animals and developing the portrayals is to be found in all. The fables of Lydgate, Henryson and Chaucer combine basic Aesopic plots with beast epic characteristics. The animal fable in the hands of Middle English writers, while initially an imitative genre relying upon reworkings of Classical models, becomes a well-developed and highly entertaining form of narrative poetry.

M. A. Manzalaoui, Supervisor
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INTRODUCTION

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL FABLE TRADITION

The fable is not a genre one associates particularly with the Middle Ages, and yet it was during the Middle Ages that the fable rose to its peak of popularity in Western Europe. Part of its popularity no doubt stemmed from its usefulness as a vehicle for moral instruction, and alongside the popular collections we find compilations made for the use of clerics. Although usually characterized as a "low" genre, the fable was also taken up by literary men and developed into some of the most vigorous verse that remains to us from the medieval period. This ubiquitous genre, although never given the literary esteem of other medieval genres, nevertheless boasts several prestigious exponents. The achievements of Chaucer and Henryson alone necessitate that we regard the medieval fable seriously, and attempt to ascertain why such immense diversities of style and achievement can exist within a single genre classification.

The fable became known to medieval writers through two main collections. One, the fourth century Latin prose Romulus, claimed to be a direct translation from the Greek of Aesop, and this claim no doubt influenced its subsequent popularity, but the collection was actually a reworking of the Latin verse fables of Phaedrus, composed in the first century A.D., and of the other chief source drawn upon by medieval fabulists, the collection of Avianus, dating from the third or fourth century. These verse fables were selected and translated from the Greek of Babrius, a Hellenized Roman of the first century A.D. The fables of Avianus, just as the Romulus, were accepted as Aesop's and were freely translated, rewritten, and selected for other collections throughout the Middle Ages.
Generally speaking, the *Romulus* and the collection of Avianus contain little literary excellence. They are simple reworkings of the older Aesopic fables, and inherit the characteristic sparseness and brevity of the Greek tradition from them. Babrius and Phaedrus were the only Roman poets, so far as is known, who attempted to treat the fable as a separate genre. It is commonly felt that Babrius' fables aspire to some literary excellence in purity of versification and precision of style. Phaedrus' style, however, is quite different. Rather than drawing generally applicable morals from his narratives, he gives them specific political significances, and uses them as vehicles of protest. However, in spite of their satirical tendency, Phaedrus' fables are short and curt--"maigre et miserable," as one critic has described the collection. One other instance of a Latin fable deserves mention, even though it was not known in the Middle Ages, and that is the apologue of the city and country rats in a satire by Horace. Phaedrus was not the only Roman to discover the suitability of the fable as satire.

The Greek fable tradition from which Phaedrus and Babrius drew their material was that of the Aesopic fable as we think of it—a brief narrative which includes only what points directly to the conclusion, which is a piece of good counsel or a precept of conduct. The Greeks did make extensive use of the fable, although scholars disagree as to whether or not they thought of it as a distinct genre. Aesop, if he did exist, did not record the prose stories he told, and he was not the first Greek to use the form. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* there is a brief fable—"The Hawk and the Nightingale"—which shows all the traits of the "Aesopic" fable two centuries before Aesop, who through the testimony of Herodotus can be dated in the sixth century B.C. But regardless of their origin, the Greek fables all have the same characteristic brevity, a complete lack of embellishment, a narrative that includes
only what is necessary to convey and point to the "moral," and an instructive purpose.  

This, then, was the Classical fable tradition as it was passed on to the Middle Ages through Avianus and the Romulus. The Greeks and Romans, however, were not the only fabulists. It has been conjectured that the Greek fable has oriental sources—Babrius states that the Greeks got the fable from the Syrians—and it is known that Eastern apalogues were spread throughout Europe during the Middle Ages by the Arabs, by the Jews in Spain, and by returning Crusaders. The Indian Pantcha-Tantra dates from about the third century before Christ. It was reworked, with additions, and translated into Old Persian and Arabic before eventually appearing in Europe to enjoy a great vogue. These fables have an instructive purpose, but have a harsher tone than the Classical fables. Many are concerned with illustrating the harshness of life with little other alternative than resignation.

By the tenth century, the popularity of the Romulus and Avianus collections was established. The imitations, reworkings and compilations of fables were extensive. Churchmen on the Continent and in England reworked them for the use of schoolboys. They employed them in their treatises and compiled them for the use of other clerics, along with other didactic illustrative tales. The fables, still Aesopic in character, came to be used as sermon exempla as well, and thus the need for collections increased. However, fables were not limited to utilitarian purposes. The animal tales also became popular for themselves, independent of the exemplum usage.

Several French versions of Aesopic fables appeared as court poetry. At about the end of the twelfth century, Marie de France wrote her Fables, consisting of 103 vernacular poems in octosyllabic verse, dedicated to a
certain "cunte Williame." About a century and a half later, two collections of Ysopets enjoyed great popularity. The Ysopets I, or Ysopet-Avionnet, were composed in octosyllabic verse for Jeanne de Bourgogne. They include sixty-four fables from Romulus and eighteen from Avianus. Ysopets II consists of verse fables loosely translated from the late twelfth-century Latin verse Novus Aesopus and Novus Avianus of Alexander of Neckam. Although these essentially Aesopic fables were intended for a lay audience, unlike most of the Latin fables they drew their material from, they are still heavily moral. Even the fables of Marie de France reflect a greater interest in the moral to be drawn from them than in the narrative itself, which is as terse and brief as the Classical Aesopic fables. However, Marie is original in one regard. In the morals appended to each fable, she often stresses the injustices of the world that the fables reflect—the suppression of the weak by the strong. As Phaedrus, Marie uses the fable as a form of protest, but rather than turning them into political or other satire, she uses the "morals" to express sympathy for the unfortunate victim and to protest injustice in a general humanitarian way.

The animal narratives in Middle English are of many different types, even though the initial sources for all are the basic Aesopic fables discussed above. The characteristics of these fables, however, are not entirely consistent, and some definition of "fable" ought to be attempted to ascertain the characteristics of the genre as it was represented, by the thirteenth century, in works known to English fabulists.

Tradition has established that the fable is a brief narrative with animals as characters, in prose or verse. Human characters may be included, but never exclusively. This basic criterion is straightforward enough. The animals' activities illustrate a truth about mankind that the author
wishes to communicate. The animals thus have an illustrative, but not necessarily an allegorical function. The fable does present a moral or a thesis in the form of narrative, as does an allegory, but the fable does not imply that the animals represent abstractions. We must rule out allegory as part of a definition, then, while admitting that the representative nature of the fable characters has the potential—often realized in the imitative medieval Aesopic fables—of robbing them of a good deal of vitality. Also, we must turn to the kind of truth the author wishes to communicate, and the way in which he does this, i.e. in a straightforward moral drawn directly from the narrative, or through the narrative itself, or in both ways. Here we must turn to individual works. In the fables of Babrius and Avianus and in the Romulus collections we have brief animal narratives which illustrate a generally applicable thesis that is appended to the narrative proper. The animals are representative of human beings in a general way. The purpose is ostensibly moral, but the moral is cloaked in an amusing story. However, not all Classical fables conform to this description. Horace's one fable is satirical rather than forthrightly moral, and its purpose is thus to point out a human weakness without supplying a moral set up as a general remedy. Phaedrus' fables serve a political purpose—social and political particulars are applied, rather than the weaknesses of human beings in general. These works were not known in the Middle Ages, and yet similar satirical tendencies occur in many medieval fables. Whereas we can safely say that the fable is a prose or verse narrative in which animals are characters whose behaviour is meant to be representative of human beings, it becomes more difficult to determine whether the nature of the fable is entirely didactic or satirical.

I purpose to show in this study that in the Middle Ages there were
written a vast range of animal stories all practicably classifiable as fables. Within the genre exist many different sorts of animal narratives, but these have enough in common to warrant a single classification. Fables range from the brief *exempla* used in sermons and treatises, through the moralizing exercises of Lydgate and the fourteenth-century fable satires, to poems as accomplished as Chaucer's and Henryson's fables. While the simple Aesopic animal apologue appears throughout medieval literature, the Middle Ages also contributed a unique development of the genre, the delightfully anthropomorphized animals who in France and on the continent are immortalized in the *Roman de Renart* and its analogues, and are the characters of one of the finest poems in English literature. The fable is indeed a genre admitting considerable diversity.

The range of purpose in the fables we will examine encompasses the purely didactic and the purely entertaining. Within this range are fables that combine entertainment and a "moral" to varying extents. The initial *raison d'être* of medieval fable can be found in the literary theory that seeks to justify imaginative literature by its underlying ability to instruct as well as entertain. This dual purpose, to teach and delight together, is often cited by fabulists. It is explained by Boccaccio as the value of fiction.

*Such then is the power of fiction that it pleases the unlearned by its external appearance, and exercises the minds of the learned with its hidden truth; and thus both are edified and delighted with one and the same perusal.*

This kind of reasoning provides the basis for the use of fables--and other fictional tales--in sermons and treatises. Henryson and Lydgate cite this purpose in the Prologues to their fables, and the Nun's Priest concludes his fable with the reminder that those who think his tale a folly should find
the "fruyt" in it. Caxton ends his translation of a Dutch version of the
Reynard epic with a moral justification as well:

But for an example to the people that they may thereby
the better use and follow virtue and to eschew sin and
vices, in like wise may it be by this book that who
that will read this matter, though it be of japes and
bourds, yet he may find therein many a good wisdom and
learnings, by which he may come to virtue and worship.11

The writer of "A song on the Times" sees his fable as an exemplum—a vorbisen
—-that illustrates his complaint. The fable provides the possibility for
a unique combination of entertainment and instruction, for while the sight
of animals acting as human beings can be very amusing, the comic irony of
that situation suggests things about human beings as well.

The fable is not an animal story in the modern sense of the term. It
is a tale that portrays animal characters who combine human and animal
characteristics. The combination is fraught with ironic possibilities.
The fable's interest is not in animals per se, but in animal characters whose
behaviour is modelled upon and in turn reflects upon human behaviour. The
purpose of the fabulist determines how and to what extent the reflection
upon human beings is made, as well as the tone in which it is made.

Rather than dealing with the English fables in chronological order,
I will discuss them in the order suggested by the purposes they fulfill and
the way the characters are developed to fulfill those purposes. I hope to
show that, alongside the simple Aesopic, or moral, fable is a literary fable,
an example of high art, which does not confine the genre to any single pur-
pose. What warrants the single classification, however, is not only the
fact that animals are the characters, but that they are developed in a peculiar
way. The characters of the briefest Aesopic fable are representations of
truths about the human world, and when these characters are developed to
speak, think, and act in more detail than is allowed in a brief narrative, they can become independent characters who ironically figure the human beings upon whose behaviour they are modelled. Set apart by the unreal fable world, these characters can present a vivid picture of the human world. Because of the nature of the fable's characterization, it is a genre that lends itself particularly well to the depiction of human frailty and folly, and can do so satirically, didactically, or simply comically. From the simplest fox and wolf exemplum to the highly complex and brilliant Nun's Priest's Tale, the range of the Middle English fable illustrates a common concern: the pointing out of human weakness in all or any of its forms.
FOOTNOTES


6 The origins of the Sanskrit Pantcha-Tantra (or Hitopadesa) are obscure, but as a collection of stories it was translated into many oriental languages. In Arabic it was entitled "Kalilah and Dimnah," after two jackals who were the central characters, or the "Fables of Pilpay," or "Bidpai," the name that was, among others, transmitted to Europe. See Hitopadesa, trans. Charles Wilkins (1886; rpt. Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), both Wilkins' Preface and the new Introduction by W. B. Stein; see also Charles R. Lanman, "Pilpay," vol. 20 of Library of the World's Best Literature, ed. C. D. Warner (New York: Peale and Hill, 1897), pp. 11437-11486, and Joseph Jacobs, ed., Barlaam and Josaphat (London: Nutt, 1896), pp. xli-xliv.

7 Levrault, pp. 10-11.


CHAPTER ONE

THE FABLE AS EXEMPLUM

The exemplum is that ubiquitous form of narrative literature so peculiar to the Middle Ages. Material from almost all available sources was taken by the church and transformed into brief narratives that could illustrate some moral or theological precept in an interesting and more memorable way than could be accomplished by merely repeating the precept. Through the wide use of exempla, audiences became familiar, albeit in a humble way, with a vast range of literary and scientific subject matter. Material for exempla was drawn from history, hagiography, narrative fiction, legend, and pseudo-scientific literature such as bestiaries and lapidaries. Subject matter was thus both sacred and profane. Throughout the Middle Ages, the clerics of the Catholic church produced countless exempla, both within the bodies of their writings and as separate compilations of stories for the use of other clerics.

Gregory the Great established the precedent for the use of exempla both by using them himself and by recommending their use. The technique of using an illustrative narrative goes back to Classical rhetoric; Aristotle had recommended the using of fables as exempla to aspiring orators. In later medieval rhetorical theory, the exemplum is recommended both as a means of beginning and as a device for ornamenting style. But for churchmen the greatest recommendation was probably the use of parables by Christ as a teaching device:

the record of Holy Scripture is to be considered as parent authority for moralization in the shape of anecdotes, whether historical or fictitious: this, too, as set forth more particularly in the method of teaching adopted by Christ Himself.
Fables probably won acceptance through their use as teaching devices in oriental works and because of the didactic nature of the Aesopic fables familiar to the Middle Ages. Early and influential church writers admitted that fables could teach. The vogue of the fable as exemplum was such that of the narratives employed as exempla and appearing in example books, fables ranked third in popularity, outnumbered only by stories about clerics and excerpts from saints' lives. The fables were drawn from the Aesopic collections known, the Romulus and the fables of Avianus, and from the animal apoloques that appeared in popular oriental collections.

Exempla began to appear frequently in the twelfth century. Churchmen collected narratives and similes from many sources and circulated them amongst themselves for use in treatises, in teaching fellow clerics, and later, in sermons. One of the first compilations, which included versions of the Fables of Bidpai, was the Disciplina Clericalis of Petrus Alphonsus, which dates from the beginning of the twelfth century. Esopus, a Latin verse collection based chiefly on the Romulus, by Walter of England, believed to have been the chaplain of Henry II, became popular in the middle of the twelfth century. The exempla found their way to the pulpit and by the thirteenth century the popularity of exempla for use in sermons was established and gradually increased by preachers and especially by the mendicant friars. Writers such as Jacques de Vitry and Caesar of Heisterbach incorporated exempla into their written sermons, and further compilations of stories were thus made from the sermons and treatises that employed them.

The use of animal fables as exempla had more justification to medieval writers than the sweeping justification of exempla in general. Animal stories, after all, are not "truth", and therefore there must be a good reason for employing animal characters who behave as human beings. The
immense popularity of the Aesopic fable in the Middle Ages, too, suggests that medieval thinkers, and particularly the clerics who chose animal characters for their exempla, had more reason to regard fables seriously than the simple element of their charm.

The medieval church regarded all knowledge in terms of its relation to Christian doctrine. The natural world was considered to contain manifestations of religious truth and clues to an understanding of Christian theology. The appearance of animals in Scripture led to the belief that a scientific knowledge of the nature of these animals was necessary for an understanding of their figurative significance in Scripture.

Just as a knowledge of the nature of serpents illuminates the many similitudes which Scripture frequently makes with that animal, an ignorance of many other animals which are also used for comparisons is a great impediment to understanding.11

Not only a knowledge of animals but of stones, plants, numbers and music was considered necessary for the comprehension of both the revealed truth of Scripture and the figurative truth that may be discovered in Nature.

To the end of providing this information, medieval scholars created compendious "scientific" volumes containing knowledge about the natural world in encyclopaedic fashion. Isidore of Seville's Etymologies is an example of a general work including this kind of information, but there are more specialized works as well. The medieval bestiaries were among the most popular of the works dealing with natural history. These are encyclopaedias containing descriptions of animals both real and imaginary, plus scientific and legendary information about them, usually followed by a figurative interpretation relating the information to Christian doctrine. A Middle English translation of a popular bestiary, the Latin Physiologus of Theobaldus, provides a typical passage.12
Natura wulpis.

A wilde der is
Sat is ful of fele wiles,
fox is hire to name,
for hire quefsipe;
husebondes hire haten,
for hire harm dedes:
Se coc and te capun
ge feccheS ofte in Se tun,
and te gandre and te gos,
bi Se necke and bi Se nos,
haleS is to hire hole;
for bi man hire hatief,
hatien and hulen
boSe men and fules.
ListneS nu a wunder,
Sat tis der doS for hunger:
goS o felde to a furg,
and falleS jar-inne,
In eried lond er in erS chine.
forto bilirten fugeles;
Ne stereS ge nogt of Se stede
a god stund deies,
oc dareS so ge ded were,
Ne drageS ge non onde:
Se rauen is swiSe redi,
wenes Sat ge rotie,
and ocre fules hire fallen bi
For to winnen fode,
derlike wisuten dred;
he wenens Sat ge ded bea,
he wullen on his foxes fel;
and ge it wel feleS,
ligltlike ge lepes up
and lettes hem sone,
gelt hem here billing
raxe wis illing,
tetoges and tetireS hem
mid hire teS sarpe,
Fret hire fille,
and goS Jan Ser ge willie.

Significacio.

Twifold forbisne in his der
to frame we mugen finden her,
warsipe and wisedom
wis deuel and wis iuel man;
Se deuel dereS derneleike,
he lat he ne wile us nogt biswike,
he lat he ne wile us don non los,
and bringes us in a sinne and ter he us sloS,
he bit us done ure bukes willie,
The attributes of the natural animal—the first was probably familiar to contemporary audiences—are explained in terms of Christian doctrine.

The fox thus becomes a figure of the devil in the natural world, a significance which is equally applicable to its appearance in the Bible.\(^\text{13}\)

The ascribing of character traits to animals begins with Aristotle's treatises. Aristotle describes the traits of certain animals in relation to their physical characteristics for the purpose of making similar conclusions about human beings.\(^\text{15}\) His characterizations are quite similar to typical medieval ones: the lion is brave and upright, as he usually is in medieval iconography; the ass is cowardly and stupid, as he is in the fables; the ape is villainous; the cock is lascivious, like Chaucer's Chauntecleer. However, the parts of Aristotle's treatise comparing physical qualities with similar physical qualities in animals does not appear to have been known in the Middle Ages. Aristotle is cited by the writers and users of
the bestiaries as an authority, for his *Historia Animalium* appears to have been known. This work, however, concerns itself but little with the psychological nature of species of animals. From the natural history that was available to them, medieval writers developed their own animal symbolism to standardize Scriptural and, later, literary exegesis, and to teach the precepts of the Christian religion through figures observable in the created world.

The bestiaries were particularly popular for use as *exempla*. Homilists frequently employed bestiary material as similes or figures meant to elucidate moral or religious precepts. Thus the simile of the ape and her two babies in the *Alphabet of Tales* can illustrate a human failing—no *moralitas* is attached—while the simile itself reads like the first part of a bestiary entry.

Simia. *Simie peccator assimilatur.*

We rede in 'Libro de Dono Timoris,' how *pe propurtie of pe ape is to hafe ij whelpis; & when *pe hunter commys & pursewis hur*, sho takis *pat at sho luffis bettur in hur armys, & *pe toder lepis vp on hur bakk. And when *pe hunter sewis hur sore*, sho *levis pat as is in hur armys & lattis it fall*, & *pe toder clevis still by hur.*

In the *Gesta Romanorum* is a similar exemplum describing the ape's characteristic method of dining on nuts; this is related to the familiar nut and kernel figure.

The standard figural interpretations of the properties of animals that resulted from the wealth of literature dealing with such interpretations is reflected in the relatively consistent significances of animals in homiletic literature. The sermon passage in which the fable of the crabs, discussed below, appears is similar to the passage describing the demons in Hell in Richard Rolle's *Pricke of Conscience*. In the first, they are adders, toads, frogs and crabs; in the second, wolves, lions, bears,
dragons, adders, and "othir vermyn." In various sermons in Ross's edition of late fourteenth and early fifteenth century sermon texts, an adder (or serpent) is identified with the devil and likened to covetous men. An exemplum for Sermon Twenty-seven of John Mirk's *Festial* includes a giant adder who, in the interpretation, represents the devil. The fox is considered a representative of covetousness in *The Ancrene Riwle* and *Jacob's Well*. In *The Ancrene Riwle*, the reasons for the equation are made clear in much the same way as they are in the bestiaries.

The wolf also has an unhappy association. In *Jacob's Well* the wrathful man is compared with him, and in Sermon Thirty-four of Ross's edition of Middle English sermons he is equated with the devil. The popular attitude to the natural wolf partially explains this, but once again precedence is found in the Bible: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matt. 8:15).

Other than the fox and the wolf, most animals are usually given a positive as well as a negative association: they were considered to be manifested both in *bono* and in *malo*. The serpent is the obvious example, as it has both good and bad associations in Scripture. The lion is usually identified with Christ and with good Christians, but sometimes represents pride, as in the list of sins in *The Ancrene Riwle*. In one instance—a fable exemplum—even the "false fox" serves an intentionally good function, albeit through his craft.
The tradition of ascribing figurative significances to animals to clarify religious doctrine adds another dimension to the significance of the fable exempla. These significances are seen operating in the "morals" appended to the exempla in the sermon literature. This tradition, combined with the didactic nature of the traditional Aesopic fable, makes it very understandable that the genre should have been so popular among medieval clerics.

Before leaving this discussion of the bestiaries, we should notice that their extensive use in English homiletic literature must have had considerable influence on the education and awareness of a broad audience, both lay and clerical, during the Middle Ages. The natural and figural descriptions of animals repeated from the pulpit must have made the bestiary material familiar to a great number of people. As Owst comments,

\[\ldots\text{there was no great gulf fixed in medieval times between the artistic symbolism of sculptor and wood-carver, the zoological literature of the "learned" and at least some popular understanding of the same.}\]

Indeed, the "popular understanding" of animals is reflected in the bestiary literature as well, as we saw in the description of the raiding fox in the Middle English version of Physiologus. A consideration of a medieval genre that contains animal characters—most often the animals most frequently described in homiletic literature—must include the realization that the wide influence of bestiary lore must have instilled some preconceptions into the minds of the readers of the genre.

The popularity of exempla among continental churchmen speaks to England, quite naturally, where the strength of the tradition was established by the thirteenth century. The thirteenth-century Gemma Ecclesiastica of Giraldus Cambrensis "makes so copious a use of monkish tales that the work is really an example-book." But the fable as exemplum came into its own in...
England with the Latin sermons of Odo of Cheriton. Written early in the thirteenth century, Odo's sermons and collection of exempla contain more fables than any other kind of illustrative tale. Odo probably found the sources for his fables during study on the continent, but his success in retelling them gave them a great deal of popularity.

Many of these fables, simple enough in their construction, present us with the natural humour and vivid imagination of those who watch the animal and insect world with the eyes of lively, mischievous children.32

Their popularity is reflected in the large number of collections drawn from them, and in the impetus Odo's appended moralizations gave to collections which included moralizations after each tale.33

One of these collections is the Latin Gesta Romanorum, a late thirteenth-century work which contains several fables. The Gesta is believed to have originated in England,34 and Middle English versions contain additional fables also borrowed from Odo. The number of longer secular tales in the Gesta Romanorum points forward to the secular works of poets such as Gower and Chaucer for, although the moralizations remain, the interest in the narrative is sometimes greater than it was in earlier example literature.35 The fourteenth-century Latin example literature testifies to the increased sophistication pervading the old concept of simple exempla. The Liber de Moralizationibus and Liber Sapientiae of John Holkot contain mostly secular tales, and many fables, accompanied by more sophisticated moralizations. Bromyard's Summa Praedicantium makes more frequent use of Aesopic fable material.

The English fables used as exempla embody one major aspect of the medieval fable. The purpose of an exemplum is to illustrate a moral or theological point, and this is exactly what a fable exemplum is equipped
to do. The illustration of a moral precept is inherent in the nature of the Aesopic fable: it is its raison d'être. The Aesopic fable of Classical times, as it was passed on to the Middle Ages, and interpreted by writers like Alexander Neckam and Marie de France, was ostensibly nothing more than a vehicle for the communication of a moral truth. To this end its style was adapted. The Classical fables, however, and to some extent the imitative Isopets, reflect a concern for achieving excellence of style within the limits of the genre. In the English fables used as exempla, there is no purpose other than that of moral illustration, for this is as inherent in the concept of the exemplum as it is in that of the Aesopic fable. But in the exempla, we do not find the concern with style that we find in their secular sources.

To the Greek and Roman fabulists, brevity, and a conciseness allowing no more than is necessary to illustrate the moral—which does not then need to be stated separately—was the chief stylistic demand. No small degree of poetic achievement was attained within these limits. The English exempla are brief, but without the virtues of conciseness, sharpness of narrative details, found in their ultimate sources. Their morals are not as inevitable: not everything superfluous to the moral is left out. Indeed, sometimes one is left wondering what the moral point of the fable is, although perhaps this is intentional, to allow the preacher making use of the tale to adapt it to the moral he wishes to illustrate. The exempla fables cannot be considered as literary manifestations of the genre, but nonetheless they are a peculiarly medieval manifestation, and their nature is such that they are of particular interest in a characterization of medieval fable. They embody the major purpose of Aesopic fables, albeit without providing much in the way of added attractions, and their use and popularity as exempla
reflects why medieval people would be attracted to the genre in its Aesopic form. If it is true that "the medieval storyteller has generally a moral purpose," then the nature of Aesopic fable answers this purpose well. Unfortunately, as in the exempla, it often answers no other.

Before proceeding with an examination of the English fable exempla, we should note that Mosher, in his study of the exemplum in England, does not feel comfortable in calling the fables used in sermons exempla. His researches indicate that a prerequisite for classification as an exemplum is the presence of human characters only, even though fables "were frequently considered as exempla by medieval collectors and preachers." To apply the stipulation of human characters to a genre so amorphous as the medieval exemplum does not seem to be particularly helpful. The example-books abound with brief satires including both animal and human characters, many of which are not fables. Animals play important roles, but they are not given the properties of human beings as they are in fables proper. And often they are not real characters, but simply agents of external forces. Fables often have human characters, but the animal and human characters must interact as if there were no significant difference between the civilized human world and the animal world. Although the fable encompasses a separate genre, it lends itself so well for use as an exemplum, and was used as such so frequently and effectively, that it is needless to separate the fable from the broad classification exempla which, though considered a genre in itself, includes others as well.

The earliest instance we have of the fable used as an exemplum in English is the fable of the crab and its mother, contained in an early homily. The homily is one of a collection which appears in Richard Morris' edition of twelfth and thirteenth century homilies, but the editor concludes from textual evidence that the group of homilies in which the fable
appears is actually a compilation made from eleventh-century documents. The fable occurs in Homily Five of the edition, entitled "Of the Prophet Jeremiah." It is recounted in the middle of a passage which draws on bestiary material to describe symbolically the inhabitants of the pit: spotted adders, black toads, yellow frogs, and crabs. The fable itself appears after the preliminary list, when the author apparently feels compelled to explain what crabs are. He begins with an explanation that reads like a bestiary passage, and then shifts into the fable:

Crabbe is an manere of fisce in pere sea. pis fis is of swulc cunde. pet. euer se he mare strengeode him to swimminde mid pe watere. se he mare swimmode abac. and pe alde crabbe seide to pe Junge. hwi ne swimmest pu forward in pere sea alse oser fisses dos. and heo seide. Leofe moder swim pu foren me and tech me hu ic scal swimmen forward and heo bi-gon to swimmen forward mid pe streme and swam hire ber aegen.

Immediately following the fable, all the animals but the crabs are given their symbolic meanings in terms of the contents of the homily. Why and how this fable describes the sinners in the pit is never made clear. The fable does not clearly point to any moral the homilist seems to have in mind.

Yet this is an Aesopic fable. It appears in the collection of Avianus, and in that of Avianus' source Babrius. The narrative is brief, and the animal characters are endowed with human qualities. The story as it stands is clever enough, and the moral it points to is clear enough: one should not reproach another for not doing what one cannot do oneself. But in the context of the homily, that does not seem to be the moral point of the fable at all. Indeed, the author seems to misunderstand the idea of using an exemplum, for here he is only explaining to his audience what a crab is, and follows his explanation with a story that does not illustrate why the crab must represent the evil inhabitants of Hell. Perhaps he felt that
a fish who would swim backwards by nature must necessarily embody a sinful character, but this does not seem likely, for he carefully explains the significance of adders, black toads, and yellow frogs, leaving the crabs out of the discussion entirely. Rather, one receives the impression that he is simply using his fable to vary the tone of the homily, rather than as a real exemplum. His desire to do so indicates perhaps a familiarity with the concept of exempla, but a lack of understanding as to how to use them to prove a point. Indeed, his imperfect understanding is further evident in his describing a crab as a fish who swims backwards. In this first example of a Middle English fable used ostensibly as an exemplum, the dual nature of the fable is already apparent. One feels there is a didactic purpose: there must be one, considering the context in which the fable appears, and the author is evidently trying to explain something to his audience, however imperfectly he succeeds. But the less sobre aspect of exemplum and fable also evinces itself. The rather haphazard way in which the fable is tossed in suggests an attempt to use the short narrative as entertainment, as a relief from the didactic tone of the homily. The product is atypical, for the entertainment is not the vehicle of the lesson.

The other Middle English fable exempla we have are more typical. Their illustrative function is clear and straightforward, the narratives pointing to a moral either stated explicitly or undeniable implicitly. The later dates of all these exempla warrant asserting that the authors would have been thoroughly familiar with the techniques and subjects of exemplary literature, and the didactic nature of the fables is more than apparent.

One fable is employed as a true exemplum in the devotional manual Ayenbite of Inwyt, compiled by Dan Michel in the Kentish dialect in 1340. This is largely a translation of the thirteenth-century French
While discussing "be uerpe stape of Rijtuolnesse," the author points out that those who try to emulate the virtues of others without discretion are not successful, for people do not have the same virtues. To illustrate his point, he relates the fable of the "Little Hound and the Ass."

**The fable is followed by a statement of its moral and a justification of the use of fables in teaching men wisdom.**

This fable also dates from Classical times. It is found in the collections of Babrius and Phaedrus, and became popular in the Middle Ages with the writers both of Isopets—notably Marie de France—and of the exempla—notably Odo of Cheriton. The writer is obviously familiar with fables in the exempla tradition, and uses this one as such. The narrative is brief and to the point, and not without some of the detail that raises its quality. The ass's state of mind is described fully enough to show how he comes to act in the way he does, and thus to characterize his foolishness and make the moral of the fable stand out more clearly. The ass's ludicrous behaviour is described well with an obvious taste for the humour of the situation. Again, this humour reinforces the Moral. Michel cannot be given all the credit.
for the success of this exemplum, he can be given the credit for communicating, in English, the technique of a successful Aesopic fable.

The English versions of the Gesta Romanorum contain many Aesopic fables. The Latin Gesta, "a work of exemplar literature in many ways unparalleled,"\(^7\) contains fables of both Classical and oriental origins. The English translations we have were made in the first half of the fifteenth century, at least a century after it is supposed the original Latin version was compiled. None of the fables in the English versions are found in the manuscripts of the Anglo-Latin Gesta which served as the original for the English translations, but, with other kinds of narratives, have been added to the "class of Gesta proper"\(^8\) that made up the earliest versions.\(^9\)

The stories contained in the English collections are accompanied, not by moralizations, but by an exegesis of their details in theological and moral terms. The "morals" of the fables, while perhaps implicitly clear in the narratives themselves, are not really drawn upon in the apposite "declaraciones" or "moralitees." Part of this is explainable by the nature of the collection. The Gesta is a compilation of stories for the use of preachers, and thus the "moral" would have to be chosen and adjusted to suit the particular discourse in which the preacher wished to employ it. The exegetical explanation, however, would aid him in applying the text to his subject. It also ensures that the narrative will be seen in the proper light.

These applications are quite unlike the "morals" that appear after other forms of the Aesopic fable we have examined. The appended explanation is not suggested by a literal reading of the story, as it is in the fable of "The Little Hound and the Ass." For example, the Gesta fable of "The Cat and the Fox"\(^5\) has a superimposed moral rather distant from the narrative itself. It describes the cat and the fox conferring on how to escape from the hounds.
The fox is confident because he has many tricks, and the cat frightened because she knows only one. When the hounds come, the cat needs only one trick to save herself, while the fox is overcome. The moral of the tale in Aesopic terms is simple enough: one form of self-help will suffice. It is more or less stated by the cat at the end of the fable, when she cries to the fox:

"foxe! opyn thi bagge of wiles, & helpe thy selfe, for thou haddiste neuer more nede; for all thi wiles helpeth the not!"

The declaracio transforms this moral into theological terms: the cat represents holy men who need only one means—faith—of saving themselves; the fox, reminiscent of his bestiary appearances, evil men who think they have enough tricks and wiles to be secure, but who are eventually caught by the hounds of Hell. Thus the "moral" of Aesopic fable—the simple statement, illustrated by the animals' behaviour and character, that applies to the world of men—is altered to conform to the purposes of the cleric. The moral becomes a theological lesson which, although in harmony with the implicit moral, is not a part of the narrative itself, and is not necessary to an understanding of the fable's elementary lesson.

The separate nature of the moral appended to the fable was not a new aspect of the genre contributed by the exempla writers. Marie de France used the moral to voice her opinions on subjects brought to mind by the fable—contemporary evils suggested by the illustration of the human condition in the tale. Classical Aesopic fable did not have an appended "Moralitas", but the genre lends itself to this kind of addition in its medieval manifestations. Thus the fable itself, the narrative, remains true to its Aesopic background, and expresses an aspect of human nature or society or experience implicitly, while the writer of the fable can employ this narrative to elaborate on the
simple moral and suit his own purposes.

Unfortunately, while the fable does gain credit for adaptability and universality, it does not always gain from a literary point of view. The fable of "The Little Hound and the Ass" in the Ayenbite of Inwyt has more literary success because it remains purely an exemplum--its implicit moral is taken at face value and incorporated into a broader discourse, and the narrative therefore is not clouded and restricted. It remains independent and clear, and has an unsophisticated but charming humour all its own. It does not, however, indicate much in the way of originality or real literary excellence; it is simply a successful translation of a fable that is purely imitative of Classical Aesopic fable. Only its use--and even that not entirely so--is new to the Middle Ages. The fables of the Gesta Romanorum, while being adapted and used in a way that is a purely medieval innovation--and important for that fact--do not brighten the status of their narratives at all. The narratives are imitations and rough translations, but they do not retain the sharp characterizations and brisk narratives of their Aesopic models. The narratives are provided, it appears, only for the sake of the declaracio. Little enjoyment of the story is evinced on the part of the writer, and little is provided for the audience.

A criterion we have set for and examined in the narrative structure of the Aesopic fable is that only those events essential to the communication of the moral be included. This criterion is met quite well by the fables of the Gesta, partly of course because the writer would have found this characteristic in his sources. The way in which these narratives are combined, however, is unfortunate. There is no attempt at brisk and efficient compression; the few events are simply strung together by connectives and the odd indication of passing time. In the fable of "The Cat and the Mouse,"
the entire narrative is recounted by simple subject-verb sentences, with
the order of the parts of speech identical throughout. Each sentence begins
with "the cat" or "the mouse", occasionally preceded by an adverb. There
is little realistic narrative detail, only straightforward recounting of
events. The cat and mouse are endowed with the human characteristics of
speech and reason, but no attempt is made to give them the human characteriza-
tion of, for example, the ass in Dan Michel's fable. Their words are quoted
and their actions are described, all very loosely, and with no real feeling
for the story.

The same criticism applies to the fable of the "Eagle and the Crow." The animals mechanically recite their speeches and go through the necessary
motions. There is no attempt to communicate the sorrow or pain of the eagle,
or the wicked satisfaction of the crow. Events and dialogue are strung
together loosely with connectives, and there is little sense of movement or
of life. This fable is brief enough to warrant quoting in full to illustrate
the general qualities of the Gesta Romanorum fables.

In a tyme the Egle had sore Eyen; and he cownseyled
with the Crowe, and asked, what he myght do agayne
the diseese. The Crow seide, "I shall bryng the an
herbe, if thou wilte gife me good hire for my laboure." The Egle seide, "if thou make myn Eyen hole, thou
shalte haue wele for thy trauayle." Then the Crow
toke Onyonus and Spourge, and made perof a playster,
and leyde it on the Egles Eyen; and in shorte tyme he
was blynde. Then the crowe toke the bryddys of the
Egle, and deuovred hem; and diseed the Egle with many
betyngs. the Egle than saide to the crowe, "acursyd
be thou and thy medisyne also; for pou haste made me
blynde, and deouryd My bryddys, and sesist not to
bete me." The crow seide, "also longe as thou myght
se, I myght not come by thy briddes, that I gretly
desyred, but now pat I desyred is fulfilled."

All of the fables in the Gesta collection have these faults. The narratives
and the animal characters never really come alive. However, we must
remember that these tales, like many other exempla, may often be no more
than plot outlines for the individual preacher to expand at will. Depending on his talent and inclination, the fable heard from the pulpit might have been a much better tale than the brief narrative that is recorded.

Yet fables of this type still contribute to our understanding of the fable as a genre in the Middle Ages. The date of these particular fables is late—the English translations of the Gesta were made early in the fifteenth century—but the prevalence of this use of the fable from the twelfth century onwards, and the repetition of the same fables from the twelfth century onwards, justifies to some extent considering these fables as representative, particularly when we remember the popularity of the numerous versions of the Gesta Romanorum throughout the Middle Ages. As exempla, these fables illustrate the didactic attitude of the Middle Ages to the fable, an attitude inseparable from the conception of the genre. They represent one of the two kinds of fables that transmitted the genre to the English poets, both kinds being chiefly or entirely moral or didactic in character. The exempla fables of the clerics, more than the Isopets, were readily available to a large and varied audience, but the Gesta Romanorum especially is recognized as containing or recording the source material for much medieval literature.

There are sixteen animal narratives in the Gesta, but only eight warrant classification as fables. Those discussed above, plus the six others listed in note 52, are obviously fables according to our criteria: they are brief narratives with animals endowed with human qualities as characters, and the events portrayed point to a realization about the nature of mankind—a "moral" or bit of wisdom. "The Eagle and the Crow," "The Wolf and Swine," "The Ass and the Swine," and "The Hen and her Chicks" are considered to be most likely derived from the fables of Odo of Cheriton.53 The first also appears in the Anglo-Latin Gesta and is quoted by later Latin exempla writers, notably
Bromyard. The other fables are considered to be definitely based on Odo's versions.\textsuperscript{54} "The Burial of the Wolf" describes the court of the lion in a way that suggests Odo may have taken the incident from one of the branches of the \textit{Roman de Renart}.\textsuperscript{55} Another exemplum, "The Ape and the Nuts,"\textsuperscript{56} also based on one in Odo's collection, is not a fable. It describes the ape's habit of eating, and draws a moral application to men from it—the familiar kernel and chaff analogy. The ape is not a character at all and there is no real narrative. Rather, this is an exemplum simile, drawn probably from bestiary material; it describes the habits of an animal in an apparently scientific manner and draws an appropriate theological lesson from the description. "How a Serpent Punished the Ingratitude of a Knight"\textsuperscript{57} is derived from a Latin "Aesop," and also appears in the fables of Marie de France.\textsuperscript{58} However, neither is this a true animal fable. The serpent speaks, but its qualities are supernatural rather than human; it has the power to reward or to punish, according to the actions of the knight of the story. The tale teaches a moral, but not so much by way of illustrating human characteristics as by illustrating the ways of providence with mankind. This story is like several other animal stories in the \textit{Gesta}, of a type popular in the \textit{exempla} collections. These deal with a good or a wicked figure—in the \textit{Gesta Romanorum}, it is one who lived during the reign of a particular Roman Emperor—who encounters an animal with supernatural qualities who acts as an instrument of divine justice. These stories are interesting to our study in their choice of animal characters, for these often embody the standard characteristics applied to animal figures in medieval exegesis,\textsuperscript{59} but they cannot be classified as animal fables.

There is one other English collection of exemplar literature that
contains several fables. This is the fifteenth-century English translation of the early fourteenth-century Latin Alphabetum Narrationum, "a work held in the highest esteem by our English preachers." The English Alphabet of Tales contains five fables. There are no accompanying "moralites", and thus we cannot examine the technique of adding these explanations to the fables in this collection. However, it is certain that the fables were meant for use as exempla, either with or without the type of exegetical accompaniment found in the Gesta Romanorum. All the stories of the Alphabet are classified according to the sort of subject matter for which they can serve as exempla. The classification is followed by a brief statement of the moral or truth they illustrate, all of this preceding the narrative.

One of the fables describes two travellers, one an honest man and the other a flatterer, questioned by a patriarchal ape. The flatterer is rewarded for his lies and the honest man punished for telling the ape he is not an emperor. The narrative is followed by a statement regarding the way it can be used:

This tale is gude to tell agayn flaterers, & agayns paim pat wull here no thyng bod at is to per plesur.

Perhaps this remark is appended because the "moral" of the fable is a cynical rather than a moral observation on human nature.

Generally speaking, the narrative faults of the fables of the Gesta Romanorum apply to the Alphabet of Tales as well. The fables in the latter tend to be longer and somewhat more drawn out, without the benefit of increased effectiveness of characterization or narrative. No real descriptive detail is added. In the fable mentioned above, the narrative is stretched out over more sentences than is necessary to describe the events it does.

There are two partial exceptions. In Tale 706, "The Man, the Serpent and the Fox," the narrative, while containing a plot more complex than usual,
is quite concise, but recounted with little skill. Again, each incident is added to the preceding one with a single connective, and almost every sentence has the same simple structure. The basic plot of the fable is a good one—it is from the *Disciplina Clericalis*—and a more vivid characterization of the serpent and the fox is possible, but the possibilities are only hinted at in the flat dialogue. Tale 631, "The Lamb and the Wolf," is, in spite of its monotonous sentence structure, a rather good example of the effectiveness of concise narration in an Aesopic fable, certainly when it is compared with the other fable exempla. Unfortunately, the author spoils the effect equally concisely.

Potencia. Potentes frequenter querunt occasiones contra pauperes.

Esopus tellis in his fables how be lambe & be wulfe war bothe thrustie, and bai come bothe vnto be watir to drynk; & be wulfe dranke abown, & be lambe benethe. Than be wulfe sayd vnto be lambe; "whi haste bough troubled be watyrr vnto me?" And be lambe ans-werd hym agayn & sayd; "How sulde I make be watir drovy when itt come from the vnto me?" And bai be wulfe said; "Whi bannys bou me?" And be lambe sayd; "Nay, I ban be nott." And bai be wulfe said; "Thi fadur did vnto me mekull ill, and now I sall venge me of the." And with pat he ran on be selie lambe and worod itt. And pis had be lambe pat did no try-s-pas.

The last sentence is not only unnecessary, but it spoils what has gone before. The injustice the writer decries is far more effectively condemned by the bluntness of the wolf's remarks and final act, unmitigated by the pathetic note at the end. The flavour of Aesopic fable is captured, and then lost again with the final line.

The classifications of the Aesopic fables in the *Alphabet of Tales* is more in accord with the intrinsic moral statement of the fables than are the exegetical "morals" of the *Gesta Romanorum* fables. The narratives are expanded no further than necessary to point to the moral cited at the beginning.
of each fable, and the animals have enough human characterization to echo the tone of the Classical Aesopic fable. The fact that the truths they illustrate are realistic impressions of human nature and society reinforces this tone. This tone plus the absence of theological interpretation leaves an impression more secular than that left by the fables of the Gesta Romanorum. That both groups of fables exist solely for their didactic function of illustrating a precept is undeniable, however, for the interest in both is not in the narrative but in its lesson.

We ought to notice that of the five Aesopic fables, three begin with the remark "Esopus tellis in his fables" or something similar. One refers to a well-known source of fable exempla, Petrus Alphonsus, and Tale 191, the same as that told in Lydgate's The Churl and the Bird, has no acknowledged source, although it too appears in the Disciplina Clericalis. There is also a bestiary-derived exemplum in the Alphabet, meant for use as an illustrative simile. Once again, it is concerned with the folly of the ape.

The Middle English fables as exempla do not illustrate any literary development of the genre. Instead, they remain within the limits of the Aesopic fable without developing any of the characteristics of that type of fable beyond mediocrity. This is understandable, for their purpose is not a literary one. They do illustrate, however, a medieval attitude to narrative literature, and particularly to the fable, and thus reveal one important aspect of the medieval fable as a genre. Inherent in its form is the ability to illustrate major moral truths. It is not simply a literary exercise that centres around the choosing of a minimum of words and incidents to illustrate a truism, which then may—as in the Isopets—or may not—as in the earlier Classical fables—be explained in an appended "moral". The writers of the Isopets found this "moral" more interesting, for it allowed more scope for
individual elaboration. In the exempla the moralitas of the exemplum in its context outside the narrative usurps the interest of the narrative to both writer and audience, for the narrative exists only to produce this effect.

The exempla include the earliest known attempts at animal fable in Middle English. Created to teach a lesson by means of entertainment, they are nonetheless primarily moral, although of course the inclination of individual preachers may often have transformed the brief examples that are recorded into very amusing and memorable tales. But the narratives as we know them are used to illustrate a moral or theological thesis, and have no independent status. The authors are not interested in the narrative or in the characters beyond the general moral of each tale, even though an occasional circumstance produces a narrative or an animal character described realistically and unpredictably. In brief, the authors of these works are not really interested in the fable as a genre. This is self-evident from the nature of sermon exempla, which are nonetheless of interest to our study not only because they are among the first Middle English fables, but precisely because they illustrate the moral and didactic tendency of the fable, particularly in the Middle Ages.


5 Owst, Pulpit, p. 152.

6 Macrobius, Somnium Scipionis, I, 2; Isidore of Seville, Etymologies, I, 41.

7 Mosher, p. 7.

8 Ibid., p. 12. Exempla apparently were not used commonly in sermons until the time of the preaching friars (the twelfth century).


14 Song of Solomon, 3:15. Cf. chapter five, note 37 below.


16 Aristotle, Historia Animalium, ed. and trans. D'arcy Wentworth
Thompson, Vol. IV of The Works of Aristotle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910). In Book X, 1, Aristotle says that longer-lived animals are more capable of developing "passions", but he does not actually associate animals with particular psychological attributes, except for the sheep. In Book IX, 3, the sheep is called "naturally dull and stupid." Further discussion of psychological qualities is limited to the differences between the sexes. In this work Aristotle does state that the qualities of men and animals are often alike (VIII, 1).

Heraldry incorporated animal symbolism that was not inconsistent with the kind of explanations given in the bestiaries but intended positive rather than negative aspects for the animals. See H. Alcock, Heraldic Design (New York: Tudor, 1962); J. Thorold, The Wreath of Heraldry (Bath: n. p., 1830); and W. C. Wade, The Symbolisms of Heraldry (London: Redway, 1898).


Mabel Day, ed., The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle, EETS OS 225 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 90. A list of the seven deadly sins (pp. 87 ff.) describes each as an animal with a bestiary-type explanation similar to that offered for the fox. The animals, besides the fox, are the lion of pride, the serpent of envy, the unicorn of wrath, the bear of sloth, the swine of gluttony and the scorpion of lechery.


Day, p. 90.

Brandeis, p. 90.

Ross, p. 181.

See note 23 above.

See p. 31 below.
31 Mosher, p. 54.
33 Mosher, pp. 66-67.
34 Herrtage, pp. xv ff.; Mosher, p. 79; Owst, *Preaching*, p. 300.
35 Mosher, pp. 80-82.

37 See pp. 3-6. In his *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Owst suggests that attempting to define the "terms of formal moralization" is ineffective, as "no such restriction of usage seems to have existed, even among the latest medieval homilists." He then suggests that we treat the terms loosely, and establishes the following sensible divisions. "The best use of these terms that can be devised in the circumstances, therefore, is to treat the word 'Example' as the general all-inclusive term for any kind of homiletic simile or illustration, while reserving the 'Narration' for stories of men and women, the 'Fable' for animal tales, and the 'Figure' for similitudes from natural objects" (p. 152).

39 Ibid., p. xi.
41 This description is peculiar to the Middle English version.
43 Ibid., unpaginated Preface.
45 Warnke, pp. 53-56.
47 Mosher, p. 79.
52 Besides "The Cat and the Fox" and "The Eagle and the Crow," the English Gesta includes the following fables: "The Cat and the Mouse" (pp. 364-65), "The Wolf and the Swine" (pp. 368-69), "The Ass and the Swine" (pp. 369-70), "The Hen and her Chickens" (pp. 370-71), "The Wolf and the Hare" (pp. 373-74), and "The Burial of the Wolf" (pp. 372-73). The page numbers refer to Herrtage's edition.

55 See especially the interpretations in the Gesta of these stories: "The Three Cocks" (pp. 98-101), "The Lion who punishes a false wife" (pp. 245-49), and "Androcles and the Lion" (pp. 327-31). The page numbers refer to Herrtage's edition.

65 The testimony of Marie de France is accepted by most scholars: "there is no reason to doubt the word of Marie de France who . . . tells us that she . . . translated her Fables from English into French." (J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, eds., Early Middle English Verse and Prose (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. xiv.
Early in the fifteenth century John Lydgate wrote a collection of Aesopic fables, Isopes Fabules, and a longer fable borrowed from a French version of the Disciplina Clericalis, "The Churl and the Bird." Unfortunately, Lydgate's poems do not advance the narrative status of the fable much beyond what it achieved in the utilitarian exempla, even though his writing poems rather than examples in homilies suggests an interest in poetic achievement. The Isopes Fabules contain little real narrative, and consist almost entirely of moralization. "The Churl and the Bird" is a happier result of Lydgate's interest in the animal fable, however, and when he allows himself to indulge in narration after a dull prologue, he offers a good tale.

The Isopes Fabules were not written for practical use as exempla, but nonetheless they do not carry the genre beyond the bounds it has in the collections intended for the use of churchmen. Lydgate's fables are in verse, in the Chaucerian stanza, suggesting that they are meant to be taken seriously as the work of a literary man. They are much longer than any of the medieval fables we have considered, including Latin and French as well as Middle English versions. In form they resemble the Isopets: they are in verse, the collection is preceded by a prologue, and each fable has its own moralitas. But a closer examination will reveal that the presentation of Lydgate's Fabules relates them more closely to the exemplum tradition than to the Classical form or the medieval imitations of the Aesopic fable.

Lydgate apparently wrote his fables as a kind of academic exercise. It has been believed that they were written while he was studying at Oxford at the beginning of the fifteenth century, although Derek Pearsall suggests
that at least the last three fables, which are much slighter than the first four, were written later, perhaps as an exercise to be returned to. Lydgate's interest in writing fables can be understood in terms of the history of medieval fable literature as we have examined it to this point. The use of fables as Latin grammatical exercises as well as in homiletics would interest Lydgate as student and as clergyman. His source is a Latin Romulus, probably one which was based on the fables of Marie de France or at least like them, so he would have been exposed to the Isopets' treatment of Aesopic fable in this way at least. It is quite likely, though, that he would have been familiar with the popular continental verse fables, certainly with the two collections of Alexander Neckam. Lydgate's moralizing impulse suggests that neither exemplum fables nor the moral Isopets would have disagreed with his inclinations. But whatever his initial motivation, Lydgate's purpose in the Isopes Fabules is clear enough. In this first English collection of fables, the narrative style of the Aesopic fable almost disappears, for it is completely overshadowed by the didactic purpose.

The Prologue to the Fabules makes it clear that the poet's intent is didactic. His preoccupation is apparent in the opening stanza:

Wisdom ys more in prise, pen gold in cofers,  
To hem, pat haue sauour in lettrure.  
Olde examples of prudent philosophers  
Moche auaylyd to folke pat dyd her cure  
To serche out lykenes in nature,  
In whyche men myght conceue & clerely see  
Notable sentence of gret moralyte.  

(lines 1-7)

Here we have the rationale for the interest in animals and natural history that produced the bestiaries. Lydgate uses it to justify his writing about animals. The next three stanzas describe the wisdom that is to be found in "fables rude", as precious stones are found under "blak erpe." These
statements are conventional medieval justifications for writing anything fictitious—Henryson's Prologue to his fable collection expresses similar sentiments—but Lydgate's interest in the "wisdom" of the fables and his feelings about the inferiority of narrative itself, as expressed in these stanzas, are borne out in the fables themselves.

Lydgate's first fable is that of the "Cock and the Jewel". Before the narrative even begins, Lydgate goes on at length—six stanzas and four lines—to describe the qualities of a cock, borrowing bestiary material and standard exegesis to explain the virtues of this noble fowl. The quality he stresses is the chief one ascribed to the cock in medieval exegesis, that of wakefulness. The cock represents the virtuous creature who puts aside the sin of sloth and all its attendant evils. He guards against the devil, singing away the blackness of night and heralding the morning.

Thys foule ys waker ayen be vyce of sloube,
In vertu strong & hardy as a lyon,
Stable as a geaunt, opon a grounde of troube,
Ayene all vyces be morall champion,
And with be entewnes of hys melodious soun
He yeuep ensample, as he hys voyce dop reyse,
Howe day & night we the lord shall preyse.

(lines 92-98)

Having established the virtues of his hero—and thus stressed the importance of those virtues—Lydgate begins his fable. This reminds one of the exemplum technique: the poet has uttered a lengthy discourse on the qualities of a particular beast, and now sets about to illustrate these virtues in a narrative describing the beast in action. All the while, however, we can scarcely forget that the poet is discussing a virtue embodied in the animal kingdom for the edification of human beings.

Ten lines are now devoted to narrative. The cock is up early looking for breakfast. He finds a jewel while he is looking for food. The fact that
he finds this jewel in a dunghill is mentioned by Lydgate, but the possibilities for moralizing on this narrative detail do not occur to him. Instead, he digresses into four stanzas of moralizing on the cock's "dylygent trauayle" and the dreadful fate of those men who are slothful and ignore the cock's good example. Another stanza is thus necessary to remind us of the narrative—it repeats what was told before. Next follows the speech of the cock to the stone. Here Lydgate inserts lapidary material to stress the virtues and beauties of the stone: the well-read cock recognizes the peculiar worth of this one. However, he decides that it is of no use to him:

Yet for all by vertuous excellence
Twene pe & me ys no conuenience.

(lines 160-61)

Then—for six stanzas—the cock moralizes on why this is so. Each must remain where it belongs, he says, and all must make decisions according to their own state.

Precious stonys nopyng appertayne
To gese nor favlys, at pasture on pe grene.

(lines 195-96)

The cock thus states the moral at the conclusion of the action, as the animals in Aesopic fable often do. Lydgate, in the tradition of the Isopets and the exempla, appends a "Lenuoy" in which he states the moral. This is a repetition of his own remarks interspersed between the few lines of narrative and the discourse of the cock. Diligence—the putting aside of sloth—leads men on to right decisions, which always means the acceptance of one's estate, of one's position in the ordered universe.

Before going on to the other fables in Lydgate's collection, let us pause briefly to examine this one in terms of the criteria for Aesopic fables. Certainly, we have here a brief narrative—only sixteen lines, excluding the
cock's speech, are devoted to narration of events, and three of these are repetitive. The cock is endowed with human qualities in that he speaks and reasons. But neither of these characteristics apply in the same way as they did in the imitations of Aesopic fables we have examined to this point. Lydgate's cock is not a representation of a certain kind of human being. He embodies a human virtue, a theological virtue, and is so weighted with exegetical associations that he cannot function as an independent character. Whereas Aesopic beasts represent or illustrate human characteristics or actions, this cock is a static embodiment of a preconceived pattern of virtues he has been created to illustrate. And we are not at all conscious of the narrative, of the description of his particular activities, pointing to the moral, for the moral is stated and restated before, during, and after the narrative so often that the narrative becomes entirely secondary. It is simply a minor illustration of a point the poet is making: "the cock represents all these virtues; for example, look at his reaction to this situation. Now let his virtues be a lesson to you." The narrative is an exemplum of sorts, but its Aesopic elements are clouded beyond recognition. Lydgate has created his own kind of fable from the medieval fable traditions he knew. But let us examine the other Isopes Fabules before we attempt to define Lydgate's handling of the genre.

Lydgate's second fable is the familiar story of "The Wolf and the Lamb." The poet begins with moralizations: there is no compromise between right and wrong, and of necessity the weak have no power against the strong. This time however he restricts his prefatory remarks to three stanzas, and then sets the stage for his drama between strength and weakness. Unfortunately, the few prefatory remarks have already removed the vigour of characterization possible in this story, for the lamb and wolf, long before they appear, are reduced
to symbols of right and wrong, weakness and strength, by the opening
moralizations and profusion of examples:

Atwene rancour & humble pacience
Ther ys in nature a gret diuision:
A sely shepe make may no resistence
Ageyn pe power of a strong lyon:

Who haue most myght, pe febler gladly sewes:
The pore haue few hys party to socour.
The rauenous wolf opon pe lambe dope lour; . . . .

(lines 232-35, 241-43)

The narrative is interrupted after the stage is set with a moralization
on what is to come: the strong can afford to attack the weak without justifi-
cation. The wolf makes his accusation and the lamb answers. There is only
one speech by each party. Rather than illustrating the wolf's unreasonable-
ness by letting him trump up one feeble excuse after another, as he does in
the Alphabet, Lydgate combines all of the wolf's accusations into one. The
three accusations in the traditional tale illustrate the wolf's wicked
nature much more directly than all Lydgate's pejorative adjectives can. The
lamb's response is rather fatalistic. He retires from the water immediately,
after only the comment that the wolf is unjust.

I may not chese: be chyse to yow ys fall.
Hyt were but foly for me with yow to stryue.
Ye shall for me haue your desyres all:
Of your ryght I wyll nat yow depryue."

(lines 281-84)

His behaviour is in keeping with the moral Lydgate draws from this fable:
the law may not help the poor and weak, but they go to heaven, and thus their
meekness is rewarded. This rather despicably complacent platitude Lydgate
seems determined to accept. It is like his favourite moral: we must all
accept our station in life and be content with it. He does, however, seem
to realize that his moral in "The Wolf and the Lamb" is not very satisfactory,
and to make it more acceptable commends the usefulness of the lamb—even a dead lamb—and stresses the wickedness and uselessness of the wolf. His fable, he says in conclusion, has pointed out the great diversities— injustices, but he does not use the word—that exist in nature and society, and has praised one and condemned the other. His praise and condemnation, however, are very calm. His moral is that these things exist, but they will be rewarded by Heaven or Hell, and therefore we must accept them now, as nature teaches us through cases like that described in the fable. Like the analogous Aesopic fable, this illustrates a truth about the nature of human life, but rather than illustrating it to impart wisdom and awareness of the evils of the world, and to register protest against them, Lydgate's moral tries to reconcile them, and diminishes the tale's unpleasant reality.

"The Frog and the Mouse" opens also with four stanzas of moralizing against deception, attached of course to Lydgate's doctrine that deceit or truthfulness are characteristics of certain types of creatures who represent similar natures in human beings. Once again then the possibility for individuality in the animal characters about to appear is removed; they are to be types drawn upon by the poet to illustrate his thesis.

\begin{verbatim}
Aftyr þeyr naturall disposicions
In man & beste ys shewyd experyence:
Som haue to vertew þeyr inclinacions,
Oone to profyte, anoper to do offence;
Som man pesyble, som man dop violence;
Som man delytep in troupe in hys entent,
Anoper reloysep to be fraudulent.
\end{verbatim}

(lines 372-378)

He then endeavors to present a sympathetic portrait of his mouse, part of whose characterization seems to be suggested by the country mouse in the well-known fable of the two mice. She is content with her lot in life and expresses this sentiment in eight stanzas: this is a great virtue, according
to Lydgate, and he relishes in its expression. The mouse's pompous speech makes her quite ridiculous, though not intentionally; she is like the cock in the first fable—a vehicle for moralization rather than a character. The mouse is kind to her guest the frog, who offers to show her his home but actually means to drown her en route. In the original fable the mouse only wishes to cross the river for food; the device of the two animals visiting each other is Lydgate's own, and one is inclined to believe he employed it in order to include the lengthy discourse on the happiness of being content with what one has. It is not necessary to the story, for the frog's behaviour would not be any less vicious if he had not first been the mouse's guest. That fact, however, gives Lydgate opportunity to moralize on "pe vyce of ingratitude" as well as on the vice and the due reward of deceit, the moral which the fable is meant to illustrate:

For whyche Isopus in hys fynall entent
Thys fable wrote full sobly in hys wyt:
Who usep fraude, with freude shalbe quyt.

(lines 523-25)

The most satisfying fable in Lydgate's collection is "The Hownde and the Shepe." The opening moralization is restricted to two stanzas which describe the evil nature and appearance of false witnesses. The narrative follows, but it is introduced by a remark characterizing its function:

Whyche byng the evil of bearing false witness to preue by exsamples full notable
Of olde Isopus whylom wrote pys fable.

(lines 538-39)

The fable is identified as a purely exemplary narrative before it starts, but the narrative itself manages to break free from the restrictions placed around it. It is lengthy without being loose or wordy; the added details all contribute to the effectiveness of the narrative as an illustration, not just of a moral, but of an actual human situation. There is a certain
sense of realism in the characterizations of the animals and the descriptions of their court. For example, witness Lydgate's description of the sheep's amazement at being accused:

The sely sheepe, astonied on his sight,
Stoode abasshed ful like an innocence;
To helpe hymself cowde fynde no diffence.

(lines 565-67)

Lydgate even attempts irony, with some success, in this fable. The hound describes his two witnesses thus:

"To offende trewth the wolf doth gretly drede,
He is so stidefast and triew of his nature,
The gentil kyte hath refused al falshe, 
He had lever grete hunger to endure,
Lovyng no raueyn vnto his pasture,
Thanne take a chykken, by record of writyng,
To his repast, or any goselyng."

(lines 596-602)

The consistent portrayals of both these creatures in the fables, in bestiary literature, and in the beast epics makes the hound's oath even more insincere than if one were familiar only with the natural animals. And in the two fables preceding this one, Lydgate has portrayed the wolf and the kite as anything but true and gentle. The fate of the sheep even prompts our moralizing poet to a little scholarly wit:

The ram of Colchos bare a flees of gold, 
Whiche was conquered manly by Iason; 
But this sheepe, when he his flees hath sold, 
With cold constrayned, wynter cam upon, 
Deyd at myschief, . . . .

(lines 624-28)

All in all, the narrative provides a scene much more lively and realistic than those in the other fables of the Isopes Fabules. The sheep is not prone to uttering long-winded moral discourses, and all the animals behave in a manner that gives the fable a quality not unlike the humour and realism of similar scenes in Henryson's fables and the beast epics. The evil of
bearing false witness and the shame of hypocrisy are communicated well, in an entertaining fashion and with a touch much lighter than usual by the end of the narrative.

Unfortunately, the effect is lost. His sheep dead, Lydgate launches into a lengthy and truly heavy-handed discourse that destroys the realism achieved in the narrative and reduces the remarkably independent fable to another example in a series of moral illustrations. There are three stanzas devoted to "examples" of the evils that begin with false witness. This is followed by a diatribe in which the Bible and Robert Holkot, and finally Aesop, are cited. The length and scope of this sermon against false witnesses effectively reduces the fable to the status of a simple exemplum whose only importance to the author is derived from the work in which it is included.

The remaining three stories in the Isopes Fabules are shorter and slighter than the first four fables. The fable of "The Wolf and the Crane" is brief but effective as an illustration of the ingratitude of the wicked and powerful, in the style of the Aesopic fable. Once again, however, Lydgate insists on adding a lengthy moral that cites similar instances of tyranny and urges men to avoid tyrants. The moral is simply a needless addition of six stanzas that repeats what the fable has expressed but thus denies the fable the independence it deserves. "The Sun's Marriage" is another exemplum, but not an animal fable. The final fable, "The Hound and the Cheese," is brief and imitative enough to be truly Aesopic but the hound is not endowed with any human qualities. And once more Lydgate presses his moral upon us in two subsequent stanzas, urging us to be content with our lot in life.

In the parts of his Isopes Fabules, excepting "The Hownde and the Shepe," that are narrative, Lydgate's fable style is Aesopic. When he tells his story he does more or less imitate the manner of the Isopets, the Classical fables,
and the exempla. But Lydgate does so much more than merely tell a story in his fables that one cannot feel justified in calling them Aesopic. The narrative is suspended in a welter of moralizations and exemplary similes. The appended "morals" are not explanations of the narratives, but elaborations of the moralizing that appears before and during the narrative. The narrative itself thus becomes a mere illustration of Lydgate's moral sermon; basically it is simply an exemplum. Neither does the length of the moralizations Lydgate adds provide any saving grace; they are heavy and monotonous, for they are entirely repetitive, and bring no fresh approach to the narrative. The basic moral of the fable is repeated in a number of ways, is illustrated with additional brief examples, and is related to the chief moral sentiment that unites the collection, that of the necessity and virtue of accepting one's station. Lydgate expands the genre in length, but not in scope. His amplified fables do not really go beyond the simple exempla, and are in fact less successful because they pretend to more.

The length of Lydgate's fables would lead one to suspect that his animal characters would be more fully developed. Lydgate was certainly familiar with some of the effects of the beast epics on the portrayal of animals, if only through the Nun's Priest's Tale, but in all the fables except "The Hownde and the Shepe" he does not appear at all influenced by this novel and vital form of animal characterization, unless we consider his naming the cock in the first fable an influence. Again excepting the characters in "The Hownde and the Shepe," Lydgate's animals scarcely have the realistic characterization of the animals in the better exempla—the ass in the Ayenbyt of Invyt, for example. The cock and the mouse are simply mouthpieces, the wolf a stock type, the lamb a rather unbelievable embodiment of the meekness the poet recommends. Bestiary and traditional exegetical associations so
crowd the cock that he cannot emerge from his figurative function. Lydgate can perhaps be given credit for combining bestiary and fable material, but his narratives gain nothing by the combination. All the material he adds—bestiary, lapidary, didactic, theological—tends to be either repetitive or superfluous, reducing his fables to nothing more than exempla within an entirely didactic framework.

"The Churl and the Bird" is a much more successful fable. Written not much later than the *Isopes Fabules*, it owes much of its success to a strong Chaucerian influence on its language. It also owes much to the quality of the story itself, a popular tale from the *Disciplina Clericalis* involving a clever bird and a foolish man. The bird is fully characterized, and her wit, wisdom, and enjoyment of teaching her captor a lesson are communicated through her extensive dialogues with him. Lydgate's bird, in spite of her lengthy moralizing speeches, is not simply a vehicle for a moral but is indeed an independent character.

The narrative begins with a description of a pleasant setting, the garden carefully built by the churl, into which the bird is introduced naturally.

Mid the gardeyn stood a fressh laurer,  
Theron a brid syngyng, bothe day & nyht,  
With sonnyssh fetheris brihter than gold wer,  
Which with hir song makith heuy hertis liht,  
That to bihold it was an heuenly siht  
How toward evyn & in the dawenyng,  
She did hir peyn most amorously to syng.  

(lines 57-63)

The churl captures the bird and places her in a cage, Lydgate managing to narrate this event with effective brevity (lines 76-77). The bird's cleverness, however, is the strongest quality of the narrative. She refuses to sing in captivity, and when the churl suggests making a meal of her instead
she offers him "thre greet wisdames" (line 159) in exchange for her freedom. She does hold true to her promise, but, happy to be free again, cannot resist teasing her foolish captor:

"Thou were," quod she, "a verry natural foole, To sofre me departe of thi lewdesse, Ther is a ston which caliid is iagounce, Off old engendrid withynne my entrayle, ..."

(lines 225-26, 232-33)

The churl is appropriately regretful, and by his lament proves that the bird's low opinion of him is just. She then explains how the wisdom she has given him was as wasted on him as a precious stone would have been, and relishes in explaining how he has already forgotten each of the three lessons. The portrait of a small bird reproving a man for stupidity is truly delightful, for, ironically, here the human being is churlish--bestially stupid--and the animal enlightened:

"It were but foly with the for to carpe, Or to preche of wisdamys more or lasse, I hold hym mad that bryngith foorth an harpe, Ther-on to teche a rude, for-dullid asse; And mad is he that syngith a fool a masse; And he most mad that dooth his besynesse To teche a cherl termys of gentilnesse."

(lines 337-43)

That such words are spoken by a bird indicates that Lydgate does here recognize the possibilities of developing animal characters as commentators upon human beings.

Lydgate's narrative in this fable is sometimes marred by his usual moralizing bent. "He extracts every ounce of morality"; the bird elaborates the three lessons when the churl has disregarded them, she utters a long discourse on the value of freedom and the dangers of captivity, and even offers further illustrations of Lydgate's favourite moral.
"Thus every thyng, as clerkes specifie,  
Frute on trees, & folk of every age,  
Fro whens thei cam, their taken a tarage."

(lines 348-50)

The Prologue, "the language of which is very turgid," provides the typical justification of writing fables. Scripture uses the same means to teach lessons, and thus poets have used parables also; natural objects, after all, are useful for illustrating Lydgate's typical theme:

Thus of al thyng ther been dyuersites,  
Some of estat, & som of lowe degrees.

(lines 27-28)

But in all fairness to Lydgate we must notice that neither in Prologue nor the concluding stanzas does he repeat the lessons of his narrative in more than a few brief summarizing remarks. The fable is left to stand on its own, and the dominant impression left in the minds of the audience is the bird's delight in her freedom and in her own wit. Even her remarks about "like to like" take the form of very attractive description of the natural scene:

"And semblably in Aprill and in May,  
Whan gentil briddis make most melodie,  
The cobkkow syngen can but o lay,  
In othir tymes she hath no fantaseye; ... ."  

(lines 344-47)

"The vynteneer tretith of his holsom wynes,  
Off gentil frute bostith the gardeneer,  
The ffissher cast his hookis & his lynes,  
To catche ffissh in every fresh ryveer, ... ."  

(lines 351-54)

"The Churl and the Bird," then, illustrates that the fable, even in the hands of an unlikely fabulist, can be expanded into a genuinely successful narrative, combining literary quality with a comment upon human beings as well. For all Lydgate's seriousness, the comment in "The Churl and the Bird" is
an amused one. As in "The Hownde and the Shepe," Lydgate develops his animal character and enjoys its animal nature, balancing that with the human role it is given.

Lydgate's collection of fables as a whole, however, does not evince any interest in the fable as narrative poetry. In the Isopes Fabules, the fable is to Lydgate a moral vehicle, and the narrative does not interest him any more--indeed, sometimes it interests him much less--than it did the preachers. Lydgate's two felicitous encounters with his chosen genre in "The Churl and the Bird" and "The Hownde and the Shepe," however that fable may be smothered by the moralizations that are welded to it, give solitary suggestions that the genre can yield more literary fruit than its exponent seems aware of in his other fables.
FOOTNOTES


3 P. 192.

4 Plessow, pp. xlii-iii; Schirmer, p. 23.

5 It is found in the Novus Aesopus, the Isopet de Paris, the Isopet de Chartres, the Isopet I, the Isopet de Lyon and the various Romulus collections (see Bastin, I, 1), as well as in the fables of Phaedrus. Henryson retains the original plot.


7 Pearsall, p. 198.

8 Ibid., p. 199.
CHAPTER THREE
ROBERT HENRYSON'S TRANSFORMATION
OF THE MORAL FABLE

There are only two known collections of animal fables from the medieval period of English literature, and each represents a different extreme of literary worth. Were the collection of Lydgate unique, there would be little justification for examining traditional Aesopic development in Middle English. But in the late fifteenth century the Scottish poet Robert Henryson wrote a collection of fables, largely based upon the traditional and long popular Aesopic versions, but treated with such originality and real literary ability that the humble fable as we have examined it so far can scarcely be recognized. In at least seven of the Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian, Henryson reworks traditional Aesopic fables, and in all we can see his awareness of the role of the beast fable as exemplum, not least through his appreciation of its didactic purpose. But unlike the exempla and Lydgate's fables, Henryson's collection does not find its sole raison d'être in this didactic purpose. Henryson teaches and delights: the Morall 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.

Like Lydgate, Henryson groups his fables into one collection introduced by a prologue. Also like Lydgate, he uses his Prologue as an apology for the genre and for his own poor skill. The argument is a familiar one, and employs the conventional metaphors of nutshell and kernel, soil and fruit. However, in the Prologues of the two poets, one can already detect the great difference in their attitudes to the fable, the difference that is so marked when the two collections are each seen whole. Lydgate begins, not with the pleasures
of poetry, the chaff through which the fruit is produced, but with the pleasures of wisdom, the fruit itself. Henryson begins with the praise of poetry's beauty that is in itself at least partial apology for its fiction:

Thocht feinyeit fabils of ald poetre
Be not al grunded upon truth, yit than
Thair polite termes of sweit rhetore
Richt plesand ar unto the eir of man; . . . .

(lines 1-4)

The remainder of Lydgate's apology indeed makes very little reference to this pleasant chaff; it is the "moralytees full notable of sentence" of Aesop that are so pleasant. One wonders why Lydgate bothers with the fable at all when he is so convinced that the lesson alone is quite pleasant enough. Lydgate uses four stanzas to praise these pleasures; Henryson also uses four stanzas to justify his choice of genre, but he puts them to much better use.

Henryson praises poetry at the opening of his Prologue not only for its pleasures but for its value as a corrector of mankind's weaknesses through metaphor, thus establishing himself, like other medieval fabulists, as a moralist. However, his seriousness does not injure his judgment of art. Poetry has nonetheless "sweit rhetore" and "subtell dyte," he never gives poetry, other than his own, any of the sententious attributes Lydgate does--"fables rude," or a comparison with "blak erpe." Clearly, Henryson loves and respects good poetry, and means to give it further credit by writing good poetry himself. But his interest is not only style. Subject matter, too, need not be entirely moral to be valuable. The third and fourth stanzas of the Prologue already suggest the realism and humanitarianism with which the Morall Fabillis have always been credited. Henryson is quite aware that the sobre mien is not always the way to successful instruction. The argument of the exponents of pulpit exempla is brought forth, but here
it has a genuine humanity:

And clerkis sayis it is richt profitabill
Amangis ernist to ming ane merie sport,
To light the spreit and gar the tyme be schort.

(lines 19-21)

Henryson sums the matter up with an expression that illustrates the timelessness of a work often considered a document of fifteenth-century Scottish views and circumstances:

Forthermair, ane bow that is ay bent
Worthis unsmart and dullis on the string:
Sa dois the mynd that is ay diligent
In ernistfull thochtis and in studying:
With sad materis sum merines to ming
Accordis weill: . . .

(lines 22-27)

The Prologue, then, shows Henryson to be genuinely concerned to delight as well as teach. In stanza two he has stated that it is up to the readers of his stories to find the "morall sweit sentence" in the "subtell dyte of poetry:" "To gude purpois quha culd it weill apply." Following the expression of the need to entertain and the conventional medieval topos of apologising for his lack of skill, Henryson gives what seems at first a conventional explanation of writing animal fables, their ability to show

How mony men in operatioun
Ar like to beistis in condioun.

(lines 48-49)

By having the Prologue culminate in the two stanzas that draw the parallel between man and beast, he makes it clear that whatever he says about animals in the fables to follow, he intends to be applicable to men as well. The initial explanation of the purpose of the fable given in the first stanza--"to repreif the haill misleving/ Off man be figure of ane uther thing,"--is elaborated by the fruit and chaff image, and stressed through the repetition
of "figure" in the last stanza. "Esope . . . Be figure wrait his buke"
clearly indicates that the animals we are to meet in the fables are really
figures of humanity. But Henryson's arranging his Prologue the way he does,
letting it build up to the consciousness of bestiality in human beings,
though followed by a reminder that the fable uses animals figurally, stresses
his awareness of a consequent interchange and multiplication of meaning:
his animals figure human qualities or human beings, but human beings also,
through their behaviour, "in brutal beistis are transformate." Thus the
correspondence is more complex than a simply figural one. Indeed, it is a
whole series of two-way correspondences between fable characters and human
beings, from the basic fact of animals speaking and thinking in the narra­
tives to the application of figure, and from human beings--through their
behaviour--providing models for the portrayal of the animals to varying
extents, to their actually being like these animals in a literal sense.
Henryson is using conventional ideas about the fable, but his consciousness
of their implications for animal narratives gives us a broader perspective
on the tales that are to follow. Not only in the morals we are to extract,
but in our literal reading of the narratives themselves, we are to be aware
of a constant co-existence of multiple human-animal correspondences. One of
Henryson's great strengths is that this awareness works as effectively upon
the solaas of his fables as upon the sentence.

Given Henryson's obvious concern that the fable delight as well as teach,
an examination of the ability of the Morall Fabillis to "light the spreit"
seems justified before going on to consider them from a more complete generic
point of view. As the sources of the Fabillis include both traditional
Aesopic fables and stories drawn from the cyclical beast epics, the latter
emphasizing the entertainment function of narrative much more than the
former, we ought to examine fables based upon both. "The Tail of the Wolf and the Wedder" and "The Tail of the Uplondis Mous and the Burges Mous" belong to the former category, while "The Tail of the Wolf that gat the Nek-hering throw the wriniks of the Foxe that begydit the Cadgear" is based upon stories from the Reynard epics. Henryson's consistent handling of both kins of material suggests that these two forms of animal narrative are not so separate as is sometimes thought; both types, at least, testify to equal concern on the poet's part for writing good poetry, and telling a good story.

"The Tail of the Wolf and the Wedder" is a good starting point for an examination of Henryson's narrative style as it is shaped to fulfill his expressed wish in the Prologue: it is filled with unreserved comedy, even burlesque, that is obviously enjoyed for its own sake. It also illustrates Henryson's reworking of source material for the improvement of the narrative--unlike what is often the case with medieval Aesopic fables, the motives of the characters and the circumstances of the narrative are rationalized. The humour of "The Wolf and the Wether" is inherent in the basic plot as Henryson found it in the corpus of Aesopic fable: a wether is dressed in the skin of a fierce dog in order to protect the flock of the shepherd when the dog who has been the scourge of the neighbouring predators dies. He is, of course, ultimately revealed and destroyed. Henryson elaborates this basic situation and fully exploits its comic potential. In his poem, the wether deceives himself as his belligerence becomes more and more successful, and climbs to the heights of folly by pursuing a wolf long after it is necessary for him to do so; it is this "ludicrous belligerence that is the essence of the comedy."

The comic tone of the tale is set shortly after the opening lines have established the situation: the shepherd, upon the loss of his dog, bursts
into a lamentatio elevating the dog (who is shortly afterwards to be unceremoniously skinned) to the rank of hero:

"Now is my darling deid, allace!" quod he;  
"For now to beg my braid I may be boun,  
With pyikstaff and with scrip to fair off toun;  
For all the beistis befoir bandonit bene  
Will schute upon my beistis with ire and tene!"

(lines 2471-75)

One must acknowledge the suspicion that the shepherd is somewhat inadequate, and the suspicion is confirmed when he replies to the wether's suggestion,

"This come of ane gude wit;  
Thy counsell is baith sicker, lieill and trew;  
Quha sayis ane scheip is daft, thay lieit of it."

(lines 2490-92)

Four stanzas of the narrative are taken up with the wether's furious--and completely pointless--pursuit of the wolf. The irony of the situation is repeatedly brought forward, so that the fury of the chase is undercut and thus transformed to the ridiculous. The beginning of the wether's pursuit is compared with the behaviour of a dog, reminding the reader that the wether is a wether clothed in a dog's skin:

Went never hound mair haistelie fra the hand  
Quhen he wes rynnand maist raklie at the ra . . . .

(lines 2518-19)

This is not a hound chasing a roe, but a wether chasing a wolf, a ludicrous situation made even more so by the wether's vow "to God that he suld have him" (line 2524). The behaviour of the wolf in the course of the chase is developed with an obvious enjoyment of the ridiculous. His fear causes him to defecate repeatedly, and in complete despair he casts away the lamb he has stolen. The tale reaches the heights of the ridiculous--and indeed in so doing precludes the need for a pointed moral--when the wether, victorious in his aim until now, shows his "gude wit" by calling out
"in faith, we part not swa:
It is not the lamb bot the that I desyre;
I sall cum neir, for now I se the tyre."

(lines 2534-36)

Another eight lines of chase seem to confirm the wether's supremacy and the defeat of the wolf, but in one line that is a masterstroke of ironic undercutting, the entire foolish situation is returned to the reality beneath the wether's feint:

The wedder followit him baith out and in,
Quhill that ane breir-busk raif rudelie off the skyn.

(lines 2544-45)

After the rough and tumble pursuit through bush and briar, the narrative jolts to a halt, and the wolf blinks his eyes as reality confronts him. His bad temper is understandable, and the potential for humour is not left unfulfilled. The wether's feeble and most wether-like reply to the wolf's angry questions is another example of a single line conveying a good part of the comic impact, and, like the vivid pursuit and brief unmasking, can be readily visualized: "'Maister,' quod he, I meant 'bot to have playit with yow'" (line 2558). The wether as hero is rapidly reduced to his true stature.

The fable does not end, however, until Henryson has delivered a few more strokes to underline the ironies of the appearance-reality dichotomy that is the basis of the comedy. In reply to the wolf's angry description of the pains he has suffered, the wether subserviently replies, "'My mynd wes never to do your persoun ill'" (line 2575); it is by now painfully obvious that he is completely incapable of such action. His fierce pursuit of the wolf and his pride end in these remarks, once again rendered obviously meaningless by the realities of the situation:
"And I sail gar my freindis blis your banis:
Ane full gude servand will crab his maister anis."

(lines 2579-80)

In a last ironic touch, Henryson shows the one way in which the wether can be useful to the wolf, and at the same time provides the obvious conclusion to his folly; he is dispatched in a brief two lines.

While the events of this fable--the death of the dog, the wether's plan, the pursuit of the wolf, and the final confrontation--are described with comic relish and considerable detail, the turning points of the plot are given in brief one or two-line accounts. The strength of the humour lies in the ironies resulting from the posturing of the wether as something he is not--the ludicrous disparity between appearance and reality--and Henryson accentuates them through punctuating his narrative with these brief but complete depictions and suggestions of the reality beneath the appearance. Thus the intervening narrative too is seen in ironic terms.

Henryson's skill in dealing with fable material can be further illustrated in this poem by a brief examination of his adaptation of source material. We have already noticed the emphasis on the self-deception and belligerence of the wether, and the great effectiveness this has one the comedy. In the Aesopic version, the wether is very passive, and there is no mention of the wolf dropping the lamb and the wether persisting in the chase. Also, the dog's sudden death makes more sense than the old age that carries him off in Caxton's Aesopic version: one would wonder how he had been so fierce if so old, and why the shepherd was so unprepared. Finally, in Henryson there is no mention of the wolf eating the wether; he kills him to vent his anger, not to satisfy his hunger. This detail makes the wether's protestations of playing games and doing service all the more ridiculous.

"The Taill of the Wolf that gat the Nek-hering throw the wrinkis of the
Foxe that begylit the Cadgear" relies on irony for its humour as well, but both irony and humour are of a subtler kind. Henryson is here dealing not with the subject-matter of Aesopic fable, but with yet another episode in the dispute between the fully developed characters of the beast epics, the fox and the wolf. Several of Henryson's fables are about these famous figures, and we will examine them in other contexts, but one will serve as a good illustration of his narrative treatment of this type of fable subject matter. The wolf, in the fourth fable called "Waitskaith", is here unnamed, but the fox is Lowrence, as in fables three, four and ten. The plot is true to beast epic: the fox, as usual, tricks the wolf, who is foolish enough to believe him, so that the wolf suffers and the fox reaps several advantages. With his usual capacity for ironic understatement and implicit double meaning, Henryson develops the humour inherent in the situation through characterization. While this is also true of "The Wolf and the Wether," this fox and wolf fable is subtler, for it involves the playing off of one meaning against another within the dialogue, rather than simply illustrating a disparity between appearance and reality through action.

The fable opens with a debate between the wolf and Lowrence. The wolf is attempting to secure regular meals by forcing the fox to be his servant: he knows the fox to be wily enough to be certain of success. The fox will not comply, making various excuses about his failures, which he sums up by saying,

\[ \ldots \text{"that beist ye micht call blind} \\
\text{That micht not eschaip than fra me an myle:} \\
\text{How micht I ane off thame that wyis begyle?} \\
\text{My tippit twa eiris and my twa gray eene:} \\
\text{Garris me be kend quhair I wes never sene."} \]

(lines 1988-92)
In other words, he can fool no creature for they all know him to be untrustworthy and dangerous. The wolf refuses to believe him, and ironically his incredulity is justified for he is in the process of illustrating that there is one creature at least who is foolish enough to trust the fox. "'It is ane auld dog, doughtles, that thow begylis'" (line 2009), he says when the fox holds out against service, and prides himself when Lowrence seems to respond to this by a quick show of fealty; but his words prove ironically true. The stupidity of the wolf is apparent enough here, and the ironic humour rests largely on that character's conception of himself as clever. But it is the fox's character which is the most finely drawn in this passage. The fox sees the wolf first when they meet, and immediately feigns obeisance. He manages to sound innocent and righteous—for example, he says he would not creep up upon sleeping creatures. But when the wolf becomes angry, Lowrence is quick to dissemble subservience, and do as he is bid. His response is replete with double meaning. When the wolf demands an oath of loyalty, he replies "'that ane word makes me wraith'" (line 2023) --ostensibly because the wolf doesn't trust him, but no doubt actually because loyalty is entirely foreign to his nature.

The following episodes—the two appearances of the cadger and the conference of the fox and wolf between them—contain characterizations of the wolf and the cadger as greedy, and stupid in their greed, that stand in marked contrast to the characterization of the fox. In their greed, both these characters believe in Lowrence's ruse; they are blinded not by the fox, but by their own shortcomings.

The portrayal of the cadger is cleverly executed in comic irony. Greedy and foolish, he gloats over the "dead" fox as if the fur were already warm mittens, and dances a little jig in the roadway to celebrate his good
fortune. His behaviour, and his "'ye ar deir welcum'" (line 2067) to the fox, are of course ironic, for we know that he will soon feel quite differently. The poet takes no small delight in the situation, for he presents a vivid picture of the scene in the roadway: the fox busily throws herring out behind, the wolf gathers them up, and the cadger, oblivious, marches on ahead singing happily.

Syne be the heid the hors in hy hes hint;  
The fraudfull foxe thairto gude tent hes tane,  
And with his teith the stoppell, or he stint,  
Pullit out, and syne the hering ane and ane  
Out off the creillis he swakkit doun gude wane:  
The wolff wes war, and gadderit spedilie;  
The cadgear sang "Huntis up, up!" upon hie.  

(lines 2077-83)

The wolf, however, is not content with what he has, for he has heard the cadger offer the fox a "nek-hering," and is too stupid, and greedy, to realize what the cadger meant. The fox instantly sees the opportunity both to beguile the wolf and to keep all the fish for himself. He immediately begins to play upon the wolf's greed by describing a fabulous "nek-hering," "'callour, py pand lyke ane pertrik ee'" (line 2127). He then proceeds to teach the wolf the trick he has just played; the wolf is not wise enough to realize the same trick can scarcely work twice, or to question the stipulations the fox gives him. These stipulations are doubly ironic in that both fox and audience know the cadger is angry and now carrying a staff. The last ironic touch is his warrant that "'ye sail de na suddand deith this day!" (line 2157) But the wolf does not even question the qualifying adjective. It is at this point that the opening passage of the fable adds yet another degree of ironic humour to the wolf's behaviour. Henryson makes certain that we do not miss remembering the debate:

Als styll he [the wolf] lay as he wer verray deid,  
Rakkand nathing off the carlis favour nor feid;
Bot ever upon the nek-hering he thinkis,
And quyte forgettis the foxe and all his wrinkis.

(lines 2164-67)

When the cadger has clubbed him and he staggers away, the narrator says, "He mycht not se--he wes sa verray blind" (line 2184), a final irony at the expense of the wolf who is blind literally, for the blood in his eyes, and figuratively, for he has been blind to the tricks of the fox, in spite of his protestations at the beginning of the tale. Although the fox plays the role of deceiver--and is condemned for it in the _moralitas_--the fable is as much a tale of self-deception as is that of the foolish wether. The final word of the _moralitas_ too is that it is greed which makes men blind, and makes it possible for them to be deceived.

We have thus far examined Henryson's ironic handling of two very different kinds of beast fable material. In "The Wolf and the Wether," the narrative dwells upon a combination of burlesque humour with an acute sense of the ridiculous resulting from a dichotomy between appearance and reality. This same dichotomy prevails in a fox and wolf tale, but is based upon carefully drawn characterization, albeit by this time of standard characters: the ambivalence in the notoriously two-faced fox, and the blindness of the wolf. In each case, an animal character impels the situation through seeming, or through thinking he is, what he is not. But beneath the level of meaning created by these ironic disparities is yet another such level which is at the basis of the animal fable as a _genre_: the animals are behaving as human beings. Other fabulists apologize for it as fictitious, and then seem no longer conscious of it. Henryson, however, is supremely aware of this paradox at the root of his _genre_; interested as we have seen him to be in the above fables with the ironic consequences of the difference between appearance and reality, he plays upon the paradox as an additional means of
making his fables memorable. Let us first examine his method of using this paradox on the narrative level before going on to consider the implications in terms of the complete fables, narratives plus moralities.

Henryson’s spirited re-telling of the age-old tale of the town mouse and the country mouse offers ample opportunity to witness his awareness of the paradox inherent in his chosen genre, while also being another excellent illustration of his comic ability. The fable is handled with a very light touch, all the more admirable for the plot being such a familiar one. Any moralizing—with one exception—that occurs in the narrative is spoken by the country mouse, but even this does not weigh heavily on the tale because of the comic, though sympathetic, portrayal of her. The gentle humour has a dual origin: the visit of an unsophisticated country relative to the seemingly comfortable home of the worldly-wise mouse is a situation with familiar comic potential, and the portrayal of mice as human beings is comical in itself. The two situations are cleverly related to each other; the country mouse’s country life resembles the life of a natural mouse, and thus makes us aware, in the context of the tale, of the paradox of the fable fiction.

The mice are much more recognizably mouse-like before they reach the city than afterwards. Their food is what one would expect a natural mouse to eat, and their journey to the city is a stealthy one, "In stubbil array throw gers and corne,/ And under buskis" (lines 253-54). But when evidences of mouse-ness appear simultaneously with human behaviour, the mice successfully embody the sense of incongruity of the behaviour of animals in fables that is usually latent in other examples of the genre. The menu in the town mouse’s home is one which would belong to human beings--mutton and beef, and the dainties of "lordis fair"--but

...--they drank the watter cleir
Insteid off wyne: bot yit thay maid gude cheir.

(lines 272-73)

Their meal is enhanced somewhat unusually as well:

And ane quhyte candill owt off ane coffer stall,
Insteid off spyce to gust thair mouth withall.

(lines 286-87)

The spirits and the subsequent plight of the mice are treated with
great comic relish. The mirth of the two mice is captured and portrayed
with a sympathetic good humour in such lines as these:

This maid thay merie quhill thay micht na mair,
And "Haill, Yule! Haill!" cryit upon hie.

(lines 288-89)

Here the narrator interposes two lines one might call moralization:

Yit efter joy oftymes cummis cair,
And troubill efter grit prosperitie: ......

(lines 291-92)

But the speedy resumption of the narrative that hurries the reader past
these lines, and the exuberant comedy found in the succeeding ones,
suggest that the poet is providing transition from the colourful but
static dinner scene to the ensuing scramble of the mice to avoid capture;
the lines reinforce the moral, but they do so without being obtrusive. The
interest at this point is in the story, and the narrator obviously enjoys,
with a good-humoured detachment, the sudden change in the scene, one which
again restores the mice to animals:

The spenser come with keyis in his hand,
Opinnit the dure, and thame at denner fand.

(lines 293-95)

Thay taryit not to wesche, as I suppose, ....

The anguish of the country mouse, who has never had to cope with such a
situation, is described with similar detachment. When the steward has
departed, the mice return to their feast only to be menaced more seriously in a scene that once again reminds us that they are mice; indeed, the new threat being a cat makes the awareness of "mouseness" unavoidable. When, after a breathless struggle that has been described as "a delightfully used parody of the wheel of Fortune topos," at last the country mouse escapes, her relief is described with a matter of fact "hir cheir wes all the better" (line 340). The fable now concludes quickly. The end of the tale, with its obvious moral implicit in the decision of the country mouse, is given through that character's words and through the brief concluding remarks of the narrator. The country mouse rather breathlessly declaims the dangers of her sister's good life, and resolves to have no part of them. Her words, taken out of context, ring like a vehement sermon against worldliness:

"Thy mangerie is mingit all with cair--
Thy guse is gude, thy gansell sour as gall;
The subcharge off thy service is bot sair--
Sa sail thow find heir efterwart na fall."

(lines 344-47)

But the lines as they are set in the fable do not carry this impression. The words are spoken by a very upset and dishevelled mouse, whose plight has been described comically and in a rather detached way. Overt moralization is withheld for the moralitas.

The moralitas repeats the lesson the mouse utters and illustrates in the narrative, suggesting at the same time a figural reading of the tale. But within the tale too the reminders of the mice's being animals, not men, have done more than simply increase the comedy. The country mouse is constantly shuttled between rural naivete—as when she cannot escape the cat—and sophisticated pleasures, but also between "mouse-ness" and "human-ness". When things seem to go well for her, something occurs to remind
her of her true nature. The disparity of her role in the narrative seems to be inspired, and made ironic, by the nature of animal fable—that a mouse should be portrayed as behaving as a human being at all. On the literal level, the disparity heightens the comedy; on the moral level it teaches mouse and audience the obvious lesson, but with the subtle addition that the reality beneath appearance will inevitably re-assert itself, that the only way to end her insecurity is to return to the country—or, to mouseness. When the moralitas adds the figural level, with the resulting ironies stemming from the double meanings that have already informed the narrative, the implications for human beings are more clear. But by referring the lesson to the narrative itself, Henryson saves his tale from a rigid single-minded interpretation, for the referral is a reminder of the sympathy he has for the country mouse, of the comedy, and of the irony of her situation:

O wantoun man, that usis for to feid
Thy wambe, and makis it a god to be,
[Luke] to thy self! I warne the weill; but dreid
The cat cummis, and to the mous hes ee.

(lines 361-34)

The moralitas on its own suggests a harsh morality, but the moralitas in conjunction with the fable reminds us only that as funny as the behaviour of the country mouse may be, it is, on the human level, not at all funny, just as on the animal level, for the country mouse herself, it is most serious. We are not to recoil against laughing at the absurdities and ironies we see, but we are to realize that humour is not enough, that the world is serious.16

Perhaps the most serious fable in Henryson's collection is fable eight, "The Preiching of the Swallow." In form it is unlike the others, for the narrator experiences the fable almost as a dream vision. The "narrative"
begins with a long passage discussing the ways of God. The ideas expressed are most conventional: man is not capable of understanding the ways of God and should not try to do so, for his understanding is imperfect. But nature, the book of God's works, was created for his education, and he may learn useful lessons by natural observation—chiefly, that God is "gude, fair, wyis and bening" (line 1652). There follow several stanzas expressing the wonders of the created world which testify to the goodness of God, and a passage on the diversities of the seasons, which shows the narrator's obvious delight in their beauty and variety. The narrator ends his description of the seasonal cycle with Spring, "and it is into the description that he walks to experience the action:"

That samin seasoun, into ane soft morning,
Rycht blyth that bitter blastis wer ago,
Unto the wod, to see the flouris spring
And heir the mavis sing and birdis mo,
I passit furth, . . . .

(lines 1713-17)

The action of the narrative occurs around him: the swallow preaches to the flock of birds in the very place where he is sitting. He goes away dazed, but returns to find the birds again. This is not dream vision, for the narrator does not sleep, and the vision is prolonged through the seasons, but there is enough of the dream vision figure in the narrator to imply that an explicit allegory is to follow.

The narrative includes a great deal of moralizing. The swallow first preaches to the birds of the wisdom of preparing ahead of time to prevent possible danger. He speaks as a learned ecclesiastic, quoting Latin proverbs and referring to the sayings of "clerks".

"For clerkis sayis it is nocht sufficient
To considder that is befoir thyne ee," . . . .

(lines 1755-56)
Although the "clerk" who describes the cycles of the seasons earlier in the poem does not say this, we are reminded of the passage on the hardships of winter following the joy and bounty of summer. This consciousness of change is reinforced by a stanza describing the natural cycle of spring changing into summer. The birds' answers to the swallow are expressive of the blindness of mortals Henryson has alluded to in other fables and in the third stanza of this one. They pay no heed while they are able to enjoy themselves, and their spokesman, the lark, flings proverbs he misapplies and misunderstands back at the swallow, thus compounding the evidence of his blindness. The outcome of it all seems inevitable, and is sadly moralized upon by the swallow:

"Lo," quod scho, "thus it happinnis mony syis
On thame that will not tak counsall nor reid
Off prudent men or clerkis that ar wyis;"

(lines 1882-84)

The suggestion is also that those who are not clever enough to learn prudence from observing the ways of the world around them should take counsel from those who are.

Yet for all its morality, this fable is not a dull series of maxims held together by a thin thread of narrative that has been inserted as in a discourse. The opening passage is itself filled with successful description and an obvious enjoyment of what is being described, even though much of it may be somewhat conventional. Similar passages in the narrative are as effective as the earlier descriptions of the seasons, as is the stanza on the plight of the foolish birds in winter:

The wynter come, the wickit wind can blaw;
The woddis grene were wallowit with the weit;
Baith firth and fell with froistys wer maid faw,
Slonkis and slaik maid slidderie with the sleit:
The foulis fair for falt thay fell off feit;
On bewis bair it wes na bute to byde,  
Bot hyit unto housis thame to hyde.  

(lines 1832-38)

The plight of the captured birds is described equally vividly.

Poetic echoes in the narrative are not the only links it has with the opening passage of the poem. The seasons described initially are the setting for the narrative, which can even be seen as "merely a dramatic expansion of this passage." Thematically, the two are held together, not by the moral the swallow concludes with nor even by the subject of the verse treatise. Rather, it is the theme that in the fallen world there is still much beauty for man to enjoy—as the narrator does in the narrative, and as the birds do while summer lasts—but that this natural order includes not only lessons about the beauty of God's creation, but also lessons fallen man must learn to preserve his life, meaning of course his eternal life. God made

The difference off tyme and ilk seasoun  
Concorddand till our opurtunitie,  
As daylie by experience we may se.  

(lines 1675-77)

The narrator sees, by experience, that the cycle of the seasons shows him that all things change, and that he must be prepared for that change. The narrative in one sense becomes an exemplum for the treatise opening the poem, but not in the simple way of sermon exempla. Instead, the narrative extends the meaning of the narrator's words, so that rather than being a straightforward illustration of the maxim that all things are made for man's benefit, it expands upon the meaning of that maxim to include not only the temporal benefits of recognition of beauty but those of recognition of man's situation as well.
The moralitas develops this theme yet one step further. The birds, of course, are said to figure fallen man made blind by desire of things temporal. The fowler is the devil, and the swallow, obviously, the preacher who, through awareness of the wisdom given in the opening passage, that knowledge comes through observation of nature, is sensible of man's situation. The shortsightedness of the birds' actions thus becomes the shortsightedness of man's behaviour in a world where he is constantly threatened with eternal death. As the cycles of seasons described in both the verse treatise and the narrative have shown, "in this world thair is na thing lestand" (line 1940). Man may see this for himself on the literal level, as the narrator did initially; but the remainder of the fable elaborates this idea, in the narrative on the moral level and in the moralitas on the allegorical level. The elaboration on the opening passage is made by the wise clerk, the preacher, and the speaker of the moralitas ends the fable with a line identifying himself with the protective preacher figure, playing on the double meaning made possible by his allegory:

And thus endis the preiching of the swallow.

(line 1950)

The possibilities for fable as exemplum have been expanded from the conception of a tale as a static illustration of an idea to a narrative as a story called to mind by an idea, elaborating upon that idea, and in turn calling forth further elaborations on other levels of meaning.

This fable is much more serious than Henryson's other fables that we have examined. There is neither burlesque as in "The Wolf and the Wether" nor the lighthearted humour of "The Two Mice." The verse form too is much more serious. Whereas the fables are generally considered to be intentionally "low style", in "The Preiching of the Swallow" Henryson
uses techniques of "high style"—dream vision stance, fine descriptive passages of nature, Classical allusions, alliterative verse. The swallow speaks with a genuinely educated voice. As a result, this is one fable in which we do not perceive the underlying ironies usual in the other fables; the allegory is too dominant, and the sense of foreboding that pervades the narrative precludes the possibility of any comic irony. But this is not to deny that here too Henryson consciously exploits the ironies of the genre. It is an irony resulting from the consciousness that people behave as blindly as these birds do; the consciousness is established by the presence of the opening passage, and its organic link with the narrative, and is reinforced by the clearly allegorical intention. The disparity between "The Preiching of the Swallow" and the other Morall Fabillis could lead one to puzzle over its inclusion in the collection, but if we extend its theme in literary terms, we can surely see in it the ultimate justification of writing fables at all. Remembering the knowledge that is gained within the context of the single poem, we can apply it to our reading of the other Morall Fabillis:

All creature He maid for the behufe
Off man and to his supportatioun
Into this eirth, baith under and abufe, . . . .

(lines 1671-73)

But we must examine Henryson's more typical fables, in which the narrative and moralitas are not so clearly integrated, to come to a fuller understanding of his attitude to the function of the moralitas. The first fable, "The Cock and the Jasp," is interesting from this point of view because the moralitas reverses the moral assigned by Lydgate, and some comparison with that fabulist will shed further light on Henryson's handling of fable moralities.
The fable is a brief one but in it we can observe some of the characteristics of Henryson's art that we have noticed in other fables. For one thing, the circumstances of the narrative are rationalized. Lydgate's cock simply finds the jewel; Henryson explains that it was probably swept out of a house by careless serving girls. This serves not only to rationalize the story, but "by explaining and domesticating the jasp" Henryson keeps the narrative on the level of "barnyard realism."

Most of the rest of the tale is taken up with the cock's soliloquy to the jewel. Henryson gives two stanzas--first and last--to narrative, the second to the rationalization, and the intermediate five to this soliloquy, a more concise version of a brief tale than Lydgate presents. Henryson's cock is as given to moralizing as Lydgate's; his tone, however, is altogether different. The cock begins by seeming wise--he utters the wisdom Lydgate repeats throughout the same fable, and in all his others, that each should live according to his nature. But what immediately follows suggests that this cock's nature is indeed bestial, and perhaps by his own choosing, for he is rather obsessed with food. He attempts to support his preference for seeking food with an old wive's proverb, but falsely applies it to what he has said:

"Thy cullour dois bot confort to the sicht,
And that is not aneuch my wame to feid;
And wyfis sayis lukand werkis ar licht."

(lines 100-102)

This alone makes us suspicious of his seeming wisdom. He then, ironically, after showing his base instincts by dwelling on his hunger, utters a pompous rhetorical rejection of the jewel that with Lydgate would pass for wisdom:

"Quhar suld thow mak thy habitatioun?
Quhar suld thow dwell bot in ane royall tour?
Quhar suld thow sit bot on ane kingis croun,
Exaltit in worship and in grit honour?
Rise gentill jasp, of all stanis the flour,
Out of this midding, and pas quhar thow suld be; . . . ."

(lines 106-111)

Henryson's acute sense of irony is once again confirmed: in the next two lines the cock leaves the jewel "law upon the ground" and continues his search for dinner.  

The moralitas to this fable, although at first perhaps surprising if we approach it after reading Lydgate, moves smoothly from the narrative. The foolishness of the cock's behaviour is borne out by Henryson's equating the stone with prudence and knowledge. Biblical authority is called upon to give weight to the argument: the cock is like

... ane sow, to quhome men for the nanis
In hir draf-troich wald saw precious stanis.

(lines 146-47)

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. The cock's rhetorical questions are mocked by the rhetorical questions of the moralitas. And the cock's leaving the stone for more suitable finders is recalled by a final irony at more than the cock's expense:

Of this mater to speik it wer bot wind;
Thairfore I ceis and will na forther say:
Ga seik the jasp quha will, for thair it lay.

(lines 159-61)

When we remember where the jewel lay in the narrative, we must also remember that human beings, on the literal level, are also responsible for its lying there. The moralitas and the narrative derive mutual benefit from each other through this irony. The cock's foolishness is entertaining, and is made more so when that foolishness is further elucidated by the moralitas. The "lesson" of the moralitas is double-edged in that Henryson implies that
the cock we have been laughing at, and the kind of man he figures, is not the only creature whose selfishness keeps him ignorant.

Indeed, in the harmony of narrative and moral one can see the difference between Henryson's conception of the fable and Lydgate's. For Lydgate's moral to be valid, his cock must be an ensample of a creature living according to his nature; in other words he must remain a literal cock. By having it so, Lydgate freezes his character and his narrative, killing whatever possibilities of irony and suggested meanings might exist within the cock's behaviour as an educated man, and thus actually destroying the reason for writing an animal fable at all. A human character would have done as well. In Henryson's fable, however, the cock functions as a figure of a man in a bestial state. He is thus able to function literally as a cock, and the fact that he speaks, especially rhetorically, at the same time is part of the essence of the humour. His character is developed to show his literal bestiality beneath his fine feathers, and it is thus possible for him to be a figure of bestiality as well. The ironies in the double recognition of animal-behaving-as-man/ man-behaving-as-animal can function towards both their humorous and moral effects. By freeing the cock from the role Lydgate gives him, Henryson frees him as a character, so that he can function plausibly on the literal level as well as the figural.

"The Taill of the Foxe that begylit the Wolf in the Schadow of the Mone" is another fable drawn from beast epic material. Its ironic humour is based upon the same kind of appearance-reality dichotomy as dominates "The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger," for the rivalry between Lowrence and the wolf forms the substance of its plot. Much the same can be said of this poem as of the other; it is very entertaining and filled with subtle mockery of stupidity and greed, and derives no small amount of comedy from the famous mistake of
the wolf's seeing the moon's reflection in the well as a cheese. As a recent Henryson scholar says, "it is characteristic of Henryson's generally sardonic outlook that the wolf abandons the oxen . . . for an illusory cheese. A comic stupidity almost always forms part of his concept of the evil man." 28 But it will now be more useful to our study to determine how Henryson applies the moralitas to this kind of fable.

In both "The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger" and "The Fox and the Wolf," the moralitas consists of a brief allegorical interpretation of the animals, in each case consisting of four stanzas. To summarize briefly, the wolf is sinful man; the fox is a deceiver, either as the devil or the world; the cadger is death, the herring and cheese are covetousness, and the husbandman is the good Christian. The allegory is predictable, indeed, typical for the fox and the wolf. One is tempted to believe that Henryson's allegory in the moralitas is a dutiful addition that he feels he must impose to be consistent with his practice and purpose in the rest of the collection, and that there might on occasion be truth in this not uncommon remark on Henryson's fables: "the moralities are the poorest parts of the fables, because they alone are unnecessary." 29 But if Henryson's dual purpose in writing the Morall Fabillis is to be answered, will not the ironic humour of these tales, and the unmitigated success of the fox, so obviously enjoyed in the narratives, overshadow the moral? It is clear enough that the wolf would not be subject to the fox's wiles if he were less greedy. But the relish one cannot help but feel for the fox's success on the animal level will not be so answerable to the moral level as the comedy one enjoys while watching the wolf. The moralitas, then, must put a human perspective on the attraction we feel for the fox.

This perspective does not interfere with our enjoyment of his antics as a fox, however, for the fable and moralitas are more closely integrated than is
first apparent. In "The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger" we saw enough of the comic portrayal of the greed of the wolf to understand that the allegory finds enough expression in the fable to preclude being considered merely a superimposition. The animals on the literal level are imbued with the qualities of what they figure on the allegorical level. Thus the wolf's foolishness in jumping into the well bucket in "The Fox and the Wolf," while being consistent with his realistic portrayal in the narrative, is also consistent with the vision that sees him as a sinful man blinded by his own greed. The allegory imposed by the moralitas does not hinder the functioning of the animals in the narratives as the highly developed fox and wolf characters they are, for the genre implies that the characteristics so amusing in the wolf, for example, are modelled upon human characteristics; thus when the moralitas demands that we see the wolf as a figure of an evil man, the connection does not hinder enjoyment of the wolf's behaviour, as that behaviour is inspired by man's bestiality, in this case, stupidity and greed. The connections between wolf and man are implied without the allegory, but the allegory reinforces the implications. The narrative of "The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger" goes yet further in its implication by showing, on the literal level, the kind of natural man figured by the wolf in the person of the cadger. The comic situations, then, such as the wolf leaping into the well-bucket fully expecting to find a cheese, or the cadger happily thinking about mittens while a very live fox steals his fish, are emphasized, rather than subdued, by the seriousness of the purpose behind them. "It is this seriousness of purpose that causes Henryson to draw out the ironic reversals in the original narrative with still greater clarity,"30 not only to allow application of allegory to the tale, or to stress justification of rewards for behaviour on moral grounds, but to fulfill the potential of his develop-
ment of the genre, which is based on intrinsic recognition of human-animal correspondences in fictions which begin by giving animals the powers of speech and reason. Thus the fable can "light the spreit," for its characters are alive and real within the fiction, and can carry its moral theme as well. Indeed, the two functions complement each other in terms of the poem as well as in terms of the audience.

The last of the Morall Fabillis, "The Taill of the Paddock and the Mous," deals, like "The Wolf and the Wether," with the theme of a blatant disparity between appearance and reality, but in the case of this fable there is little humour involved. Its mood is a dark one, and the moralitas continues the mood with a sermon on false appearances—the theme of the moral level of the fable—and a brief allegorical interpretation. On the surface it seems that in this fable Henryson comes as close as he does anywhere to a simple exemplum, for the narrative seems only to express the moral that fair words hide false intent. A closer examination, however, reveals some amazing subtleties in this final tale.

The mouse does seem sensible of the moral lessons given in the first part of the moralitas. She knows better than to believe she is wise to trust the frog, for she recognizes his ugliness—and can quote some physiological scholarship; she doesn't trust his fair words—

"Let be thy preiching!" quod the hungrie mous.

(line 2851)

She is not at all comfortable about swimming, does not wish to tie herself up, and makes the frog swear an oath before she finally goes with him. Indeed, the mouse is portrayed as a piteous little creature, and her death is a purely haphazard circumstance. The irony here is the bitter one that the weak have very little opportunity to avoid disaster, in spite of all
the lessons they may have learned. It is made complete by death coming through the kite, who is completely uninvolved in the moral issue between mouse and frog.

The sermon about credulity in the moralitas is in a sense rather unnecessary, for it little avails the mouse to have this kind of wisdom. It is only in the allegory following the sermon that we begin to make sense of the narrative: man must endure the evils of life in the fallen world, avoid them as best he can, and be prepared to have his trials end at any moment; faith is his only hope of salvation. Here, as in "The Preiching of the Swallow," the paradox of animals behaving as human beings is overshadowed by a consciousness of the unhappily plight of human beings as creatures, like animals, of a mortal world. The consciousness is not fully realized until we reach the allegorical explication in the moralitas, after the narrative has led us to pity the plight of the helpless and condemn the evils of the wicked, an initial reaction corroborated by the narrator who begins the moralitas with a fervent condemnation of wickedness deceiving innocence. But while our and the narrator's reactions rise to "categorical descriptions of Everyman,"31 the narrative itself, like the other fable narratives, is realistic enough to avoid being confined by the allegory. "The effect of mixing personified abstraction with such precise particulars is not only to drive home the moral point but also to present a vivid memento mori which has a broader application."32

The broader application is not so much to "everyman" in the general sense as "everyman" in the particular sense. The concluding theme of mortality is impressed upon the consciousness of the audience by the vividness of the narrative, with its dramatic climax. The mouse has been portrayed as essentially human, but with enough "mouseliness" in the portrayal to suggest
the piteous qualities of her animal nature in the "lowly, troubled person" she represents--witness the "exquisite play on the human-animal situation that opens the poem:

Upon ane tyme, as Esope culd report,
Ane lytill mous come till ane rever-syde;
Scho micht not wald--hir schankis were sa schort;
Scho culd not swym; scho had no hors to ryde: . . . .

(lines 2777-80)

The paradox of the fable situation, as in "The Preiching of the Swallow," is played upon for just enough subtle irony to heighten the impact of the narrative that in turn gives the moralitas its directness and validity.

Henryson's fables go further in fulfilling the "teach and delight" objective claimed by writers of animal fables than any of the examples of the genre we have examined so far. Certainly, he places more emphasis on entertainment than the writers of exempla, and most certainly, than Lydgate. But the functions of entertainment and instruction are not separated in the Morall Fabillis. They are not comic tales with a sobre moral dutifully appended. Both the effectiveness of the moral and the success of the narrative are achieved through the criteria of the fable as a genre in medieval terms. Henryson is aware of the paradox latent in the portrayal of animals with human characteristics, and he uses that paradox, intertwining it with all the subsequent ironies of correspondences between men and animals on the moral and figural levels. The comedy of the narratives is based largely upon the ironies of self-deception, of the disparities between appearance and reality, and their consequences. The moralities are also based upon man's deception of himself in his failure to see his natural condition—in short, man's blindness. The narratives confirm the moral themes, but the two together are replete with the ironies one sees when facing the natural world, or man's natural condition, and Henryson makes it possible for us to see just that by showing us animals behaving as men.
And beneath it all, he never lets us forget, on literal, moral, or allegorical levels, the ultimate irony that men do behave as these animals do, and that they are therefore subject to the same consequences, whether those be looking as foolish as the wether bereft of his sham skin, being as flustered as the country mouse away from her natural habitat, being injured and laughed at together as the wolf who never learns to mistrust the fox, or unprepared as the mouse facing death while tied to her enemy. The correspondences between animals and man drawn out as they are make it possible for narrative and moralitas to co-exist, without tension or disparity, in one fable. The Morall Fabillis consist of, and are developed through, multiple levels of irony based on these correspondences, and these levels take the fable as a genre out of the realms of simple comic tale and utilitarian apologue into the realm of poetry.
FOOTNOTES

1 John MacQueen, Robert Henryson, A Study of the Major Narrative Poems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), Appendix I, p. 189, gives 1475-1490 as the most likely date of composition. David K. Crowne ("A Date for the Composition of Henryson's Fables," JEGP, 6 [1962]; 583-90) suggests dates later than 1481 on the basis that Henryson used Caxton's printed text of Aesop (1481) and the Reynard (1486) as sources. Denton Fox ("Henryson and Caxton," JEGP, 67 [1968]; 586-93) summarizes scholarship that dates Henryson's fables and shows that as Caxton cannot safely be assumed to be Henryson's source the dates of his texts should not be used as means of dating the Morall Fabillis. The question becomes particularly important to those scholars interested in historical interpretations of the fables; see chapter five and Marshall W. Stearns, Robert Henryson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).


3 See particularly Stearns, passim.


5 MacQueen (pp. 95-98) discusses the influence of Boccaccio's De Genealogia Deorum on Henryson's narrative technique.


7 It would not be practical to enter into a discussion of sources in this study, for there is by no means agreement among scholars as to what sources Henryson used. Suffice it to say that of the fables rooted in Aesopic tradition, other than "The Taill of Schir Chantecleir and the Foxe," Henryson's expansions and reworkings are unique, and to list the most usually suggested sources: the Anonymous Neveleth of Gualterus Anglicus, an imitation of Phaedrus; Caxton's Aesop (and Reynard, with branches of the Roman de
Renart, for the fables developing Reynardian material; the Disciplina
Clericalis; the Ysopets; the Fabulae of Odo of Cheriton; fables current
through their use in sermons, and thus based upon the exempla collections
discussed in chapter one; Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale. Editions of these
works, and scholars' considerations of Henryson's sources, are listed in
the Bibliography. Denton Fox, in "Henryson and Caxton," makes the following
sensible suggestion, worth quoting in full: "While Henryson was a learned
poet, and at times clearly followed written sources, it would be a mistake
to visualize him as a modern scholar, working in the midst of a litter of
variant versions of a fable, and selecting here and there appropriate de-
tails. A more appropriate, if more vulgar, analogy might be a modern parent
who, in telling a familiar story, such as 'Red Riding-hood,' to a child,
draws partly on his memory of versions that he has listened to and read, and
partly on his imagination. Like such a parent, Henryson himself might not
always be able to point to his precise source" (pp. 592-93). See also
Donald MacDonald, "Narrative Art in Henryson's Fables," Studies in Scottish
Literature, 3 (1965); 101-113.

In the interest of economy, I will shorten the titles of the Morall
Fabillis in the text as follows: "The Tail of the Wolf that gat the
Nek-hering throw the wrinkis of the Foxe that begylit the Cadgear" -
"The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger;" "The Tail of the Wolf and the Wedder" -
"The Wolf and the Wether;" "The Tail of the Uponlandis Mous and the Burgis
Mous" - "The Two Mice;" "The Tail of the Foxe that begylit the Wolf in
the schadow of the Mone" - "The Fox and the Wolf". The remainder of
Henryson's fables will be dealt with in the following chapters, where their
subject matter relates to that of other Middle English fables. Whereas the
observations made in this chapter apply to most of the collection, three of
the fables (discussed in chapter six) are set apart by their specific
satiric purpose.

The version printed by Caxton appears in R. T. Lenaghan, ed.,
61. Caxton translated a French translation of Steinhowel's Aesop, a
fifteenth-century collection of Romulus tales, Gualterus Anglicus' verse
rendering of the Romulus, and other fables of the Aesopic type labelled
under the catch-all title, Extravagantes.


See note 9 above.

MacDonald, "Narrative Art," p. 106.

The beast epics--the term applied to the collections of episodic tales
of Reynard the Fox popular throughout Europe in the Middle Ages--are briefly
considered in chapters four and five. They do revolve essentially around
the enmity of the fox and wolf, caused by felonies each has committed against
the other, though many other stories involving other animals go far beyond
this central impetus. See the comprehensive study by John Flinn, Le Roman
de Renart dans la littérature française et dans les littératures étrangères
au Moyen Âge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963).
14 The fox is also called "Russell" in this fable (the wolf using the name more or less generically in line 1962), as he is in Chaucer. Both "Lowrence" and "Russell" are common names for the fox in medieval beast literature (see p. 134, note to line 429, and p. 142, note to line 1962 in Elliott's edition; p. 229 and p. 245, notes to the same lines, in Wood's edition).

15 I. W. A. Jamieson, "A Further Source for Henryson's 'Fabillis'," Notes and Queries, 212, N. S. 14 (1967); 404.


17 MacQueen, p. 161.

18 Denton Fox, "Henryson's Fables," English Literary History, 29 (1962); 351.

19 Numerous characters in Henryson's fables misuse proverbs and sententiae, both comically and as an illustration of their lack of wisdom, for example, the cock in "The Taill of the Cok and the Jasp," line 102, the wolf in "The Fox's Confession," and the wolf in "The Trial of the Fox." In an equally serious fable, "The Taill of the Paddok and the Mous," the frog, repeatedly, and consciously, misuses proverbial wisdom. On the use of proverbs and sententiae, in these ways and others, to aid characterization, see Donald MacDonald, "Chaucer's Influence on Henryson's Fables: The Use of Proverbs and Sententiae," Medium Aevum, 39 (1970); 21-27.


21 There is some disparity in critical opinion as to how conventional this passage is, and in what ways. Wittig (p. 37) feels that summer and autumn are conventional portrayals but not winter. G. G. Smith (Scottish Literature, Character and Influence London: Macmillan, 1919 , p. 66) says that in the description of winter Henryson is using the "artificial and 'ennamelit' " style typical of the Scottish Chaucerians. MacQueen (p. 162) feels that the passage on the seasons is conventional but more in the sens of Renaissance style than medieval, and compares it with Spenser's poetry. Henryson's natural description in general usually has been felt to be highly original. See Henderson, pp. 125-31; Henry S. Canby, The Short Story in English (New York: Holt, 1909), pp. 89-93; Wittig, pp. 37, 42-43; H. Harvey Wood, "Robert Henryson," Edinburgh Essays on Scots Literature (University of Edinburgh, 1933; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), pp. 9-10; Wood's edition of Henryson's poems, pp. xv-xvii, etc. My feeling is that Henryson is using conventional descriptive techniques in "The Preiching of the Swallow" to elevate his style, that it may be more in line with the serious tone of the fable. A full discussion of the conventions of descriptions of the seasons may be found in Rosamond


23 I am using the terms employed by MacQueen in his study of Henryson, pp. 94, 182, and 185-86.


25 Several Henryson scholars see a disparity between narrative and moralitas in this fable, and feel either that the audience is meant to agree with the cock (MacQueen, p. 107), or that Henryson "has allowed his own colourful fable to run away with him, and is now returning to his duty" (Wittig, p. 40). Apart from the cock's bestial concerns and his pride in considering himself learned, his stupidity within the narrative is confirmed by this line. It is unfortunate that so many readers have missed the delightful irony of the cock's grave summons to the jewel to "rise up," followed by his wandering off, in most rooster-like fashion, to search for something edible.


27 Ibid.

28 MacQueen, p. 174.

29 Canby, p. 32.


31 Toliver, p. 304.

32 Ibid.

33 Jenkins, "Henryson," p. 25.

34 Pearsall, p. 197.

35 See the discussion of Lydgate's "The Frog and the Mouse," pp. 44-45 above. Limitations on space prevent comparison between the two fabulists, but see Derek Pearsall's excellent and witty comparisons of the two fabulists' versions of this fable, pp. 194-97 of John Lydgate.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE BEAST EPICS AND MIDDLE ENGLISH

ANIMAL FABLE

In the last chapter we noted that Henryson drew on the beast epic tradition for the plots and characters of some of his Morall Fabillis. The beast epics are not sufficiently represented in medieval English literature to warrant a close examination of them here, but their undeniable influence on writers from the exempla compilers, such as Odo of Cheriton, to Henryson and Chaucer does necessitate a brief look at the continental tradition. The one English example of this kind of animal tale, the anonymous late thirteenth-century The Vox and the Wolf, must also be seen against the background of the cycles it is drawn from. The interest in pure entertainment that dominates the best of the beast epics has no small responsibility for the quality of the narratives of such tales as Lydgate's "The Howne and the Shepe," the best in his collection, of Henryson's fox and wolf fables, and of the Middle English animal tales we are yet to examine.

While we can scarcely undertake in this study an examination of the literary characteristics of the entire beast epic tradition, a brief summary of scholars' conclusions will be useful, particularly as beast epic and beast fable are often said to be at completely opposite generic poles. The chief distinguishing factor between the two is that of intent: the fable has a moral purpose, while the beast epic exists only to entertain. The animal characters of beast epic are fully developed, neither types nor vague figures speaking words predetermined by the moral they are to illustrate. The beast epics are longer and contain many episodes involving the central characters. They are comic, usually satirical but in a good-natured way, and never to —the extent of losing their lightheartedness, at least before they degenerate
into allegorical commentary on contemporary conditions. And a point not
to be overlooked is that the vernacular beast epics, unlike earlier Latin
tales having the wolf as a central character, took the fox—more correctly,
Reynard the fox—as their hero. His success is delighted in, and neither
morality nor allegory is imposed to condemn him.

The origin and rise of beast epics in Europe have been discussed exten-
sively by many scholars. Varying attitudes to the origins include two
polarized viewpoints: that the cycles developed out of a popular tradition
of beast sagas or beast tales, and that they were the work of monastic
poets. Exponents of the latter viewpoint feel that popular animal tale
tradition is a result of the currency of beast epics in the Middle Ages,
but many scholars concede that it is reasonable to assume a certain amount
of folk interest as a stimulus. The evidence brought to light by scholar-
ship shows however that the beast epics are largely traceable to clerical
interest in the fable, followed by more extended animal stories. It is
generally conceded that monastic poets or trouvères educated in the clerical
schools developed these stories into episodic cycles.

The earliest extant extended narrative with animal characters is a
Latin poem dating from the middle of the tenth century, *Ecbasis cuiusdum
captivi per tropologiam*. It employs the interpretations given various
animals—notably the wolf—in medieval exegesis to describe allegorically the
plight of the writer. The narrative consists of two fables, an outer fable
which develops the parable of the lamb caught by the wolf and returned, and
an inner fable which the wolf must tell to explain his fear of the fox. The
latter is the traditional Aesopic tale of the trial of the fox at the court
of the sick lion. *Ecbasis* is clearly in the tradition of clerical use of
animal stories. A moral—the necessity of renouncing the world—is added to
the end of the tale, and "the incidents smack of Aesopic didacticism." But it goes further than Aesopic fable in that it combines episodes and in so doing communicates a sense of the existence of these animals as characters outside the narrative.

The next example is a Latin poem, *Ysengrimus*, dating from the middle of the twelfth century. It is the first European work to make use of proper names for animal characters, but this statement holds true only if it precedes the first branch of the *Roman de Renart*, a question still open to speculation. Didactic in tone, it relates twelve adventures of the wolf, Ysengrimus, and the fox, Reinardus, all but one of which appear in the *Roman de Renart* also. Among these are the tale of the sick lion's court, and a version of the cock and fox fable found in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*.

The French beast epic, *Le Roman de Renart*, is the basis for the spread of beast tales throughout Western Europe. Parts of it were translated and reworked into several other languages, and many of the episodes it relates are considered to be the sources, however indirectly, of similar stories in Middle English literature. The terms roman and "beast epic" are misleading, for the various branches of the *Roman de Renart* were not written by one person at one time. Rather, they are episodic tales written by many different poets from the middle of the twelfth to the middle of the thirteenth centuries, and were copied together because of the similarity of their subject matter.
Each branch may contain from one to several stories, and not all are about the fox. The sequence of the branches is different in the various manuscripts, and many stories may appear in several versions.  

The earliest extant branch, sometimes numbered two and sometimes sixteen, is unusual in not being anonymous--its author is identified as Pierre de St. Cloud--and important for the instant popularity it received, as is evident in the continuations and imitations that subsequently produced the Roman. It is also the branch containing a version of the story told by Chaucer, that of Pinte, Chantecler, and Renart. Yet more popular than Pierre de St. Cloud's branch is the later poem, nonetheless consistently numbered branch one, that purports to explain the reason for the war between Renart and Isengrin which Pierre de St. Cloud undertook to describe. The reason is what occurs at the trial of the fox after his accusation by Isengrin and Chantecler. Isengrin's accusation involves Renart's violation of the wolf's wife, and the conclusion of the trial episode is an interesting variation on the plot of the sick lion fable that is elaborated in the Ecbasis and the Ysengrimus, though the latter includes this variation also: the wolf and his wife must give Renart their "shoes" to enable him to go on pilgrimage to repent of his misdeeds. The episode is an illustration of the increased human characterization of the animals developing upon the plot of an Aesopic narrative.

Reynard stories continued to be written in French after 1250, but they became repetitious and lost their original vigour. Excessive didacticism and bitter satire replaced the comic mocking tone of the Roman. The fox became "the type of successful hypocrisy and wickedness," and he and the other animal characters were enveloped in allegory prompted by political and religious controversy.
The *Roman de Renart* inspired many other animal tales of its type. The earliest of these is the Middle High German poem *Reinhart Fuchs*, written towards the end of the twelfth century by Heinrich de Glichezare. It contains an encounter between the cock and fox similar to that found in branch two and in Chaucer. The most successful reworking of the episodes of the *Roman* is a Middle Dutch version based in part upon branch one. *Van den Vos Reinaerde*, written in the third quarter of the thirteenth century, is customarily considered to be "the beast epic in its most artistically mature form." Not only was it translated into Latin—the *Reinardus Vulpes* of Baldwin the Young—but, through its expansion and continuation in another Middle Dutch verse epic, the fourteenth-century *Reinaerts Historie*, reached England through the printing press of William Caxton in 1481 and eventually was the source for Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs*. Caxton's *The History of Reynard the Fox* is his translation from the Dutch, probably the prose redaction of *Reinaerts Historie* printed by Leeu at Gouda in 1479. Caxton's translation is believed by many scholars to be Henryson's chief source for his Reynardian fables.

This brings us to the question of whether or not, or to what extent, the beast epics were known in England before 1481. All arguments must remain inconclusive because of the scarcity of evidence, but several scholars have pointed out that there are some indications that the English were acquainted with Reynard the fox. Besides *The Vox and the Wolf*, which in all respects is like an episode from a continental beast epic, there is a library catalogue of Dover Priory, drawn up in 1389, which lists a manuscript of a Reynard tale since lost. Reynard's name appears four times in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and once in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. Odo of Cheriton has a fable entitled *De Ysingrymo*, in which the wolf wishes to become a monk,
as he often does in the beast epics, as well as many fox fables recounting event popularized in the Roman and including the animals' names. In several of these fables Odo introduces English. Nicole de Bozon also uses the familiar animal names in his fables, and in one fable quotes in English. The use of English in both suggests an English source, if only an oral one. Kenneth Varty's extensive study shows that the beast epic characters must have been familiar in medieval England to some extent, for not only do the animals appear in religious art, but often they clearly illustrate episodes from the beast epics.

However, in spite of these suggestions that tales of the beast epic type were known in England, there is only one example before Chaucer for our examination, the late thirteenth-century The Vox and the Wolf. It is sometimes called a beast fabliau to differentiate it from the moral fable, and perhaps because, containing only two episodes, it can scarcely be called a beast epic. The Vox and the Wolf contains the story of a fox duping a wolf into a well that appears in related versions as a moral fable in the Disciplina Clericalis and in Odo's and Nicole de Bozon's fables. The fable is believed to be of Hebrew origin, and to have become current in Europe through Petrus Alphonsus' knowledge of a tale told by Rabbi Raschi in the eleventh century, although it has also been related to the ancient Indian fable of "The Fox and the Goat." The Roman de Renart includes the tale, but substitutes for the illusory moon reflection in the well a more complex explanation of the wolf's thinking his own reflection that of his wife. The Middle English poem is felt to be based upon branch four of the Roman or a similar poem. It shows considerable ingenuity in reworking its original, however, and is "no unworthy representative" of the continental beast epic tradition.
The Vox and the Wolf exemplifies the essence of its continental counterparts. While relating only two episodes, it nonetheless places them in the context of the extensive adventures of its hero, Reneward. The cock, Chauntecleer, will not be persuaded to trust the fox because he recalls the many woes the fox has caused his flock before. When the fox and wolf converse before the wolf enters the well, their recollections of past events are reminiscent of other adventures in the Reynard cycle. The wolf remembers the fox and his family dining with him several days before, and he "confesses" the suspicions he had of the fox's adultery with his wife. And, of course, the fox and wolf immediately recognize each other and converse as the intimate acquaintances they are in the beast epics. Reneward and Sigrim, then, are clearly characters, not simply a fox and a wolf. As in the beast epics, the episodes are narrated with considerable detail, and the tale certainly is developed with entertainment as its object: it is highly comic and includes no moralization on its theme. The comedy is achieved chiefly through the "excellent characterization," handled particularly through dialogue, and the development of the plot itself which, as in the beast epics, involves the cleverness of the fox in action.

Reneward does indeed live up to his reputation in the poem, and it is his amazing ingenuity that produces so much of the humour. The humour is chiefly ironic, involving the fox's outwitting his gullible opponent and the audience's knowledge that he is clearly outwitting him while he is not able to see through the fox's words. In this sense, the first episode reinforces the ironic humour of the second, for Chauntecleer does recognize the fox's malintent—if only because of past experience—in spite of his feigned good will, while Sigrim is too foolish to doubt an even less likely story.

The poem opens with a hungry Reneward visiting the hen-house. He tries
to persuade Chauntecler that his coming is always for their good:

I have letten pine hennen blod.
By weren sike ounder ðe ribe,
Pat hy ne miȝte non lengour libe
Bote here heddre were itake.
Pat I do for almes sake— . . .

(lines 40-44)

These lines ring ironically indeed, particularly after the description of his hunger and search for food. After the conversation between Chauntecler and Reneward, the poem seems to have cut out a detail, for it appears from subsequent remarks (lines 68 and 98) that the fox has helped himself to the hens. Overtaken by thirst, he finds the well and unwittingly traps himself. The author's capacity for ironic understatement is now exercised at the expense of the fox, whose thirst has got the better of him:

Al þus he com to þe grounde,
And water inou þer he founde.
Po he fond water, þerne he dronk
(Him boute þat water þere stonk . . . !)

(lines 91-94)

Upon the arrival of the wolf, it is immediately clear that the fox has a plan for escape:

Pe vox hine ikneu wel for his kun,
And þo eroust kom wiit to him;
For he þoute, mid somme ginne,
Himself houpbringe, þene wolf þerinne.

(lines 123-26)

His good humour returns, and we are conscious of a preconceived notion of Sigrim's stupidity and gullibility that promises a comic situation.

Throughout, Sigrim ignores common sense and allows himself to believe the fox, initially from stupid curiosity, and then because his hunger overrules what common sense he has. To begin with, Reneward identifies himself as "bi frend" (line 133) and says if he had known he was in the neighbourhood
he would have prayed that the wolf join him. This remark should make
Sigrim suspicious, particularly in the context of their traditional rivalry,
but he is only surprised:

"Mid þe?" quod þe wolf, "warto?
Wat shulde Ich ine þe putte do?"

(lines 137-78)

This is the last trace of common sense on Sigrim's part, for Reneward now
begins his psychological persuasion of the wolf he knows so well. He
happily describes the paradise he has in the well, carefully intertwining
descriptions of general bliss with suggestions of food. It does not yet
occur to the wolf to join the fox, but although he laughs and recalls how
recently they dined together, he seems to believe the fox is dead. Reneward
quickly responds that he is indeed dead and happy to be so. His previous
description, the location of Paradise in the bottom of the well, and the
audience's knowledge of the truth of the matter and of the fox lend consider-
able irony to his exclamation

"Gode þonke, nou hit is þus
Fat Þhc am to Criste vend!"

(lines 158-59)

He describes the woes of the world, contrasts them to the "ioies fele cunne"
(line 166) of Paradise in most pious fashion, and ends his speech with

"Her beþ boþe sheþ and get."

(line 167)

The irony of this line is comical enough after the pious description of
Paradise; it is reinforced by our knowledge of the fox's consciously choosing
his words to fool the wolf. As characterization, it is excellent, for it
illustrates the cleverness of Reneward in appealing to the wolf's weakest
point—and in the last sentence of his description—without pressing the
point and arousing Sigrim's suspicions.
Clearly enough, it is this last remark of Reneward to which Sigrim responds. He begs to be allowed to join the fox, but even though his ruse is successful, Reneward is not content simply to escape. As R. M. Wilson points out, he is here the same well-developed character he is in the beast epics. "Eagerly hoping to persuade Sigrim to get into the bucket he cannot, even at the risk of arousing his suspicions, lose the chance of humiliating his old enemy." Rather, he insists that the wolf first confess his sins and be shriven. The wolf begs the fox to be his priest, pleading hunger as the reason for speed. Reneward can afford even to hesitate before agreeing, and to encourage the wolf to add to his first confession. The episode reaches its high point when the wolf "confesses" his suspicions of the fox, repents believing his own eyes when he found Reneward in bed with his wife, and begs the fox to forgive him.

The conclusion of the poem is replete with the comic irony of the wolf's situation. The fox's parting taunts play upon his role of confessor, and in so doing add insult to the wolf's injury:

"Fi bizete worth wel smal!
Ac Ich am berof glad and blipe
Fat pou art nomen in clene liue.
Vi soule-enul Ich wile do ringe,
And masse for bine soule singe!"

(lines 248-52)

The narrator adds a few remarks of his own to reinforce the comic irony:

"Pe wrecche binebe noping ne vind
Bote cold water and hounger him bind.
To colde gistninge he wes ibede—
Wroggen hauep his dou iknede!"

(lines 253-56)

The ultimate irony is brought out in the fate of the "shriven" wolf who thought to go to Paradise. The monks who find him in the well cry "'e deuel is in be putte!'" (line 282), and the poem concludes with the narrator's
ironic comment on the wolf:

For he ne fond nones kunnes blisse
Ne hof dintes forjeuiness.

(lines 294-95)

It has been pointed out that the moralizing of the fox upon his foolishness in entering the well (lines 96 ff.) hearkens back to the morality of beast fable. R. M. Wilson notes that "it was part of the game that the beast tale should be outwardly as moral as the most pious literature." This suggestion is valuable in that it clarifies the non-didactic character of the poem. Although the fox's predicament and the wolf's behaviour illustrate the truth of Reneward's sententia, the fox's lament is really a mock moral. Reneward's consciousness of the reason for his stupidity--"lust"--gives him the idea of tricking the wolf. Sigrim's "lust" for sheep and goats blinds him to the common sense of his initial reaction, "Wat shuld Ich in pe putte do?" The moralizing of the fox, then, is harmonized into the narrative, and indeed reinforces the irony in that, rather than reforming Reneward, it contains the worldly wisdom that enables him to carry on his career. The poem retains the familiar characteristic of part of the animal tale tradition, but reworks it on the terms of the animal characters and the humorous ironic tone.

It is evident that the characters of The Vox and the Wolf are developed with many human characteristics. Reneward's sententious moralizing, his knowledge of medicine, his professions of charity, his clerical role, all reinforce his portrait as a highly sophisticated character. The relationship between Sigrim and Reneward--their dining together, the suspicions of adultery--is obviously inspired by human characteristics. These are the characteristics that McKnight lists as differentiating The Vox and the Wolf.
While he no doubt means the typical brief Aesopic fable, we must realize that the fable too portrays animals as human beings. Even the simplest Middle English exemplum involves animals speaking and thinking. And we have seen already in Henryson's Morall Fabillis that their success is due to his ability to develop the ironies of a comination of human and animal characteristics.

The author of The Vox and the Wolf, too, is fully conscious of these ironies. When the fox is introduced, we are reminded of his "fox-ness" through this contrast with a human being:

Him were leuere meten one hen
Ten half an oundred wimmen!

(lines 7-8)

And again, the anthropomorphism of Reneward is ironically played upon when he laughs after leaping over the wall surrounding the hen-house:

(For he com in wipouten leue
Bopen of haiward and of reue!)

(lines 25-26)

His being a fox makes this fact self-evident, but its being stated reminds us that we are looking at an animal functioning on both human and animal terms. The confession scene, too, illustrates the development of the ironies latent in such a portrayal. The wolf's concept of Paradise is a wolfish one—it has sheep and goats—and his plea to the fox to be his confessor is the urgency of hunger. This in itself is ironic in its comic perversion of religious ideals and sacramental and ecclesiastical regularity, but the irony is underlined and extended through the reminder the wolf's hopes give that he is a ravening wolf absurdly capable of considering the human hope of Paradise. In the behaviour of Reneward and Sigrim, the irony is extended from the comic episodes of the narrative to encompass the nature of animal narrative itself.
Reneward's offer to bleed the hens is ironic not only because he is Reneward masquerading to satisfy his hunger, but because he is portrayed as a fox capable of the learning of a doctor who yet behaves as a fox; the confession episode, not only because Reneward is duping Sigrim but because he is portrayed as a fox with the knowledge of the priestly function who yet behaves as a crafty fox. The characters in The Vox and the Wolf are not more human at the expense of their animal natures; rather, their considerable human qualities are integrated with their animal natures, incongruous as that integration clearly is.

The incongruity of the integration produces so much of the comedy of the tale. On the simplest level, the humour is the result of the interplay of the cleverness of the fox and the stupidity of the wolf. But these characteristics are manifested in human terms constantly referred back to animal terms, so that the humour is also produced by the interplay of the animal and the human in each character. The last lines of the poem capsulize the ironic humour of the plot and of the characterization. The fox has duped the wolf into a situation the opposite of what he expected. The wolf's foolish hopes are thwarted, and his fate is described in terms of the human hopes he had, which recall his wolfish perversion of them:

*fe wox bicharde him, mid iwisse,*  
For he ne fond nones kunnes blisse  
*N*o*e hof dintes for*jeueness.*

The wolf's stupidity determines his fate, but the expression of his stupidity --his characterization as a wolf with human attributes--produces the additional irony of his fate. The characterization of Reneward and Sigrim, so basic to the poem, develops the paradox indigenous to animal fable, that of animals behaving as human beings, and this development fulfills the potential for comic irony inherent in that paradox to no small extent.
But this too is the accomplishment of Henryson's comic narratives. The characters he found in Aesopic tradition—such as the foolish wether and the country mouse—are fully developed and effectively communicate the ironies of beast fable portrayals. In his fox and wolf fables, Henryson retains the full character development of his sources. He alters aspects of the tales to shape the comedy to moral ends, that the moral interpretation may be more evident through suggestions in the narrative, but the narratives entertain in the same way *The Vox and the Wolf* does.

In "The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger" we noticed the same use of irony as is developed in *The Vox and the Wolf*. The animals are imbued with human characteristics which are constantly juxtaposed with their animal natures. Lowrence, the fox, has the same reputation as the beast epic fox. "The Taill of the Foxe that begylit the Wolf in the schadow of the Mone," which like *The Vox and the Wolf* involves the trapping of the wolf in the two-bucket well, reflects similar consciousness of the play upon the combination of the animal and the human in the characters. In Henryson's version, the fox does not first trap himself; he simply uses the wolf's stupidity and the plight of the husbandman to gain a few chickens and have a laugh at the wolf's expense. Lowrence and the wolf are particularly anthropomorphic: they converse with the husbandman on matters of justice in legal language. The wolf is his characteristic stupid self but tries to be clever with misapplied proverbs about loyalty—the question is not one of loyalty—and the legality of oaths. Lowrence is in true form, feigning a nice sense of justice and himself laughing at the irony of his posturing. In short, the scene presents, besides the irony of the fox and wolf using judicial sentiments for selfish motives, the basic irony of a man conversing on justice with a fox and wolf by nature interested only in his oxen and chickens. Besides successfully
entertaining, Henryson's presentation of these ironies makes his audience conscious of the implications of human-animal correspondences. Lowrence's words to the husbandman suggesting he be bribed with hens is comic, because he is so much the fox even in his anthropomorphic role as judge, but also imply something unsavoury about human judges through the very fact of Lowrence's being assigned this role. Henryson makes the implication explicit in the *moralitas*, but it is hard to miss on the narrative level:

"I am ane juge" quod Lowrence than and leuch:
"Thair is na buddis suld beir me by the rycht;
I may tak hennis and caponis weill aneuch,
For God is gane to sleip;" . . .

(lines 2329-32)

In the narrative, as in the beast epics, Lowrence is allowed to get away with it, for his craftiness is the germ of the entertainment, but Henryson's purpose necessitates that the implied human perspective be clarified in the *moralitas*.

Henryson does not always allow his Reynard the success of the beast epic fox. In two fables, "The Taill how this foirsaid Tod maid his Confessioun to Freir Wolf Waitskaith" and "The Taill of the Sone & Air of the foirsaid Foxe, callit Father wer: Alswa the Parliament of fourfuttit Beistis, baldin be the Lyoun," the fox meets his end as punishment for his misdeeds. In "The Fox's Confession," Lowrence is shot by the keeper of the flock he has robbed. "The Trial of the Fox" is a continuation of "The Fox's Confession," and includes the Parliament familiar from beast epic, as well as another fox and wolf tale and the trial itself. The fox is found guilty and hanged. These two fables are more serious than "The Fox and the Wolf" and "The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger," and clearly Henryson's moral purpose is responsible for the alterations. But both tales still reflect the comic spirit of beast epic, and although irony supports the morals, it is equally responsible for
the humour. A brief examination of one of them will confirm these statements.

"The Fox's Confession" presents the familiar picture of one of the two beast epic protagonists appearing as a cleric. During the confession of Lowrence, both confessor and penitent abuse the sacrament shamelessly, as we might expect. The elaborate confession scene, preceded by Lowrence's astrological ponderings, illustrate the degree to which Henryson's animals are developed on human terms, but these characteristics coexist with their animal natures, both producing ironic humour and suggesting the two-way correspondence between human and animal nature. The confession's ironic comedy is the result of the fox and the wolf's treatment of the sacrament; again, the implication that the human attributes of the animals can include their irreverence, though not brought out in the moralitas, cannot be overlooked when a wolf is presented as a friar. But the comedy in the incongruity of the presentation is nonetheless enjoyed:

So saw he Lowrence cummand ane lyttill than frome hence
Ane worthie Doctour in Divinite;
Freir Wolff Waitskaith, in science wonder sle,
To preich and pray wes new cummit fra the closter
With beidis in hand, sayand his Pater Noster.

(lines 666-69)

Likewise, Lowrence's travesty of the Eucharist must be culpable on moral (i.e. human) terms, hence his subsequent death and the moralitas' warning against such behaviour in human beings, but on the narrative level it is still a brilliant comic depiction of Reynardian roguery, obviously enjoyed for its own sake. Catching no fish after his promise to fast, Lowrence steals a kid, rushes with it to the sea, and exclaims

"Ga doun Schir Kid, cum up Schir Salmond again!"
Quhill he wes deid; syne to the land him drewch,
And off that new-maid salmond eit anewch.

(lines 751-53)
Even when pierced by an arrow, Lowrence remains the Reynardian hero—more so, perhaps, than the moralizing fox in *The Vox and the Wolf*—and complains that there is so little humour left in the world:

"Now," quod the Foxe, "allace and wellaway! Gorrit I am and may na forther gang; Me think na man may speik ane word in play, Bot nowondayis in ernist it is tane."

(lines 768-71)

It seems indicative of Henryson's enjoyment of Lowrence that the moralitas dwells more on cautioning the audience against being unprepared for death than on the fox's wickedness. Like Reneward, Lowrence's character is developed through a comic integration of human and animal characteristics, and is individual enough to exist beyond a rigid moral or allegorical interpretation. Henryson draws out the inevitable implications for human beings that the moral purpose of his fables might be fulfilled, but he leaves Lowrence/Reynard as the character he is that his entertainment purpose might not be jeopardized.

Henryson, then, uses episodes and characterization similar to those in the beast epics. We have seen repeatedly how his consciousness of the paradox of portraying animals with human attributes and the consequent ironies of such a portrayal contribute to the humour and inform the morals of his fables. In the Reynardian fables, the paradox is developed chiefly in the characters of Lowrence and the wolf, but Henryson's other animals, while perhaps not as entertaining as the crafty fox, are well developed characters also. The two mice, the learned swallow, and the well-read mouse of the final fable are all like Lowrence in that they are an integration of human and characteristics.

Characterization is the basis of the similarity between Henryson's
Fabillis and The Vox and the Wolf. The humour of animal tales such as these is largely ironic, involving the disparity between what is clear to the audience and often one of the characters and what is clear to the character who is the butt of the joke. The irony is frequently underlined by the narrator's detached understatement. But this comic irony of situation is the development of the characterization. The animals' strengths and weaknesses produce the tale. The animals, however, are not simply animals but characters with both human and animal characteristics combined. The combination is a paradoxical one, whether it involves an elaborately anthropomorphic Reynard or simply a fox who speaks. The extent to which the paradoxical characterization is developed, however, clearly influences its comic possibilities. The full development of Reneward and Lowrence is responsible for the comedy of the episodes we have examined.

Henryson, however, also develops his fable characters in this way to underline the human-animal correspondences that support his moral. The Vox and the Wolf does not moralize upon its events or its characters, and while we may smile to see so much of mankind in Reneward and Sigrim, we are left with them as characters to be enjoyed on the terms of the narrative. It does not attempt to achieve the sophisticated intertwining of "teach and delight" attained by Henryson. But to avoid calling The Vox and the Wolf a beast fable simply on the grounds of its not having a deliberate moral denies its share in, and its contribution to, the essence of beast fable, the paradox of animals behaving to some extent as human beings. Even in the simple Aesopic fables, as the exempla we have examined in chapter one, where the animals serve only as examples of human conduct, their being animals makes the human behaviour—and the lesson—memorable, though tale and lesson may be limited. Whether there is a moral purpose involved or not, the success
with which this paradoxical characterization is realized and developed
measures the success of the Middle English beast fables we have examined.
FOOTNOTES

1 For studies of the beast epic, see the works cited in this chapter, and particularly John Flinn, cited in chapter three, note 13 above.


3 L. Foulet, Le Roman de Renart (Paris: Champion, 1914), especially chapter one and the conclusions.


8 Sands, p. 30.

9 See Rose, pp. xvi-xxiii.

10 Sands, p. 29.

11 Ibid.

12 Rose, p. xxvii.


14 Bossuat, p. 6.

15 Flinn, p. 30.

17 Bossuat, p. 32.


19 See Bossuat, pp. 145-51, and Flinn, pp. 3-9 and the chapters dealing with French reworkings of the epic, chapters four to eight.


21 The episode from Reinhart Fuchs is printed in Hulbert, pp. 658-62.

22 Tinbergen and Van Dis, as cited above, note 4.

23 Ibid., pp. 16-17, and Sands, pp. 20-24.

24 Sands, p. 28.

25 Edited by Donald B. Sands, as cited above, note two.

26 Ibid., pp. 3-5.

27 See chapter three, note 7, and note 47 below.


31 See Flinn, p. 672; Owst, Pulpit, pp. 204-205; Rose, p. xxxvi; Wilson, pp. 244-45. However, Sands (in his introduction to his edition of Caxton's Reynard) does not feel that the English were familiar with beast epic type literature before Caxton printed Reynard.


33 Sands, p. 35; G. H. McKnight, "The Middle English Vox and Wolf," PMLA, 23 (1908), 499-500. J. M. Smith (The French Background of Middle Scots Literature [Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1934], p. 75,
suggests that fables are a type of fabliau, in that both are short stories in verse and "the counterpart of the romantic idealism of the literature of courtly love."

34 Wilson, p. 247.

35 McKnight, pp. 500-504.

36 Ten Brink, p. 257.

37 Flinn, p. 676, discusses the relationship between The Vox and the Wolf and branch four of the Roman. See also Bennett and Smithers, p. 66, and Wilson, p. 247.

38 Several scholars have pointed out the plausibility of the Middle English narrative in relation to the account in the Roman, where the wolf is lured into the well by thinking the fox is there with his wife (Bennett and Smithers, p. 66, ten Brink, p. 257). Wilson (p. 248) offers the opposite viewpoint. He also points out (pp. 247-48) one noteworthy lapse in the Middle English poem, and that is the thoughtlessness of the fox in jumping into the bucket in the first place. In the French branch he sees his reflection, thinks his wife is in the well, and descends to see what is wrong. But perhaps the English poet felt that this was not suitable behaviour for Reynard either--after all, it is like the mistake of the stupid wolf. He says only that the fox

\[\text{ne hounderstod not of be ginne:} \]
\[\text{He nom pat boket and lp perinne,}\]
\[\text{For he hopede inou to drinke. (lines 77-79)}\]

39 Wilson, p. 249.

40 The edition used throughout is that in Bennett and Smithers, pp. 65-76. Other editions may be found in A. S. Cook, pp. 188-198, and Dickins and Wilson, pp. 62-70.

41 Dickins and Wilson, p. 62.

42 Wilson suggests that this is a deliberate cutting; ten Brink (p. 258) assumes a gap in the text.

43 Wilson, pp. 248-49.

44 Bennett and Smithers, p. 67.

45 Wilson, p. 249.

46 McKnight, p. 499.

47 Henryson's collection includes five Reynardian fables, the four mentioned here and "The Taill of Schir Chantecler and the Foxe," which will be examined in the next chapter. On the sources of these fables, see note 7, chapter three and especially MacQueen, Appendix III, pp. 208-21.
See also J. M. Smith, pp. 79-81, who concludes Henryson must have been familiar with French narratives; Bauman (pp. 112-14) suggests that those aspects of Henryson's narratives not found in either Caxton or the Roman must have come from folktale sources. On "The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger," see Gavin Bone, "The Sources of Henryson's 'Fox, Wolf, and Cadger,'" The Review of English Studies, 10 (1934); 319-20, and A. W. Jenkins, "Henryson's The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger again," Studies in Scottish Literature, 4 (1966), 107-112. On Odo of Cheriton as a source for "The Trial of the Fox," see Jamieson, pp. 403-405.


49 Stearns, pp. 119-20.

50 Hereafter referred to as "The Trial of the Fox" and "The Fox's Confession"

51 Many episodes of the Roman de Renart and beast tales based upon it involve the wolf or the fox fulfilling some ecclesiastical function. Cf. The Vox and the Wolf. In later derivations of the beast epics, such portrayals are primarily heavily satirical; see chapter six.

52 John B. Friedman, "Henryson, the Friars, and the Confessio Reynardi," JEGP, 66 (1967); 550-61, clearly outlines this abuse. Friedman sees the fable as an anti-mendicant argument. While it is not possible to ignore the satire inherent in the portrayal of the wolf as a friar and in the abuse of the sacrament, Friedman's reading underrates the comic relish with which the animals are described and Lowrence's duping the wolf into doing as he wishes. Stearns (pp. 114-17) sees Lowrence as a sympathetically portrayed figure of the poor man misled by a bad priest, citing Lowrence's "complete, immediate faith in the wolf" in lines 671-78 as "almost touching" (p. 114). I suspect that he has been fooled by the clever fox, for Lowrence's obeisance to the wolf is simply another Reynardian trick: anything but penitent--indeed, he fears only for his skin--he wishes to fool the wolf into absolving him. His show of penitence succeeds in fooling the wolf, and his arguments about his need complete the ruse. Obviously, the wolf's conception of his function is anything but ideal, but much of his behaviour is explicable by his stupidity--ironically, after his introduction in lines 666-69--and gullibility.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE APOGEE OF THE BEAST FABLE:
CHAUCER'S NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

The Nun's Priest's Tale is considered by most Chaucer scholars to be one of the best of the Canterbury Tales, high praise indeed for a poem belonging to a genre usually associated with the didacticism of would-be Aesops. A supremely comic tale, it nonetheless includes a great many of the serious themes that Chaucer focuses upon in his other poetry. The tale of a cock and hen contains consideration of dream psychology and physiology, marriage, the question of free will, as well as a series of suggestions about the human failings evoked by the portrayal of the animals. The seriousness of these themes, and the fact of the portrayal of the animals as sophisticated characters, has led some scholars to read the tale as a serious allegory. Any one-sided allegorical reading, however, tends to obscure the poem's immense range of subject matter and unfailing comic tone. The comedy ranges from the narrator's joke in portraying a cock and hen as he does, through mock-heroic tone, satire of romance and rhetoric, the burlesque of the climactic chase of the fox, to a humorous perspective on the moralitas itself. Indeed, it is the comedy of the Nun's Priest's Tale that is most consistently recognized and admired by Chaucer's readers. And it is through an examination of the comedy that one can understand how in Chaucer's hands the animal fable achieves its finest expression in medieval literature.

To recognize the originality of the Nun's Priest's Tale we must see it in relation to similar animal fables. Chaucer incorporates both the traditional homiletic sphere of fable exempla and the comic anthropomorphic characterization of beast epics. The basic plot of the cock and fox story comes from Aesopic fable, although in the extant Aesopic fables that antedate
the twelfth century the bird in question is usually a crow. These fables contain elements of either of the two tricks in the Nun's Priest's Tale and the analogous tale in the *Roman de Renart*.¹ Marie de France includes the cock and fox fable in her collection,² but it is likely that her transforming the bird to a cock is indebted to the development given the old fables in the *Renart* tales.³ Her fable is Aesopic, however, as is that translated and printed by Caxton from a continental collection.⁴ Clearly, the same story serves both the didactic purpose of the Aesopic fable and the entertainment purpose of the *Roman*. Chaucer's source is most obviously the *Roman* tradition: his narrative includes—indeed emphasizes—events before the entry of the fox, and his animals are highly developed characters.

Branch two of the *Roman de Renart*⁵ contains a story of the cock, hen and fox much like Chaucer's. Scholars have suggested that the existence of another French version would account for some of Chaucer's departures from the *Roman*, particularly the names of Renart and Pinte becoming Russell and Pertelote.⁶ However, seeking to explain all of Chaucer's deviations from the *Roman*, or Reinhart Fuchs, which is also similar, in terms of additional sources neglects the obvious originality of Chaucer's fable.⁷ What is more important is to examine the changes Chaucer does make and their effect on the tale as a whole. Besides the addition of the discussions of dreams, marriage, Fortune and free will, of which only the first is suggested in the *Roman*, several aspects of the characterization are altered as well. Chauntecleer is transformed from the "gullible fool into a sympathetic character."⁸ In the *Roman*, Pinte advises Chantecler to heed the warning his dream has given him. The role of the fox is diminished in Chaucer and the emphasis is on the cock and hen. The wealthy farmer, Constans de Noes, who owns the hen-yard becomes an anonymous, poor and humble widow. We will
examine each of these alterations in terms of the tale presently. On the whole, however, the plot of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale and the extent to which the animals are developed as characters with human attributes are inspired by the beast epic treatment of Aesopic material.9

But the Nun’s Priest’s Tale does make use of the tradition of the didactic fable in other ways. We have witnessed the popularity of fables as exempla, particularly in homiletics, for their ability to teach and delight together. In the Prologue to the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, the Host has asked the priest to tell "swich thyng as may oure hertes glade" (line 2811);10 after the Monk’s tragedies the company wants a merry tale. The priest is happy to oblige, and does tell a merry tale, but one which is in keeping with his clerical position. Accordingly, the cock and fox each state the moral of their respective failings (lines 3431-32, 3434-35), and the narrator summarizes both morals:

Lo, swich it is for to be recchelees
And necligent, and truste on flaterye.11

(lines 3436-37)

The priest concludes his fable with a standard vindication of the use of fiction:

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.

(lines 3438-43)

The narrative, too, is interspersed with "morals" interpolated by the narrator. Before the fox appears, Chauntecleer is depicted in all his happy glory; the narrator ominously remarks
For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.
God woot that worldly joye is soone ago; ......

(lines 3205-6)

Later, he digresses on the evils of women's counsel. And when the fox has begun to persuade Chauntecleer, the narrator interrupts to warn against flattery and suggest his audience protect themselves against it by reading Ecclesiastes (lines 3325-30). When he has brought up the subject of free will, the Nun's Priest cannot resist making several remarks on the subject, even while protesting

I wol nat han to do of swich mateere;
My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere, ......

(lines 3251-52)

In telling his merry tale, then, the Nun's Priest is still conscious of his clerical role and habits, and does not let his audience miss any of the morals his tale can offer. 12

Although the Nun's Priest so frequently offers these moralizations, the characters of the tale are by no means simple vehicles for his statements. Chauntecleer and Pertelote are highly developed characters whose behaviour is the essence of the tale's comedy. One of the most noticeable comic aspects of their portrayal is Chaucer's technique of constantly reminding the audience that these sophisticated lovers are, after all, a cock and a hen. "It is a comic device inherent in the beast-fable to make a bird talk like a learned man and then show it going off to have a dustbath, but it has never been done better than here." 13 We have observed such deliberate juxtaposition in other fables, but Chaucer's skill in drawing out the comic ironies of his characters' dual natures cannot easily be rivalled. "Faire damoysele Pertelote" is introduced as the heroine of a romance, but her graces are twice mockingly qualified by the reminder that she is a hen.
She is the fairest of all Chauntecleer's paramours, for she is "the fairest e hewed on hir throte" (line 2869). Her conduct has been a standard of courtesy "syn . . . she was seven nyght oold" (line 2873): "the description of a courtly lady becomes ensnared in the life-cycle of a hen." When Chauntecleer praises his love, he does so in the language of the courtly lover, but rather than praising her red cheeks or lips, he suddenly reminds us of the unprepossessing stare of a chicken:

Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,  
Of o thyng God hath sent me large grace;  
For whan I se the beautee of your face,  
Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,  
It maketh al my drede for to dyen; . . . .

(lines 3158-62)

Some of his praises of Pertelote acquire comic overtones in their being applicable to both a woman and a hen, but in different ways, such as Chauntecleer's affectionate "whan I feele a-nyght your softe syde" (line 3167). Pertelote's reprimand to Chauntecleer for his cowardice also contains a play upon the cock portrayed as a man:

Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?  

(line 2920)

The irony is doubled by the nature of the question, for obviously Chauntecleer does not have a beard. Pertelote's vehement appeal to the romance standards of heroism becomes empty rhetoric when this line restores the perspective on speaker and hero. Similarly, Chauntecleer's vow later in the poem is ironic when it is remembered that he is a rooster, but also in that the vow can only be meaningless, and that he really does not wish Pertelote to be as learned as he is:

By God! I hadde levere than my sherte  
That ye hadde rad his legende, as have I.

(lines 3120-21)
The last two examples suggest that Chauntecleer and Pertelote sometimes become carried away with their human natures. They regard each other in human terms, as is expected in a fable, but occasionally expand these terms beyond what can coexist with their animal natures. A further illustration is provided by Pertelote, when she advises Chauntecleer on his dream:

Though in this toun is noon apothecarie,
I shal myself to herbes techen yow ....

(lines 2948-49)

Chaucer has made a point of describing the limits of Chauntecleer's and Pertelote's world; the idea of finding an apothecary in a "toun" that consists of one rooster and seven hens in a yard enclosed by a stick fence and a ditch indicates the extent to which Pertelote has developed her imagination.

It is not only through the characters that the Nun's Priest's Tale brings out the comic ironies of beast fable portrayal. The tale opens with the introduction of the widow and her two daughters, but the first creature to be dignified with a name is the "sheep that highte Malle" (line 2831). The tone for the fantasy is set, for now we expect a beast fable in which, ironically, animals are more interesting characters than human beings. The contrast of the first description of Chauntecleer to that of the widow underlines the irony. The widow's frugal, simple life includes her small hen-yard, but in that hen-yard appears the splendid figure of Chauntecleer, dazzling in his "mock-heroic brilliance." Her rooster and his hens lead a life of courtly customs and erudition, but Chauntecleer, "roial, as a prince is in his halle" (line 3184), is after all only the possession of a poor and humble widow.

However, once the widow has been introduced, Chauntecleer and Pertelote take over the narrative and, for the moment, focus our attention on the world
within the fence and ditch, their world. In that world they are seen with
the accomplishments and abilities of highly sophisticated human beings.
They are courtly lovers, endorsing the ideal of the romance tradition—and,
because they are hen and rooster, are a parody of that tradition. They
have read widely and can debate with scholarly enthusiasm. At the same
time, they are like a human husband and wife. In their total behaviour
their highly individual characters emerge as those of human beings, but
always through the touchstone of our consciousness, prodded by the narrator,
that they are cock and hen.

Chauntecleer is first presented as the hero. His reputation is based
on his ability to crow at the right time, and this ability is described as
would be a chivalric hero's prowess in arms:

   In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer.

(line 2850)

Of course, his physical beauty and the adoration of his court add to his
status. He is a "gentil cok," and his heart belongs "trewely" to Pertelote.
That he has six other hens as "paramours" is partly the irony of beast
fable portrayal, for no farmer would keep only one hen and one rooster,
but the validity of Chauntecleer's "true love" in the courtly tradition is
thus undercut. Pertelote, behaving as a courtly lady, reprimands Chauntecleer
for cowardice and refuses her love to none but a fearless hero. Again the
realities of their animal existence mock the courtly sentiment: what rooster
in his right mind would not fear a fox? Chauntecleer, after demonstrating
his superior intelligence and learning in the debate on dreams, becomes
again the polite courtly lover and extols Pertelote's beauty.17 His joy
in her love elevates him to the rank of prince, and an heroic simile that
would describe someone like Palamon in a serious tale18 is applied to the
He looketh as it were a grym leoun,  
And on his toos he rometh up and doun; ... ...

(lines 3179-80)

Once again, the disproportion between Chauntecleer's human sentiments 
and his rooster's physiognomy undercuts his heroic status. The final 
episode of the fable sees Chauntecleer's wives moaning for him as if he 
were an epic hero:

Certes, swich cry ne lamentacion,  
Was nevere of ladyes maad whan Ylion  
Was wonne, and Pirrus with his streite swerd,  
Whan he hadde hent kyng Priam by the berd,  
And slayn hym, as seith us Eneydos,  
As maden alle the hennes in the clos,  
Whan they had seyn of Chauntecleer the sighte.

(lines 3355-61)

The human world intervenes in the frantic chase that follows, and restores 
the perspective on Chauntecleer with realistic description of farmyard confu-
sion. In human terms Chauntecleer's heroics are laughable; the comedy 
relies on the disproportion between Chauntecleer's conception of himself--
and the hens' conception of him--and the fact that he is only a cock.

But it is not only the grander human aspirations that elaborate 
the characters of Chauntecleer and Pertelote. In the debate on dreams, cock 
and hen are like a human husband and wife. Pertelote is the practical wife 
and Chauntecleer the husband too proud to accept his wife's somewhat motherly 
advice. She pooh-poohs Chauntecleer's fear that his dream might be a fore-
warning, and diagnoses it with the efficiency of a brisk nurse, recommending 
a suitable diet to forestall "fevere terciane" or "an agu" (lines 2959-60).  
W. C. Curry has pointed out that in terms of medieval science Pertelote's 
diagnosis and prescriptions are correct and reveal considerable knowledge of 
physicians' lore. Indeed, her earnestness throughout the course of her
lengthy examination reveals genuine concern for her husband.

Chauntecleer, however, replies with the wounded dignity of the hero who has just been rebuked for cowardice and has had to listen to an argument that reduces his avisoun to a simple indisposition:

"Madame," quod he, "graunt mercy of youre loore,
But nathelees, as touchyng daun Catoun,

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . men may in olde bookes rede
Of many a man moore of auctorite
Than evere Caton was, so moot I thee, . . . .

(lines 2971-72, 2974-76)

His pride ruffled, he reminds Pertelote of his superior understanding and learning, and silences her with a lengthy defence of heeding dreams. Chauntecleer's role in the debate shows that he is no simple rooster, and that he is quite capable of interpreting his own dream correctly. 21 He ends his argument, however, with a suggestion that he has a less dignified reason to refuse Pertelote's advice as well:

. . . and I seye forthermoor,
That I ne tell of laxatyves no stoor,
For they been venymous, I woot it weel;
I hem diffye, I love hem never a deeli

(lines 3153-56)

One suspects that Pertelote has imposed her medications on Chauntecleer before.

Chauntecleer and Pertelote emerge from their various human role as distinct and complete characters. Their incongruous combination of human and animal traits is comic, and their simply human traits are comic as well, but the portrayal is nonetheless sympathetic. Part of our sympathy for them stems no doubt from their being so very human, but their weaknesses are not seen with a stern eye. Pertelote is a genuinely affectionate wife, somewhat ludicrous in her officiousness, but likeable for her sincerity.
Chauntecleer is proud, but this aspect of his portrayal is tempered by his affection for Pertelote, his sense of duty, his wisdom, and, not least, his vulnerability. The latter is gently suggested in his ruffled reaction to Pertelote's solicitude, his expressed distaste for laxatives, his unwillingness to offend Pertelote or have a quarrel, and the joy he expresses when their debate is ended. And Chauntecleer is, after all, a very splendid rooster. The courtly and the heroic pretensions of Pertelote and Chauntecleer may be laughable, but the very fact that we can laugh at them with so much pleasure ensures that we will feel a sympathetic interest in the cock and hen.

Chauntecleer and Pertelote are indeed so human in so many ways that when we laugh at them we are laughing at human beings also. As in many of Henryson's fables and in *The Vox and the Wolf*, the incongruities of animals behaving as human beings produce comedy, laughter at both the animal characters and at human behaviour. Particular human traits, such as pride or foolishness, are put into perspective in the animal characters, particularly when these are comic, because we can regard them from a distance, but this perspective shifts constantly as the distance between fable character and human being is altered. Thus while we are able to see how pretentiously Chauntecleer behaves while we are watching a rooster, we suddenly see that man and rooster have more in common than the power of speech, and find ourselves laughing at a human foible. In the *Vox and the Wolf*, the human view remains implicit in the ironic humour that pervades the tale; in Henryson, it asserts itself in the *moralitas*. Chaucer, however, builds a human distance into the narrative structure of his fable; like our varying viewpoints of Chauntecleer, it shifts, but more dramatically.

Unlike other fables that include human characters, the Nun's Priest's
Tale separates the worlds of the widow and the hen-yard.

It is out of the good widow's spare and sober way of life that all the exuberance and all the delusions of the world of Chauntecleer and Pertelote grow, until at last the human world erupts into the animal one, in an energetic and breathless attempt to rescue a valuable piece of property. This treatment of the human and animal on two different levels, each blissfully unaware of the other's mode of experiencing life and each pursuing its ends with equal vigour and determination, is responsible for much of the comic effect of the tale.23

We have noted before how the contrast between the widow and Chauntecleer points out the irony of the rooster's splendour and how the pursuit of the fox deflates Chauntecleer's heroic stature. The comedy produced is that of a comic perspective. The framework provided by the initial and concluding descriptions of the widow's small farm, of which Chauntecleer is only a small part, gives the audience the perspective on the rooster that makes his pride the more ludicrous. Chauntecleer is no bigger than his kingdom: to Pertelote and his other wives, he may be a prince, but outside the stick fence and ditch he is another animal, like Malle the sheep and Colle the dog. In his pride he forgets that like the rest of the world he is mortal, fallible.

"I am so ful of joye and of solas,
That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem."

(lines 3170-71)

He looketh as it were a grym leoun,
And on his toos he rometh up and doun;
Hym deigned nat to sette his foot to grounde.

(lines 3179-81)

For the audience it is a short step backwards to see that Chauntecleer's comic pretensions in the world of the fable are like mankind's comic pretensions in the world as a whole.
But the audience's perspective is not left as a distant one. While the widow is initially a model of temperance and good judgment, her second appearance is as the leader of a chaotic chase that does not speak for moderation. She does not swoon as a tragic heroine, but her behaviour is no less hysterical than Pertelote's. Together with ducks, bees, dogs, and other human beings, the widow bursts into Chauntecleer's world: she deflates it, but she also becomes part of it. In the pandemonium of the chase, we are given an overwhelming view of shared preoccupation in which the boundaries between human and animal world are broken entirely.

The role of the description of the widow's frugal life returns us to the question of Chaucer's motives in changing aspects of the version believed to be his source, branch two of the Roman de Renart. The wealthy farmer to whose farm Chantecler belongs in the Roman would not be as effective a figure in Chaucer's tale as is the poor widow. Her simple life contrasts sharply with Chauntecleer's splendour, underlining the ironies of the portrayal of the animals. Chauntecleer's and Pertelote's pretentious human behaviour is made the more ridiculous by the widow's lack of pretentiousness, both because they are only chickens in her humble establishment and because her human behaviour is more commendable than the human characteristics of Chauntecleer and Pertelote. Besides lending perspective to the comic portrayal of the cock and hen, the widow also provides a moral perspective on the follies of pride and pretension.

The change in the roles of Chauntecleer and Pertelote regarding the interpretation of Chauntecleer's dream is basic to the development of Chaucer's tale. To begin with, it provides the basis for the long debate on dreams. Chauntecleer is not a fool, as his escape from the fox testifies; his wisdom and his correct interpretation of his dream result in the
rationale for his fall being focused on his pride and consequent susceptibility to flattery. Chauntecleer's more sympathetic portrayal increases the comic effect of the tale and makes him a more effective representative of human behaviour than a simply foolish cock. Pertelote's reaction to the dream suggests a light-hearted realism at work in the anthropomorphic development of the animals. Pinte in the Roman interprets her husband's dream prophetically, seeing him in the terms Chauntecleer in the Nun's Priest's Tale wishes to be seen in.

Chaucer knew more of matrimony than that. It is the husband that would have high pretensions about the significance of his dreams, the wife who would throw the cold water of common sense upon them. Pertelote's rather ordinary housewifeish nature reveals itself and points out the shallowness of her courtly pretensions, heightening the comedy of the mock-heroic portrayal and of the reflection on human behaviour she suggests. Chauntecleer and Pertelote are developed more realistically as human beings with a combination of strengths and weaknesses that speak of mankind as a whole.

The fox's role in Chaucer's fable is not a central one; unlike Renart in the Roman, Russell is not the hero, or mock-hero, but the villain. There has been a great deal of speculation about why Chaucer changed the fox's name, especially when he was familiar with it. Russell, too, is the name for a son of Renart in Renart le Nouvel and the Dutch Reinaert de Vos. If the adventures of Reynard were well-known to Chaucer's audience, changing the name would be in keeping with Chaucer's making the cock, rather than the fox, his hero. Chaucer's fable is a microcosmic portrayal of the human world, but a comic one; Chauntecleer as hero, and as man, is more suitable than Reynard, whose rogueries, while certainly comic, cannot be seen with such an indulgent eye. The fox as man would suggest a harshness
that is out of keeping with Chaucer's humane vision. There are "fals flatours," certainly, but the poet's concern is with the bulk of humanity, and for this reason, I suspect, he is more interested in characterizing Chauntecleer and Pertelote than the sly col-fox.

Russell, however, still is portrayed with lively interest. He provides an opportunity for the narrator to parody certain rhetorical practices. The moralist's voice introduces him as a "homycide":

O false mordrour, lurkynge in thy den!
O newe Scariot, newe Genylon,
False dissymulour, o Greek Synon,
That brogtest Troye al outrely to sorwe!

(lines 3226-29)

The mock-heroic voice elevates the fox, crouching in a "bed of wortes," to the ranks of history's famous traitors. But the fox, after all, is only behaving according to his nature. The solemn voice of the rhetorician mocks itself when our vision returns to the hen-yard and the animal world. As R. T. Lenaghan points out, the narrator is enjoying a joke at the expense of the rethor who inflates his subject-matter beyond common sense. The fox, then, provides a means of satirizing yet another human folly. Apart from the inflated condemnations that really have very little to do with Russell himself, the fox is portrayed humorously and somewhat indulgently. His cleverness in duping Chauntecleer shows that Chaucer is quite as capable of developing upon the wiles of Reynard as the trouvères. He speaks to the cock as one learned man to another: the intricacies of music are of interest to him--

... ye han in musyk moore feelynge
Than hadde Boece ... 31

(lines 3293-94)

--and has read of the wisdom of Chauntecleer's kind in "Daun Burnel the Asse."
He thus cleverly combines flattery with an appeal to Chauntecleer's pretensions to learning. The fox's fair words too have ironic double meanings which Chauntecleer does not see through:

\[
\text{My lord your fader--God his soule blesse! --} \\
\text{And eke youre mooder, of hire gentillesse,} \\
\text{Han in myn hous ybeen to my greet ese; . . . .}
\]

(lines 3295-97)

By the end of the tale, Chauntecleer and Russell, each both victim and victor in terms of cleverness, exchange moralities in a matter-of-fact way, both the wiser for their experience. The fox is the mock villain who illustrates Chauntecleer's foolishness and blindness, but he too learns to "observe a law of governance" and "recognize the advantages of self-control."32

Chauntecleer's capture by the fox through his susceptibility to flattery and the fact that Pertelote misinterprets the dream and distracts him on the fateful morning have led many readers to feel there is a consistent allegorical purpose in the poem. Chauntecleer's weaknesses are his pride and recklessness, both related to his joy in Pertelote. The analogies to the Fall are thus inevitably suggested, but an attempt to sustain an allegorical reading is thwarted by details of plot and characterization, and not least by the comic tone. To see the hen-yard bordered by a stick fence and ditch as an earthly paradise33 is to miss the ironies of Chauntecleer, the wise and splendid hero and lover, being in reality a rooster whose earthly paradise is a simple hen-yard. It is Chauntecleer, not Pertelote, who falls through personal vanity,34 and although the Nun's Priest, in making the comparison between Eve and Pertelote while decrying "wommanes conseil," may be making his audience aware of the correspondences, the tale as a whole does not suggest that
Pertelote's counsel is responsible for Chauntecleer's error. Chauntecleer does not take her advice and does not give it any credit. He simply ignores his dream because he is happy. Granted, his "joye and solas" in Pertelote is largely responsible for his recklessness, but Pertelote cannot be blamed for making Chauntecleer happy. Chauntecleer's folly is too comic, both in its portrayal and in the fact that he corrects it and saves himself, for the reminders of the Fall to dominate the tale. The delightful humour of the pursuit scene, too, is surely beyond being seen as a conception of "moral disorder" resulting from the Fall.\(^{35}\) "The comedy of folly and conceit . . . is enhanced by the oblique comparison with the Fall,"\(^ {36}\) and like so many other suggestions in the poem, this comparison relates the world of the fable to the human world. It is yet another example of the comic anthropomorphism of Chaucer's fable characters.

Several readers of the Nun's Priest's Tale have seen it as an allegorical warning to the clergy or the Christian man to beware of heretics. These interpretations are based partially on typical symbolic meanings given the animals in medieval exegesis, the fox as heretic or false cleric,\(^ {37}\) and the cock as a priest or Christian.\(^ {38}\) Charles Dahlberg\(^ {39}\) sees Russell as a symbol of a Franciscan friar, and Chauntecleer as a member of the secular clergy; he reads the tale as an anti-mendicant allegory exhorting parish priests to be alert to their duties.\(^ {40}\) Part of his argument is based on the sloth of the secular clergy, which drove members of their flocks to the mendicants. Chauntecleer, however, is not slothful. His attention to his duty is stressed--indeed, he ends the debate on dreams because day has come:

\begin{quote}
But thilke tale is al to longe to telle,
And eke it is ny day, I may nat dwelle.
\end{quote}

\(^{(3149-50)}\)
And on the morning of the day on which Chauntecleer meets the fox, he is doing his duty, which, as he is a rooster, includes being attentive to Pertelote and helping his flock find food. Dahlberg's reading does not elucidate much more of the fable than the episode between the cock and the fox, which is only a small part of the tale as a whole. M. J. Donovan constructs a similar but more general reading. It should be noted that neither of these readings takes Pertelote into account, other than seeing her as a general representation of woman who leads man astray and an indication of Chauntecleer's tenuous spiritual state.

Indeed, of all the subjects the poem treats, none is sufficiently consistently presented to warrant considering it a unifying theme, for all are eventually mocked by the fable portrayal. The very fact that a rather ludicrous rooster can consider such serious matters as he does makes us laugh at the serious matters as well. This is not to say that the serious matters, or even the comic fall of Chauntecleer, are entirely funny. Rather, the perspective that the comedy of beast fable portrayal provides makes it possible for us to laugh at serious matters and in laughing see them in relation to the world as a whole.

To begin with, the Nun's Priest's Tale is after all another tale of a character at the top of the Wheel of Fortune who is threatened by Fortune's instability. The Monk's Tale has been a series of tragic tumblings from the Wheel, and the Nun's Priest tells a tale that will please a company wanting a change; as the knight says, a happy tale of man's fortunes

... is gladsom, as it thynketh me,
And of swich thyng were goodly for to telle.

(Prologue, lines 2778-79)

The priest's tale puts the monk's tragic vision into perspective: Chauntecleer's fall, or near-fall, has a reason--his pride--of which we
are so aware because we have been laughing at it merrily for some time. But also, the qualities that elevated Chauntecleer in the first place, his wakefulness and ready voice, recur in time to save him. Thus the unhappy aspect of life is counterbalanced by the comedy of a happy resolution. The monk's concept of tragedy goes no further than this statement:

For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.

(line 3205)

The priest mimics it, and then proceeds to show that the matter is not so simple. The Wheel of Fortune is unstable, but man is not completely helpless. He does, after all, have free will.

The underlying belief in free will, one of many serious themes incorporated into this comic tale, comments on the incompleteness of the monk's point of view in the previous tale, and is used for comic effect in this one. Chauntecleer avoids tragedy by exercising his wits; he thus denies the "necessitee" implied by his "avisioun" through retaining his free will. The priest has brought up the matter, interrupting his narrative with his interest in the question of predestination, but proceeds to show, in the remainder of his tale, that when man retains his free will, necessity is conditional. However, while this theme is certainly part of the tale, we must be careful not to lose the perspective the comic portrayal gives us. The priest ends his discussion of "necessitee" with a reminder of his fable, though not with a return to the narrative:

I wol nat han to do of swich mateere;
My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere, . . . .

(lines 3251-52)

The question is a very serious one indeed, but when it is applied to the doings of a rooster, it cannot be regarded too seriously. In terms of Chauntecleer's portrayal, of the comic tone and of the happy ending, the
inflated diction of the narrator's lament for Chauntecleer's failing to heed his dream is a comic mockery of seriousness:

O Chauntecleer, acursed be that morwe
That thou into the yerd flaugh fro the hemes!
Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes
That thilke day was perilous to thee;
But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee.

(lines 3230-34)

The solemn discussion of free will and necessity indeed adds to the comic incongruities of the poem: a serious subject adorns a frivolous one. We are shown the Wheel of Fortune as straddled by a rooster. On one level, the themes of free will and of Fortune are put into perspective by the priest, but this lesson for mankind cannot become solemn unless we lose our perspective on the hero, Chauntecleer, and Chaucer does not let us lose that perspective.

Pertelote's role and the Nun's Priest's remarks on woman's counsel have been seen as evidence of the Nun's Priest's Tale's belonging to the ranks of medieval anti-feminist literature. Pertelote's counsel is certainly short-sighted, but the criticisms she meets with are not severe; again, the comic tone of the poem prevents our taking the anti-feminist theme too seriously. Chauntecleer and Pertelote are sympathetically portrayed, even in their weaknesses, and there is a genuine delight communicated to the reader when Chauntecleer describes his happiness:

"Madame Pertelote, my worldes blis,
Herkneth thise blisful briddes how they synge,
And se the fresshe florres how they sprynge;
Ful is myn herte of revel and solas!"

(lines 3200-3)

Chauntecleer's Mulier est hominis confusio is borne out by the fable, but not by Pertelote's behaviour so much as by his own weakness. But even this
weakness is understandable and justifiable. "Chaucer's humane and comic realism forbids the dour antifeminist implications and provides a counterpoise in that other truth, that other affirmation, _Amor vincit omnia._" Pertelote's genuine affection, and Chauntecleer's genuine joy, balance the view of woman and marriage, as does Chauntecleer's soothing Pertelote with "the most felicitous mistranslation of all time," "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis."

And of course, the seriousness of any thematic implication is moderated by the comedy of the fable portrayal: these serious reflections on the joys and dangers of human life are presented through the tale "of a cok and hen."

Several of these serious themes are also undercut by a deliberate confusion of the causal relationships in the tale. It is not clear when Chauntecleer first sees the fox after his dream and his reckless flight from the beams. Neither dream nor the reckless pride apparently caused by joyful contemplation of Pertelote leads to instantaneous woe. The blurring of responsibility caused by presenting a prophetic dream, a wife who gives poor counsel, and a hero who knows better than to behave as he does, is reinforced by the obscured chronology.

Several other potentially serious subjects are treated lightheartedly in the Nun's Priest's Tale. The debate on dreams includes a great deal of information on the subject of sleep-visions and their importance, but it is nonetheless essentially comic that Chauntecleer, a rooster, should be possessed of this knowledge. While Chauntecleer characterizes himself by thinking his dream an "avisioun," he is nonetheless correct, so that the comedy shifts to encompass the very incongruity of allowing a rooster such
a dignified role. Indeed, the dream itself mocks a human "avisoun" by its particular suitability to a rooster: Chauntecleer dreams of being forced to wear a fur coat with a tight bone collar, an obvious metaphor for being swallowed by a fox.  

Numerous scholars have pointed out the significance of the date of Chauntecleer's fall--May 3rd--and related this date and other astrological phenomena in the poem to its serious themes. Chauntecleer is under the influence of Venus, and susceptible to a fall, but also, because of the rebirth of the New Adam, has the potential for rebirth. Certainly, Chaucer would not have taken the trouble to clarify the date of Chauntecleer's mishap if he had not meant to suggest something of these associations. Chauntecleer is the servant of Venus, and his error is implied when the Nun's Priest ironically appeals to Venus:

O Venus, that art goddesse of plesaunce,
Syn that thy servant was this Chauntecleer,
And in thy servyce dide al his poweer,
Moore for delit than world to multiplye,
Why woldestow suffre hym on thy day to dye?

(lines 3342-46)

Mention of Friday brings to mind another example of the fall of princes, and the Nun's Priest elevates Chauntecleer to the company of King Richard I, also slain on a Friday. Such stress on Friday, particularly by a priest, suggests the theological significance of that day as well, but the poem does not develop the suggestion. The significance given to Friday in the poem indeed functions to underline the comic incongruities of Chauntecleer's mock-heroic portrayal: a rooster is the faithful servant of Venus and the companion in tragedy of King Richard. This very portrayal prevents our taking the morality implicit in the priest's appeal to Venus too seriously. One suspects that the priest wishes us to realize how suitable it is that
Chauntecleer should fall on Venus' day, but he does not dwell on moral weakness. He shifts to a rhetorical interest in another apostrophe, this time to a rhetorician. In this passage, we are returned to the mock-heroic conception of Chauntecleer; the moral significance of Friday as Venus' day is a passing allusion, a deepening of the consciousness of the possibilities of extracting a significance for human conduct, but it is not solemnized. The satirical reflection on the poetry of Geoffrey of Vinsauf ironically undercuts the relevance of dwelling on the day of the week at all:

O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,
That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
With shot, compleynedest his deeth so soore,
Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,
The Friday for to chide, as diden ye?
For on a Friday, soothly, slayn was he.

(lines 3347-52)

In a sense, them, Chaucer snatches back the "fruit" he has offered by relating Chauntecleer's fall to the associations of Friday.

Chaucer's comic approach to rhetoric and romance in the Nun's Priest's Tale includes, ironically, a comic approach to beast fable itself. To begin with, the didactic moralizing of exempla is satirized at several points. Chauntecleer, in his grand attempt to convince Pertelote of the truth of dreams, "uses the exemplum technique. During the lengthy tale of the two travellers (lines 2985 ff.) he becomes so carried away with his tale that he forgets the lesson he meant to illustrate:"

"Mordre wol out, that se we day by day.
Mordre is wlatsom and abhomynable
To God, that is so just and resonable,
That he ne wol nat suffre it heled be,
Though it abyde a yeer, or two, or thre,
Mordre wol out, this my conclusioun."

(lines 3052-57)
He carries on his narrative to prove this point, and then recalls the moral he began to illustrate, adding it somewhat anticlimactically:

"Heere may men seen that dremes been to drede."

(line 3063)

The multiplication of "morals" at the end of the fable suggests, too, a comic glance at the simple-mindedness of an Aesopic fable. When the Nun's Priest says "Taketh the Moralite," we can only ask with bewilderment, "Which one?"51

The earnestness of the narrator in drawing out the morality of his tale sometimes comes under comic scrutiny. The priest digresses to stress the evil of woman's counsel:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
Wommanes conseil broghte us first to wo,
And made Adam from Paradys to do, . . . .

(lines 3256-57)

Chauntecleer, however, is not following Pertelote's counsel; he is neglecting his dream because of his amorous interest and his pride and happy confidence in general. It is noteworthy that these lines follow the digression on free will, which implies that it is in Chauntecleer's power to alter the fate predicted in his dream. The priest's partiality undercuts their seriousness. He backs away from them rather quickly too, in keeping with the comic tone of his tale.

The Nun's Priest pauses on numerous occasions in the narrative to point a moral. In each case the moral is corroborated by the narrative to some extent, but is tempered by the comedy of the portrayal of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, by the possibility of another moral application, or by the satire on pompous rhetorical moralizing. There is not one moral for which the tale functions as an exemplum. The Nun's Priest has filled his tale with moralities, but he is caught up in their multiplicity—even to the
extent of adding another possible cause for misfortune—when Chauntecleer's fate is at last confronted:

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!
Alias, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!
Alias, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!
And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.

(lines 3338-41)

And ironically, once again, not one of these "causes" is the most obvious cause of Chauntecleer's plight:

This Chauntecleer his wynges gan to bete,
As man that koude his traysoun nat espie,
So was he ravysshed with his flaterie.

(lines 3322-24)

The fable explodes in a welter of morals and of moral associations. In one sense, we can feel that the Nun's Priest himself is being satirized when he tells us to take the morality, for his tale is beyond this simple exhortation. But the rhetorical stance of the lines such as those quoted above suggests that the narrator too is poking fun at those who see at tale only in terms of an obvious "moral" and neglect to recognize the diversities of human experience. The simple-minded moralizing mocks the Aesopic fable as a didactic tool, and the tale as a whole mocks by sheer contrast the illustrative fable that represents only one view of human behaviour.

Just as there is not final moral statement in the Nun's Priest's Tale, there can be no final statement to capsulize the technique of the portrayal of Chauntecleer and Pertelote. They are certainly as anthropomorphic as any of the characters in the fully developed beast epics. But were it not for Chaucer's frequent reminders of their animal appearances, we would sometimes forget they are chickens, as in the long debate on dreams for example. Indeed, as we noted above, the animals themselves sometimes
The critical temper of the poem . . . produces no negative effect, but a continuously humane suggestion of the relativity of things. The shifting style and the succession of topics never rest long enough to serve a single view or a single doctrine or an unalterable judgment.  

Chauntecleer's pretensions are mocked by the fact that he is a rooster, the priest's moral or learned digressions are mocked by being applied to a cock; the rhetorician's terminology is mocked by his subject matter. Yet, Chauntecleer is a splendid rooster, the priest's remarks on free will have a great deal of validity, and the rhetorician's voice utters truths of its own. The comic contradictions of the fable are also those of the human world. Man's complacent answers to his problems, like his pretensions to heroism or learning, are put into perspective by a portrayal of the comic instability of all sublunary values, and indeed of sublunary life. The tale's comedy often includes parody and enjoyment of the paradoxes of mankind's reactions to his mortal condition, but its basis is the underlying
tone of sympathetic enjoyment of humanity, the essence of which is
tolerance. Chauntecleer and Pertelote amuse us with their pretensions,
but they also engage our sympathy, for their foolishness is of a universal
kind. The narrator ends his tale on a note of true comedy and humanity.
Chauntecleer saves himself and learns his lesson, the fable world is left
behind, and with it the disparities of the mortal world:

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.

(lines 3444-46)

Before concluding our discussion of Chaucer's handling of beast fable,
it will be worthwhile to compare the Nun's Priest's Tale with Robert
Henryson's treatment of the same basic tale, "The Taill of Schir Chantecleir
and the Foxe." Henryson's fable, unlike Chaucer's, concentrates upon the
capture of the cock by the fox. While he clearly borrow aspects of
Chaucer's characterizations and mock epic tone, the Scottish poet has a
more clearly defined moral purpose. Chantecleir's character is developed
to illustrate the follies of vainglory, and Lowrence is a more clever
flatterer than Russell. The action of Henryson's fable is limited to the
capture, pursuit, and escape of Chantecleir. While the narrative illus-
trates the comic efficacy of fable portrayal, its particular moral purpose
requires that that portrayal be executed along lines very different from
The Nun's Priest's Tale.

To begin with, Chantecleir is not so well-developed nor so sympathetic
a character as is Chauntecleer. Most of his characterization is accomplished
through the dialogue of the three hens. Chantecleir as he appears in the
fable is a rather foolish figure. He has only one line before his capture
by the fox, and that does not speak well for his intelligence; he replies to the fox's recollections of the amity between Chantecleir's family and himself,

"Knew ye my father?" quod the cok, and leuch.

(line 446)

He is duped by the fox into listening; "leuch" does not seem to indicate incredulity, for if it did surely the cock would flee. It has been pointed out that "leuch" in Henryson often means "giggled,"\(^57\) and such a reading is in keeping with Chantecleir's foolish pride, for here he is flattered by the fox's words and behaviour. His foolishness is further illustrated by Henryson's original development of the fox's request that Chantecleir sing with his eyes closed. Lowrence, after hearing Chantecleir sing, insists that the cock's father could do better:

"For," quod the tod, "he wald—and haif na doute—
Baith wink and craw and turne him thryis about."

(lines 472-73)

Henryson makes it clear why Chantecleir behaves so foolishly: he is "infect with wind and fals vanegloir" (line 474). But his intelligence is not of a high order either, for crafty as the fox may be, he is no stranger to Chantecleir. He has disturbed the hen-yard before,

In pyking off pultrie baith day and nicht; . . . .

(line 423)

As is often the case in Henryson's Fabillis, pride and comic stupidity go hand in hand. The cock's escape from the fox seems to owe more to divine intervention than to his own wit. He is "with sum gude spirit inspyrit" (line 558), and the narrator later adds another similar suggestion:
This tod, though he was false and frivolous,

Desavet was be menis richt mervelous; ... .

(lines 565, 567)

The cock does not succumb to a second attempt by Lowrence to beguile him, however. Donald MacDonald points out that Henryson borrows an element from Chaucer's tale, the fox's second attempt to capture Chantecleir, even though the narrative logic of Henryson's poem would seem to demand "that the cock revert to his original role of a vain and gullible fool." In the Nun's Priest's Tale the incident is added to show that Chauntecleer has learned his lesson, for he is a regenerate figure. Chantecleir as an embodiment of foolish vainglory is spared because Henryson is telling a comic tale and because he follows the traditional story.

The fox in Henryson's fable is a major character. His cunning and deceit are skilfully brought out by the poet's "remarkable ability to reveal character through dialogue." The ironies of Lowrence's words are typical of Henryson's portrayal of the crafty fox in other Fabillis:

Your father full oft fillit hes my wame,
And send me meit fra midding to the muris: ... .

(lines 441-2)

Lowrence's caution in winning Chantecleir's confidence speaks for a greater degree of rationalization on Henryson's part than on Chaucer's, and of characterization of the fox as well. The characterization is fulfilled, again, through an increased anthropomorphism in the fox. Lowrence does not wait for the cock to see him and be startled, but approaches him on his knees, speaking politely and going through the motions of wishing to pay service to his "maister". He does not ask Chantecleir to sing until he has given the history of his acquaintance with the elder rooster, and does not ask Chantecleir to close his eyes until the first challenge to sing as
well as his father has been fulfilled. Lowrence is only fooled by Chantecleir because he is weary and weak with hunger, and afraid of the pack of hounds close on his heels. Lowrence's comic guile focuses our attention on the success of clever flattery.

The digression that introduces Henryson's contributions to the cock and fox fable, Pertok, Sprutok, and Toppok, includes mock heroics and a satirical glance at marriage no doubt inspired by the Nun's Priest's Tale. Henryson's depiction of the hens is considerably different from Chaucer's portrayal of Pertelote, however. While his wives' censures point to Chantecleir's moral weaknesses, their behaviour is in effect self-critical, and the selfishness their words reveal is a far less gentle comment on women. Each hen expresses a human attitude to Chantecleir, and the selfishness—or bestiality—of each attitude is reinforced by the fact that these are hens. Pertok expresses a courtly point of view in her mock-heroic lament, but her sorrow is rapidly shown to be "feinyeit", so that she is not unlike the fox whose fair words mask selfish motives. She states that Chantecleir's love was really only "lust but lufe," a criticism in keeping with her courtly sentiments, but in the following lines she shows that her interest too is only that of lust:

"Sister, ye wait, off sic as him ane scoir
Wald not suffice to slaik our appetye."

(lines 525-26)

This comic reversal reveals her true nature. Sprutok, whose words effect Pertok's rapid change of tone, is a cheerful realist with views "the Wife of Bath would have understood and relished." She resents the cock's jealousy and overbearing nature, but her major criticism is that he is not amorous enough. The comic portrayal of Sprutok the hen as a merry widow is
another example of Henryson's playing upon fable portrayal to suggest human-animal correspondences:

"The proverb sayis, 'Als gude lufe cummis as gais.'
I will put on my halydayis clais
And mak me fresch agane this jolie May.
Syne chant this song, 'Wes never wedow sa gay!"

Finally, Toppok delivers her speech "lyke ane Curate", self-righteously presenting a rigid moral viewpoint. She comments on Chantecleir's pride and criticizes his adultery, the latter being quite ridiculous in terms of the animal nature of the hero assigned by the widow to keep "ane lyttill flok." Her finding Chantecleir "lous" and "lecherous" reflects unfavourably on both the other two hens and on herself. But her severely judgmental position is mocked in the tale, not only by the pomposity of her words in contrast to the narrative but by her assuming to determine God's attitude to Chantecleir. Not long after she declares Chantecleir falls by "the verray hand off God" (line 542), Chantecleir saves himself when he is "with sum gude spirit inspyrit." The suggestion is comically ambiguous, but Toppok's conviction is clearly shortsighted. Altogether, the juxtaposition of the varying rhetorics of the hens makes each ridiculous by contrast.62

The foolishness of Chantecleir's pride is ironically elaborated as well, for while he is yet alive his wives, over whom he no doubt reigned very proudly, are enjoying the prospect of a new love and condemning him outright.

The satire of the views expressed by Pertok, Sprutok and Toppok in this comic digression is more pointed than the Nun's Priest's Tale's satiric glances at women and marriage. The hens are amusing, but they are not portrayed very sympathetically—indeed, one rather pities Chantecleir for having to return to them. Pertok's insincerity, Sprutok's selfishness and Toppok's self-righteousness betray more antifeminist tendencies on the part of the narrator than—does the Nun's Priest's portrayal of the misled but well-meaning
Pertelote. It is only the comic irony of fable portrayal—the congruities and incongruities between the hens' animal natures and their human roles—that prevents the satire from becoming bitter. Pertok, Sprutok and Toppok express a comic combination of human and animal characteristics, but their self-centeredness and hypocrisy cannot be indulged in strictly human terms. In the world of the fable, Chantecleir finds a saving grace and Lowrence is an amusing for, but when vainglory and flattery are examined in the human world, they must be condemned.

Forth as now schortlie to conclude,
Thir twa sinnis, flatterie and vaneglore,
Ar vennomous; gude folk, fle thame thairfoir!

(lines 610-12)

Henryson's specific moral purpose, then, controls the development of his animal characters. They are anthropomorphic and comic, but the irony that reveals their character reveals a specific human weakness the narrator wishes to single out. The fable is aetiological, and in this sense Henryson is closer to the exemplum tradition; he portrays his characters that they may illustrate a moral point, but the means by which the illustration is executed is comic and artful as well, involving full character development. Chaucer develops his characters in the tradition of comic animal fable, endowing them with a complex range of human qualities, but alters the exemplary aspect of the fable. The "moralitee" is so elusive because there is no single moral to which the narrative has been shaped. Rather, it presents diverse attitudes to life and tests them against each other.

The Canterbury Tales do provide an illustration of an animal tale in the exemplum tradition. The Manciple's Tale\textsuperscript{63} describes the fate of a crow condemned by Apollo for telling an unhappy truth. It is not really a fable; while the crow speaks, he does so only because Apollo has taught him to do
so. He does not function in human terms, other than speaking, and the
tale insofar as it concerns him is related to myths that explain the
appearances of animals, rather than to fable. The tale is told by the
Manciple as a straightforward exemplum. He emphasizes the role of the
crow in his commentary, whereas it is the conduct of the human characters
that ought to come under scrutiny; the moral he extracts is superficial
and misses the more valuable "fruit" that lies in the narrative. Like the
Nun's Priest's Tale, the Manciple's Tale parodies single-minded reading
and limited vision, but it is particular rather than universal in scope.

The Nun's Priest's Tale is Chaucer's one undertaking in the beast
fable genre. It draws upon both the tradition of the exempla and Aesopic
fables and that of the comic beast epics, and synthesizes the two in a poem
that combines comedy with instruction and makes each inextricable from the
other. The lesson is that of experience: the world and man's means of coping
with it are diverse, often amusing, and one can learn from observation and
from experience itself. Laughter is both cause and effect of the lesson of
Chaucer's "tale of a cok." In Chauntecleer and his fellow fable characters,
the essence of beast fable portrayal is realized and its paradox transcended:
Chauntecleer and Pertelote comically suggest human beings and their vanities
and spur considerable laughter at the follies of our world as well as their
own. But as amusing as they are in the roles the fable gives them, the end
of the tale admits a kinship beyond paradox. The correspondences between
human and animal are too many to allow us to hold the world of the fable apart
or withdraw or append a single "moralitee". Comic and cosmic, the Nun's
Priest's Tale gives us Chauntecleer, a paradoxically human rooster, and
leaves us with a view, human and humane, of the mortal world. Chaucer
contributes to the beast fable the ultimate irony that his "tale of a fox, or of a cok and hen" is also a tale of man and woman in miniature.
FOOTNOTES

1 Sisam, pp. vii, viii-xiii, prints texts of these fables.


3 Ibid., p. xi.

4 Lenaghan, pp. 138-39.

5 The text is printed in Hulbert, pp. 646-58.

6 Hulbert (p. 645) summarizes scholarship on the sources of the Nun's Priest's Tale, as does Robinson in his notes to the tale (p. 751). It is generally felt that Chaucer's tale descends from the Roman, either (indirectly (Sisam, pp. xxiv ff.) or, as more recent scholars feel, directly. See note 7 below. Nevill Coghill (The Poet Chaucer [London: Oxford University Press, 1949; rpt. 1960], p. 156) observes: "I have counted over four-and-twenty learned allusions to different authors in this story, and one might almost say that Chaucer's source for it was not the Roman de Renard so much as a life-time of delighted reading and natural observation."


9 Flinn, 686-87.


11 John M. Steadman ("Flattery and the Moralitas of the Nonne Preestes Tale," Medium Aevum, 28 [1959], 177) suggests that the brevity of the "moralitee" indicates "an indebtedness to the tradition of the beast-fable." The morals spoken by the cock and the fox, however, also appear in branch two of the Roman in a form almost identical to that in Chaucer, which indicates that the Roman is thus indebted.

12 The suitability of this tale for the Nun's Priest has been remarked upon by many recent scholars. There has also been a considerable amount of interesting analysis of the priest's character and relation to the other pilgrims, as well as the relation of his tale to other tales, such as the Monk's Tale and the Tale of Melibee. As interesting as these considerations are, the limits of this study prevent their examination beyond what light they may throw on the tale as a development of beast fable. See particularly Arthur T. Broes, "Chaucer's Disgruntled Cleric: The Nun's Priest's Tale," PMLA, 78 (1963), 156-62, on the priest; Samuel E. Hemingway, "Chaucer's Monk and Nun's Priest," Modern Language Notes, 31 (1916), 479-83, and Charles S. Watson, "The Relationship of 'The Monk's Tale' and 'The Nun's Priest's Tale,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 1 (1963-64), 277-88, on


15 Although "toun" can be read as "farm", the line does indicate that Pertelote sees her surroundings in terms of an establishment that could have such manifestations of human civilization as an apothecary.


17 See George Clark, "Chauntecleer and Deduit," English Language Notes, 2 (1964-65), 168-71, who shows that Chaucer alludes to the idealized lovers Mirth and Gladness in the Roman de la Rose when he portrays Chauntecleer and Pertelote, and thus heightens the mock-heroic comedy of his tale.


19 J. Kieran Kealy, "Satire in The Nun's Priest's Tale," unpublished typescript, pp. 15-16; he shows also that this realistic description reinforces the satire of artificial rhetoric and illustrates the necessity of seeing the world as it is.


21 Curry (pp. 229-30) points out that it is characteristic of Chauntecleer's proud nature for him to see his dream as an "avisioun", the sort of dream that only comes to great men.

22 E. g., Henryson's the "Fox and the Wolf," in which the husbandman goes through legal proceedings with the two animals, the "The Wolf and the Wether," in which the shepherd shares the wether's scheme.


24 In Henryson's version of the fable, the widow also swoons in mock-heroic fashion. Henryson links the animal and human worlds through parallel
behaviour, but he seems to have caught Chaucer's amused attitude to the widow as well.

25 It has been pointed out that the widow also serves as a means for the priest to chastize some of the other pilgrims, such as the Monk, the Prioress, and the Pardoner. Her life is the healthy life of moderation, unlike that of the priest's fellow clerics. See Broes, p. 160.


27 Coghill, p. 155.

28 See p. 92 above.

29 Flinn, p. 684.


31 Emma M. Dieckmann, in "... 'Moore feelynge than had Boece, ...'", Modern Language Notes, 53 (1938), 177-80, points out that this statement too is ironic for Boethius' strict mathematical treatment of music had been questioned since the eleventh century. Chauntecleer's having more "feeling" than Boethius is thus no great compliment. Both Chauntecleer's pretentiousness regarding his wisdom and his folly in general thus are given another comic blow.


34 Speirs (Chaucer, p. 190) notes this as well.


36 Kean, p. 137.

37 Song of Solomon, 2: 15, "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines," was interpreted by Gregory as a warning against hypocrisy (Friedman, p. 501). Allegorical interpretations of the fox in the Middle Ages are summarized by M. S. Donovan, "The Morality of the Nun's Priest's Sermon," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 52 (1953), 498-501.

38 Broes sees the cock as a representative of the priest himself, who is suffering the evils of woman's counsel through being in the service of the Prioress. He feels that Chauntecleer is positively portrayed and
that his failings can be blamed on Pertelote. Broes' views, whitewashing Chauntecleer, seem untenable.


40 Cf. J. B. Friedman's interpretation of Henryson's "The Fox's Confession" as anti-mendicant satire.

41 Donovan, as cited above, note 37.

42 Brewer, Chaucer, pp. 156-57.

43 Watson, pp. 281-83.


45 Ruggiers, p. 190.


47 Kealy, pp. 9-11. See also Fish, pp. 225-27.

48 The Roman also describes the dream this way.


50 This exemplum also mimics the Prioress' Tale. See note 12 above.

51 Pearsall, pp. 151-52.

52 Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude Toward Fables," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 59 (1960), 403-16. Manning makes it clear that the priest's admonition to take the morality mocks the attitude that insists a fable be justified by its moral lesson. "Chaucer's poking fun at this attitude in the final section of his poem is one more example of what he is doing in the tale as a whole: ridiculing the rhetorical and poetic practice of his day" (p. 416).

Ibid., p. 242.

Quotations from Henryson's fable are from Elliott's edition, pp. 13-19.

MacDonald, "Narrative Art," pp. 107-113, discusses Chaucer's and Henryson's versions of the fables, also differentiating Henryson's by its more serious moral purpose.


On the names for the hens, see Wood's edition of Henryson, p. 230.

Stearns, p. 66.

Fox, "Chaucerians," p. 175.

CHAPTER SIX
SATIRE AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE
ANIMAL FABLE

When animals are portrayed with human characteristics, it is a natural
consequence that there will be a certain satiric reflection on human beings.
Even animals who merely speak and briefly reason are no longer animals, but
characters modelled to some extent on man. Latent in the conception of fable
characters is the unflattering notion that human actions can be those of ani-
mals. Thus a fox or an ass speaking in an Aesopic fable mocks human be-
haviour, if only to the effect of illustrating a vice or a weakness. How-
ever, a fox whose human ability extends beyond the utterance of a few lines
of flattery will inevitably serve to mock whatever human traits he possesses.
The fabulists who develop the anthropomorphic portrayal of their characters
also realize the satirical propensities of their genre. An animal, particu-
larly one who traditionally embodies a vice or folly, or is portrayed as
possessing one, points a satirical finger at the human equivalent of the
role in which he is cast. Well-developed animal fables include some degree
of satire, often enough as part of a moral purpose in the broadest sense.

The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, which fulfills in so many ways the potentiali-
ties of the animal fable, employs comic satire to point out human foibles.
Its satiric tone can best be described as Horatian, for human weakness is
seen with amusement rather than indignation. Indeed, one of the most
delightful illustrations of Horace’s satire is an early example of a sophisti-
cated fable, his Mus Urbanus et Mus Rusticus, which gently mocks the vanity
of human wishes. The satire of Chaucer’s tale is both general and specific.
The Nun’s Priest mocks the tragic vision of the Monk and the foibles of the
other pilgrims goodnaturedly, for the unreal world he describes provides a distance that prevents any comment from becoming an expression of a personal inclination. Courtly conventions come under humorous scrutiny when Chauntecleer and Pertelote take over the tale. The rhetorical practices mocked by the repeated assumptions of the rhetor's voice satirize the weaknesses of yet another form of human endeavor, and the simplistic moralizing of animal fable itself is comically satirized when the narrator mimics a capsulized moral appendage. The comic portrayal of the fable characters reveals human weaknesses and follies that relate to specific people and practices as well as to mankind as a whole. But criticism is tempered by the humane perspective that values all the joys and lessons of experience. The superbly comic portrayal of Chauntecleer and Pertelote is so delightful because it is also sympathetic. It is this sympathetic view that is responsible for the narrator's distance from his subjects. He appreciates the diversities of the human world and, aware of the kinship between human and fable worlds, he allows the characters freedom of action without imposing his own viewpoint—or any single viewpoint—on their behaviour. The satire of the Nun's Priest's Tale is directed at many forms of human weakness, but it communicates the assurance that man is regenerate, and laughter regenerative.

Henryson also uses satire to fulfill the twofold purpose of his Morall Fabillis, although the tone and extent of his satire varies. One cannot formulate any rigid classification of the Morall Fabillis according to the kind of satire or moral criticism that Henryson effects. Even "The Two Mice," a superb comic portrayal of human folly and vulnerability that is beyond restriction to particulars of time and place, contains satiric reflection on the new burgher classes of fifteenth-century Scotland. All Henryson's fables operate on multiple levels of ironic correspondences
between the animal and the human, so that a general human weakness, a
specific social vice, and a type of human being susceptible to a particular
bestial trait all may be suggested within a few stanzas of one fable.
However, in the Fabillis we can witness the several sorts of satiric re-
flexion on the human world that are to be found in medieval animal tales.
While the mockery of human behaviour in "The Two Mice" is considerably sub-
dued by the sympathetic portrayal of an appreciably human figure, Henryson
has less patience with the failings of some of his other comic characters,
notably Pertok and her sisters and the cock of "The Cock and the Jasp."
Their weaknesses are completely laughable, but they are also human weak-
nesses that are no longer quite so amusing when the fable world is left
behind.

The Reynardian fables in Henryson's collection contain more specific
satire as the anthropomorphic development of the animals includes their
assuming specific human roles. In these fables, however, the satire is
tempered by comedy also. One of the fables we have examined already, "The
Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger," can be seen as a satirical comment on the
merchant class, as represented by the cadger. The cadger is the butt of
the fox's clever trick, and his stupidity and greed are paralleled in the
wolf. It is stupidity and greed that are satirized in the main, and the
application to the merchant class is simply a passing blow struck in the
course of a great deal of comedy. "The Fox and the Wolf" satirizes misuse
of the law while developing the craftiness of the fox and greed of the wolf
anthropomorphically. The satire in this fable is oblique, for the portrayals
within the world of the fable remain comic; it is the human beings like these
beasts "in conditioun" who are the targets. Even Freir Wolf Waitskaith in
"The Fox's Confession" is delightfully comic in his complete ineptitude for
his office. But the enormous gulf between the wolf's character and what
we would expect to be the character of a friar is narrowed when the wolf
sustains his mock-holy role throughout the tale. In "The Trial of the Fox"
there is a similar portrait of the wolf as a learned "Doctour off Divinitie"
and a sort of chancellor to the king. The episode is yet another example
of Lowrence's clever outwitting of the wolf, who in spite of his learning
is too foolish to see even a simple ruse. The comedy plays upon the differ­
ence between the learned appearance and protestations of the wolf and his
stupidity: when he has been kicked in the head, he is mocked by the fox as
the "Doctour off Divinitie,/ With his Reid cap" (lines 1052-53). The human
characteristics thus reinforce the comic ironies that illustrate the animals'
characters, upon which rest both entertainment and moralitas, but as in the
other fox and wolf fables there is a satirical reflection involved as well.
The portrayal of a wolf as a cleric or an official of the state naturally
suggests that these have something in common. When the wolf is further
characterized as being extremely foolish, the satirical reflection on the
human role sharpens. These fables all parody human roles by assigning to
them the animal characters which in ideal terms would seem least suitable.
The characters are developed as individuals, both through their basic animal
natures and their human traits, but these two ostensibly opposite natures
mingle, so that one cannot distinguish between them. The learned Waitskaith,
newly come from the cloister, might be hypocritical and stupid because he is
a wolf, but on the other hand, he is also a friar.

The anthropomorphic portrayal in highly-developed fables such as
Henryson's and Chaucer's is of course responsible for the extent of satiric
reflection on the manners and ideas of the times, as well as on universal
human behaviour. When animals are to be portrayed as functioning in human
terms and with a society of their own, the contemporary scene will naturally
serve as a model. The *Roman de Renart* and its early analogues also contain considerable comic satire at the expense of all the human models it employs. Courtly conventions, the legal system, and clerical faults are alike ridiculed when taken over by Reynard and his companions. Writing of branch one, Robert Bossuat remarks that

Assurement, l'auteur... connait les defauts du systeme politique et de l'organisation sociale. Il les denonce par la voix du goupil, mais sans violence, et pour amuser un public ou tous les milieux sont meles.

Clerical weaknesses, however, do meet stronger criticism in the *Roman*, though the portrayals of fox and wolf as clerics are especially comic. John Flinn, in his recent comprehensive study of the *Roman de Renart* and its analogues, summarizes the satirical spirit of the French beast epics.

Je suis convaincu qu'c'est... bien consciemment que les trouveres francais ont satirise, en la travestissant, la societe francaise du XIIeme et du XIIIeme siecle, et qu'ils se sont souvent contentes de faire rire leurs contemporains sans leur faire de la morale.

The Middle English *The Vox and the Wolf* retains the potential for satire alongside a comedy that reveals the influence of the beast epics, but it is not developed to satirize particular human roles. Rather, it reflects satirically on human nature and behaviour in general. The ludicrous attitude of Sigrim to Paradise is surely a jest at the expense of human hypocrisy, and Reneward's mock-solemm posing as confessor and parish priest suggests the ease with which a serious office may be abused, and its abuse accepted. But Reneward and Sigrim are individual characters, not representatives of the clergy or their flock; their abuse of religion is an individual one, and is not held up as being in any way exemplary.

In all of the fables which develop the anthropomorphic characteristics of animal characters into conceptions as individual as Reneward, or
Chauntecleer, or Lowrence, satire often joins comedy as a result of the expansion of human-animal correspondences. The satire is tempered by comedy, however, so that while it ridicules human weaknesses or suggests the abuse of a human role, it is part of a number of effects of the fable portrayal. It may join comedy and irony to underline a moral application, or to entertain, or both. This light satire, however, is developed through individual characters and comments on human vanity and weakness that the individual can apply to himself. While the weaknesses may be expressed by a convention, as are insincerity and pretension through protestations of courtly sentiments, they are nonetheless the shortcomings of individuals.

However, the fable has also been the vehicle of a different kind of criticism. Animal society modelled on human society can be held up as a representative comment on the shortcomings of the human world as a whole. Phaedrus adapted the fable to the purposes of sharp political satire, which, although sometimes a personal reaction to individuals, often involves making his characters represent classes or groups. The oppression of the weak by the strong is obviously often seen in the animal world, and as a result the "morals" of Aesopic fables can be more worldly than otherwise. Marie de France often appendes moralities to criticize social and political injustices, brought to mind by the unfortunate victims of the fables. "Marie fut bien le fabuliste du regime feodal au XIIIe siecle." The clerics who used exempla sometimes introduced themes of social criticism in the fables in the same way as Marie de France. The fable of the wolf and the lamb in the Gesta Romanorum is recommended as an exemplum against oppression of the poor. Latin fables by English clerics also contain social satire, as well as satire on other clerics. Nicole de Bozon and John Bromyard particularly satirize the social vices of their times, the fox often being used to signify
bad prelates. Bromyard describes a wolf who kills more than he needs to maintain servants, an expensive lady, the promotions of his sons and the dowries of his daughters. The satire is made explicit by the addition of anthropomorphic characteristics to the animal portrayed in the fable.

When the anthropomorphic portrayal of animals involves their fulfilling particular human roles, satire of those roles can be expected. However, in some animal fables, social or political criticism and satire for a didactic purpose is the only basis for the anthropomorphic portrayal. While the simple Aesopic fable can illustrate a moral that reinforces a social criticism, the anthropomorphically developed animal fable heightens the illustrative potential through more specific similarities between human and animal worlds. However, satire without comedy and didacticism without interest in the entertainment function of the narrative restrict the fable once again. Its narrative style may be effective and its purpose well-fulfilled, but the characters are reduced to examples that have no real world of their own.

Three of Henryson's fables are clearly social and political allegories. The moralitas to each relates the narrative to contemporary events. The ironies of the characters' behaviour are brought out in these fables, but the tone is serious and the satire more so. The voice of the narrator is no longer detached, but reveals a strong commitment to exposing the evils he decries.

"The Taill of the Scheip and the Doig" is a straightforward satire on the failings of the legal system in fifteenth-century Scotland, transformed by the moralitas into allegorical terms. The familiar "trial" scene of beast epics is here a serious portrayal of a fraudulent court.
The animals take on the human roles of a court proceeding, and the ironies of their doing so are not those of comic incongruity, but of a bitter reality within the incongruity. The details and intricacies of legal proceedings are elaborated, with a host of animals fulfilling various functions: the wolf is judge, the fox, clerk and notary, and so on. The sheep pleads his case in legal language, and the members of the court speak in the same way. The anthropomorphic characterization is developed to the extent of the dog's having purchased for "fyve schilling or mair" (line 1183) the bread he alleges the sheep has stolen from him; the sheep personally sells his fleece to a merchant and then buys bread again; the various members of the court read and discuss "Of civile law volumis full mony" (line 1216). The contrast between the behaviour and the animal natures of the characters, however, is not comic.

Rather, the incongruity of the animals' portrayal informs the seriousness of the fable's criticisms. The members of the court seem to fulfill their duties in their serious use of legal procedure, but their own bias of course perverts justice. The moralitas states that men such as these "settis al thair cure/ Be fals meinis to mak ane wrang conquest" (lines 1260-61); Henryson figures such men in the kind of animals one expects similar behaviour from, the beasts of prey. And he makes it perfectly clear throughout the narrative that these beasts deliberately pervert justice for their own ends:

Ane fraudfull wolff was juge that tyme, and bure Authoritie and jurisdictioun, . . . .

(lines 1150-51)

The bias of the officers of the court is indicated:

Schir Corbie Ravin wes maid apparitour Quha pykit had full mony scheipis ee, . . . .

(lines 1160-61)
The animals are in league to ensure the protection of their kind and their method of living; the kite and vulture

The doggis play togidder tuke on hand,
Quhilk wer confiderit straitlie in ane band
Aganis the scheip to procure the sentence;
Thocht it wes fals thay had na conscience.

(lines 1177-80)

There is an occasional avowal of honesty, ironically placed after the narrator has confirmed the reverse. The repeated reminders of fraud, lack of conscience, and conspiracy are too serious for comic enjoyment of the fable scene:

This cursit court, corruptit all for meid,
Aganis gude faith, law and eik conscience,
For this fals doig pronuncit the sentence.

(lines 1241-43)

The characters are fully developed as villains. Their villainy is expressive of their animal natures—they are all beasts of prey—and its human development is of a piece with those natures. The narrator is not the distant onlooker he is in many of the Fabillis, and the moralitas simply extends what he has presented very clearly in the narrative. The narrative is continued into the moralitas as well. The narrator describes encountering the sheep after the trial, and devotes two stanzas to the sheep's lament:

Bot of this scheip and of his cairfull cry
I sail reheirs; for as I passit by
Quhair that he lay, on cais I lukit doun,
And hard him mak sair lamentatioun.

(lines 1282-85)

The sheep is a helpless, pathetic figure; the narrator's strong commitment informs the portrayal of court and victim, and guarantees an affective response.

"The Taill of the Wolf and the Lamb" similarly exemplifies the
bestiality of human behaviour that is responsible for the social ills
Henryson condemns. Again, the satire is too serious for laughter. The
wolf is "cruell," "richt ravenous and fell" (line 2614), with none of
the comic stupidity of Waitskaith or the "wolf that gat the nek-bering."
His dispute with the lamb consists of his perverting justice to suit himself.
The lamb's replies are sensible and sound, and thwart the wolf on all counts.
The animals are developed to suit the fable's purpose, rather than to
function as credible characters. That a young lamb should make such formal
speeches, each expressing a knowledge of either natural philosophy, theology,
or law, is hard to believe. Yet, the way he is presented brings out the
depths of the wolf's depravity—the wolf is "reduced . . . to a self-
acknowledged monster." The moralitas draws out the similarity between
animals and men and criticizes directly what the narrative has exposed
satirically: powerful creatures, including "fals perverteris of the Lawis"
and "Lordis that hes land be Goddis lane" (lines 2715 and 2743), who oppress
the poor and in so doing place their souls in mortal danger. Satirized in
the narrative through the character of the raving wolf, such men are
criticized yet further in the moralitas, for a natural wolf knows no better
than to behave as he does:

O man, but mercie quhat is in thy thocht?
War than ane wolf and thow culd understand!

(lines 2735-36)

"The Taill of the Lyoun and the Mous" is a political commentary.
In structure it is a dream vision; the narrator is walking in the country
on a June day, sleeps, and dreams of Aesop, who tells him the fable and
provides the application. The conversation between the dreamer and Aesop
includes a remark about the times as well; Aesop says of telling fables,
"For quhat is it worth to tell ane fenyeit taill,
Quhen haly preiching may na thing availl?"

(lines 1389-90)

The fable of the lion who spares a mouse and is later saved by him is well-known. Henryson alters the basic universal moral, however, to political allegory. The lion is the king lax in his duty whose people are becoming unruly but who are nonetheless loyal to him and save him from his treacherous barons. The intention is made explicit in the moralitas, though Henryson is cautious about drawing too many direct parallels:

Thir rurall men that stentit hes the net
Mair till expound as now I lett allane--
Bot king and lord may weill wit quhat I mene:
Figure heirof oftymis has bene sene.

(lines 1609, 1612-14)

In spite of their allegorical intent, however, the animal characters are quite well-developed, and indeed their characters speak for Henryson's attitude to their human equivalents. The lion as the noble monarch of the forest is sufficiently dignified, but also basically wise and merciful. He recognizes that there is no excuse for the mice's disrespect for his "Nobill persoun," but he thinks "according to ressoun" (line 1504) and shows them mercy. The leader of the mice is a clever and likeable character. His long speech to the lion is reasonable and just; he can use legal language to effect, and he can show due respect to the monarch. The lion has threatened to hang him, but the mouse's speech plays upon the animal-human in the characters and remarks that a lion will have little satisfaction in eating a mouse. Indeed, though the mice represent

... bot the commountie,
Wantoun, unwyse, without correctioun

(lines 1587-98)
the wisdom of this mouse and the solidarity of the mice as a group speak favourably both for characters and for figural representation.

The lion's solitary plight is a sharp contrast to the leadership of the mouse when he calls on his fellows for help:

"Cum help to quyte ane gude turne for ane-uther;  
Go, lous him sone!" And thay said: "Ye, gude brother!"

(lines 1557-58)

In these three fables, then, Henryson uses the genre as a vehicle for political and social commentary. He is pointing not at human weakness as manifested in individuals but at the effects of human weakness on society. "The Lion and the Mouse" has a happy ending, but it is not a comic fable. What we are not so aware of is the incongruity between the animals and the human roles they fill. This is partly because Henryson has chosen animals that traditionally conform to the behaviour he wishes to illustrate: mice as common men, lion as monarch, lamb as innocent man, wolf as villain. In "The Wolf and the Lamb" and "The Sheep and the Dog" fables this choice is itself ironic, for one realizes that the wicked animals suit their human roles because human beings have perverted those roles. But this is also true of the sympathetic characters. The common people are like helpless sheep or lambs because of the injustices of society, and like "wantoun" mice because their ruler has been sleeping rather than ruling. Man's behaviour, then, makes it possible for him to be figured by beasts. In these fables, however, the seriousness of the purpose dominates the narrative, and while the characters are memorable in their own way, they are not as individual as those of the other Fabillis. The narrator's express purpose makes it necessary that his partiality characterize them throughout each fable.

The fable as a vehicle for social commentary and satire manifests itself
elsewhere in Middle English literature. Langland's *Piers Plowman* contains a fable that comments on the contemporary relationship between the common people and the state by portraying the commons as rats and mice fearful of a cat that dominates them ruthlessly.\(^{24}\) The common people and the court both are satirized through the likeness: the rats are a ragged mob and the cat kills indiscriminately and for pleasure.\(^ {25}\) The fable narrative involves a description of a council held by the rats and mice to determine what they might do to prevent the havoc the cat wreaks in their lives. One rat suggests they bell the cat,\(^ {26}\) and a bell is accordingly bought, though no one dares apply it. A wise mouse rises and speaks against belling, or killing, the cat, and the fable ends with the narrator leaving the interpretation to the audience.

The *moralitas*, however, has been uttered by the wise mouse, and the truth of what he says is borne out by the description of the rats and mice. Clearly, the rats have reason to fear a cat who kills wantonly, but the mouse points out that they too are wanton. The picture of the mass of common people living as they wish is dramatically, and paradoxically, realized through the fable's suggestion of a horde of rats and mice gone out of control:

>For better is a litel losse þan a longe sorwe—
>Phe mase amonge vs alle þouȝ we mysse a schrew.  
>For many mannus malt we mys wolde destruye,  
>And also þe route of ratones rende mennes clothes, . . . .

*(Prologue, lines 195-98)*

By portraying these creatures as a social group the fable illustrates very successfully the nature of this group. The need for rule is understood through the chaotic picture of rats and mice with no cat to control them. A few remarks about the cat indicate that he too is at fault, but again the mouse makes it clear that were this tyrannous cat disposed of, the mob
of rats could not be successfully controlled by a "kitten", or child-king:

\[ \text{Pere be catte is a kitoun be courte is ful elyng.} \]
\[ \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \]
\[ \text{For may no renke pere rest haue for ratones bi ny3te.} \]

(Prologue, lines 190, 192)

The fable supports the principle of rule and order while at the same time satirizing the weaknesses of various levels of society and of individual figures in particular.

It is interesting that the spokesman for the rational point of view should be a wise mouse, whose knowledge of the necessity of leadership is not unlike that of the mouse in Henryson's "The Lion and the Mouse." He is able to see the weaknesses of his own kind, and to see the necessity of ordering them—to see his own position in relative terms. The moral is made the more effective in coming from the ranks of the commons themselves; the mouse, like Langland, clearly feels uncomfortable at the thought of his fellows being left to their own devices.

Langland's fable is developed in a fairly sophisticated manner. The characters are portrayed anthropomorphically: they hold a council and quote Latin proverbs; some can read Holy Writ, and they purchase a bell with "catel". The aspects of their animal natures that are stressed are those which are most powerful in terms of the tale's purpose. The rats are in a large group; they are destructive and noisy; the mice are destructive as well, and, of course, they fear a cat. The fable's effectiveness lies in its suitability as an illustration. Langland uses the animal natures of his characters to make his point about human society. The rats and mice are purely representative, and while it is paradoxical to present human beings in this way, the paradox is the germ of the satire and the moralitas it conveys.
The portraying of animals in human roles to fulfill an express and exclusively satirical purpose becomes a marked characteristic of the later development of the beast epics on the continent. By the end of the thirteenth century in France Reynard was the means of expressing particular social and political enmities. Renart le Bestourne and Le Couronnement de Renart are late thirteenth-century manifestations of strong anti-penitent satirical, in both of which Reynard becomes a friar but continues his typical activities. In the latter he is eventually crowned king. Renart le Nouvel, written by Gielee in 1288, portrays the fox and his sons as friars who united all disagreeing orders under their direction. All these poems are basically allegorical, representing Reynard, and with him friars, Pope, and princes, as vice and the lion, Noble, as virtue. The early fourteenth-century Renart le Contrefait is a reworking of the entire Reynard cycle by an anonymous clerk at Troyes. The interests and morality of a rising middle-class are reflected, not least in a hatred of the nobility, and in the conclusion of this vast compilation. Reynard in the end repents of his sins and condemns the sins of his time.

There is one example of a similar development in Middle English. An early fourteenth-century "Song on the Times" contains a fable of a fox, a wolf and an ass tried at the lion's court. The poem opens with a lament on the sorry state of life in this world, and then proceeds to describe how "fals and lither is this lond" (line 9). Covetousness, pride and contention are the great sins that result in oppression of the lawful man. The corruption of the king's ministers, who are subject to bribery, results in the oppression of the just and the triumph of the wicked.

Of thos a vorbisen ic herd telle
(line 45)
continues the narrator, and then tells a fable meant to illustrate the state of the land. The lion, however, is as culpable as the vaguely suggested ministers—"men"—who accuse the ass, and the fable satirizes the court and the law most of all.

The wolf, fox and ass are called to court because they have been accused of wickedness, though it is immediately made clear that the ass is innocent. Wolf and fox bribe the court—apparently the lion himself—by sending, respectively, and typically, geese and hens, goats and mutton. The ass knows himself innocent and fears no harm. Appearing before the lion, the fox justifies himself by saying that he bought all his geese and hens dearly,

"And bere ham up myn owen rigge."

(line 84)

He is immediately forgiven. The wolf's defence is more sharply satirical. He begins by identifying himself as a noble, and the lion's manner immediately follows suit:

"What hast i-do, bel amy,
That thou me so oxist pes?"

(lines 93-94)

The wolf confesses to having slain a sheep and "fewe gete"; he then adds that he "ne 3af ham dint no pilt" (line 104), and is immediately forgiven, on the grounds that he behaved according to his nature. The ass, however, is tried simply for eating grass; the lion ironically addresses him as "bel ami" also, after already having indicated his prejudice:

Me thenchith thou cannist no gode.
Whi nadistou, as other mo?
Thou come of lither stode.

(lines 110-112)

This remark precedes the ass's defence. The ass is punished because the
lion judges that

That was age thi kund,
For to ete such gras so:-- . . .

(lines 119-20)

and the fable concludes with the death of the ass and the final remark of the lion that this is "al for lawe" (line 123). The poem continues with the narrator's complaint of the times. The fable is in a sense an exemplum, for it is illustrating the theme of the poem which encloses it. Like Henryson's fables of social commentary, it describes a social weakness which is clarified and commented upon outside the narrative.

While the remainder of the poem is straightforward criticism, the fable itself incorporates a bitter satire that illustrates the theme of the poem and goes yet further in its suggestions. The animals' society mirrors human society—a king, court, laws—and the animals commit human offences such as bribery. They are cast as representatives of human vices, the wolf and fox representing the corrupt and wealthy who oppress the ordinary man, represented by the ass. The lion too embodies power corrupted by covetousness, but as a representative of an ultimate authority he is the vehicle for the most serious satirical reflection. The animals' characters are not developed beyond these representations; their animal natures are simply used to support the representation and heighten the satirical effect. The forgiveness of a ravening wolf and the condemnation of a helpless ass underline the lion's perversion of justice revealed in the grounds for his judgments. The portrayal of these animals in human roles effectively serves the purpose of the satirist, but that purpose allows only a single human-animal correspondence. The ironies of fable portrayal are not developed; the characters remain static embodiments of human vices, and the seriousness of the moral condemnation that is the rationale for the choice of
animal characters precludes comedy.

These fables of social satire, like the other fables which mock individual human failings, are able to do so because of the perspective which the genre provides. The fable, in that it is an animal fiction, is a world of its own that can be regarded by the audience from a separate vantage point. Langland's rats present a sharp picture of the confusion of a disordered mob, and "The Song on the Times" capsulizes the essence of legal corruption in illustrating the blindness of covetousness that will not distinguish a wolf from an ass. But in the satires, the perspective does not alter to provide new insights as the correspondences shift and vary; it remains the static perspective imposed by the narrator. The animals cannot be developed as individual characters because they must represent types of human society the narrator wishes us to observe. We are not engaged by the fable world, but regard it from a distance as an explicit lesson about our own.

The satirical propensity of the animal fable is witnessed in the varying satirical uses of the genre. After the Middle Ages, this aspect of the fable continued to find expression, most notably in the fables of La Fontaine. In English, Spenser's Mother Hubberd's Tale is a satire of political corruption inspired by and based at least to some extent on the Roman de Renart. In Spenser's and La Fontaine's fables, the function of the satirist, too, is that of the moralist. Their fables expose and decry human vices and weaknesses, although in Spenser's tale the satire is more specific, and dominates the tale.

In the Middle English fable satires, the animals are representative of a particular social situation, and thus a single human-animal correspondence is emphasized. Characterization and its resulting ironies receive
little attention. When the paradox of portraying animals as human is accepted in the poems as an accurate representation of human reality, that paradox is transformed to straightforward allegorical satire on various human institutions. The highly developed animal characters of other medieval fables are akin to these beasts in their human behaviour, but the fable satires are interested in the animals allegorically only. Like the fable exempla, these satires can fulfill their single purpose well enough. But in both, one misses the art that makes a fox a Reynard.
FOOTNOTES


2 J. K. Kealy discusses the priest's fulfillment of the demand that he both teach and delight in terms of Horatian satire, "a form of satire which gently laughs at the follies of man rather than raging at his vices" (p. 2).

3 He lapses once, in his denunciation of "wommanes counsel," but hastily corrects himself and "reestablishes his satiric distance" (Kealy, p. 11).

4 MacQueen, pp. 121-24.

5 Stearns, pp. 111-14.


7 The good-natured satire most readers find in the Roman de Renart is denied by A. Jeanroy in Le Roman de Renard, Principaux Episodes (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1926), but compare Levrault, who takes the extreme opposite view: "Au fond, ce qu'ils [les trouvères] écrivent pour les clercs mécontents ou les plebeiens goguenards, c'est le parodie amère de l'épopée et la satire cruelle du moyen âge" (p. 43).

8 Bossuat, p. 112.

9 See Bossuat, p. 112, and Flinn, pp. 36-69. Flinn suggests (pp. 67-68) that the satire of parish priests may have been prompted by class differences--the trouvères were better educated than the simple country priests.

10 Flinn, p. 36.


12 Levrault, p. 37.

13 See p. 31 above.

14 Cf. the portrayal of the fox in various clerical roles in medieval English art, Varty, Reynard, passim.


16 Quotations from this fable are from Elliott's edition, pp. 35-40.
17 MacQueen, pp. 127-29, shows that the legal procedure is that of fifteenth-century Scottish courts.

18 Elliott, pp. 78-83.

19 MacQueen, pp. 131-32.

20 Stearns, p. 122.

21 Elliott, pp. 40-49.

22 MacQueen, pp. 68-70, explains the prologue to this fable by suggesting that the fable was published separately. Stearns, pp. 15, 18, feels that Henryson wished to protect himself by attributing the political satire and the remarks of the moralitas to Aesop.

23 Stearns, pp. 15-18, provides the background for the satire, contemporary events in Scotland and the reign of James III.

24 The edition used is that of J. A. W. Bennett, Piers Plowman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). See also W. W. Skeat's edition, The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman, 10th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923; rpt. 1948). Both edit the Prologue and seven Passus of the B-Text. The fable appears in the Prologue in the B-Text, lines 214 ff. It is omitted in the A-Text, but in the C-Text it appears in Passus 1, lines 163 ff. Skeat notes (p. x) that it is related to events of 1377, when the commons were dissatisfied. The cat represents King Edward III and the kitten Richard, later Richard II, who on the death of the Black Prince had become heir apparent (p. 102). In his extensive notes to a later edition (Oxford University Press, 1886, II, 17) Skeat notes that the rats "are the burgesses and more influential men among the commons; the mice those of less importance." Bennett sees the rats as the lords or the knights of the shire and the mice as the rising middle classes. He suggests that the cat may be John of Gaunt rather than Edward III, and points out the historical facts that support his reading (Notes, pp. 100-101).

25 As Stearns notes, Henryson's fable portrayals of the peasantry are more sympathetic than Langland's. In Langland's fable, however, it is the rats who are least sympathetically portrayed; they also initiate the scheme to bell the cat.

26 Skeat (p. 101) notes that a Latin metrical version of the same fable exists in a fourteenth-century manuscript, and that it also appears in a fourteenth-century Ysopet. See Bastin, I, 10. A similar fable appears in Avianus: a peasant puts a bell on a fierce dog, who thinks he has been honoured (Herrmann, Avianus, p. 27).

27 See p. 91 above.


31 Bossuat, p. 150.


33 Paris, p. 132.


37 Spenser's editors summarize considerations of the sources of "Mother Hubberd's Tale," IX, 585-93.
CONCLUSIONS

A wide range of purpose and accomplishment characterizes the Middle English animal fable. But whether meant to be didactic or entertaining or both, the fables, by the nature of their characterization, combine narrative fiction with a reflection on the human world. The dual purpose—to teach and delight together—of the best Middle English animal fables relies on the shifting perspective provided by multiple correspondences between animal characters and human beings. The anthropomorphic development of the animals multiplies the correspondences between human and animal, so that entertainment as well as enlightenment is heightened, and the possibilities for satirical reflection on the follies of mankind increase.

Human behaviour, however, is constantly played against animal nature in the more successful fables, so that it is not anthropomorphic development alone that is responsible for their success. Rather, an increased humanity in a cock or a fox is ironically juxtaposed with reminders of the fact that we are watching a cock and a fox, not men. Tales like *The Vox and the Wolf* and Henryson's and Chaucer's fables constantly refer us back to animal qualities, whether in physical appearance or in simple bestiality of one kind or another. The fabulist produces a delight in the ironies of his fantasy, and often reinforces his moral "fruit" by those very ironies. Henryson's express purpose is to show "How mony men in operatioun/ Ar like to beistis in condioun" (Prologue, lines 48-49). When an animal character has enacted a human role, and then does something one would expect only an animal to do, there is an obvious suggestion that our expectations are too optimistic; if the animal characters are like men in some ways, it follows that the simile can extend to more aspects of their behaviour. While the ironies of the portrayal itself can be purely comic, such as Chauntecleer's
praising Pertelote's red-lined eyes, similar juxtapositions of the human and animal often imply another correspondence. Thus when Chauntecleer is portrayed as having six wives besides his "true love," the animal reality deflates the fable's heroic portrayal of Chauntecleer, but at the same time the human context into which Chauntecleer has placed himself suffers a deflation also—at least until we remember that Chauntecleer is a useful beast in a poor widow's farmyard.

While the most successful character portrayals rely on the ironically ambiguous question, which, now, is strictly human and which animal, the fables which serve a single purpose also provide a single answer. The didactic exempla and the straightforward satires also rely on the conscious juxtaposition of the human and the animal, but without allowing a lapse in the single perspective that focuses the audience's vision on the exemplary character of the animals. In the brief Aesopic fable exempla or in Lydgate's Fabules, there is little human development of the characters. They have the gifts of speech and reason, which apply their animal behaviour to the human sphere. Thus Lydgate's cock does not foolishly ignore a stone of wisdom; he ignores something he cannot eat, and as he is a cock, not a man, it is his business to eat. The event is meant to figure a man wisely rejecting what is beyond or outside his station in life, whereas Henryson's cock in the same situation, like a man, rejects what he cannot be bothered with and justifies himself with a too-easily accepted platitude. Lydgate's animals are pure illustrations of Lydgate's moral lessons to mankind, and yet, as in this case, their animal natures are the justification for their behaviour, so that the characters do not really figure human beings as independent characters, but serve as illustrations of Lydgate's unfailingly applicable moral, each to his own nature. Such fable animals, for all their speech, remain animals
in an illustrative lesson, and the potential ironies of more human characterization remain dormant.

While Lydgate and the sermon exempla do not develop the human aspects of the animal characters, the satirical fable in "A Song on the Times" and Henryson's three fables of social criticism are less concerned with the animal aspects of the characters. In these fables the fact of the characters' animal identities is used only to satirize, criticize and illustrate human roles. The irony of fable portrayal is here the single irony of viewing human social actions as those of wicked beasts and helpless victims. It is a bitter irony and supports the sharp criticism of the failings of human society. The paradox of presenting a beast as a man is accepted by the fabulist for his satirical purpose, and subsumed in the animals' allegorical function. The fable in Piers Plowman is similar, but Langland plays upon the animal portrayal more than do the other satirists. His purpose is illustration also, but he uses the animal nature of his rats and mice to heighten the effectiveness of his illustration. The human behaviour of the animals in the other fables corresponds to their animal natures—and human nature as well—but the natural animal traits are not developed beyond, for example, the depiction of the wolf as ravenous and lambs and sheep as helpless. Human portrayal is the interest, and the animals are the vehicles for emphasizing the author's views. The juxtaposition of human and animal traits reinforces the critical effect of these fables, but the point is made with greater effectiveness when the animal traits are not secondary.

In the Aesopic exempla and the satires, the fable is restricted by the intention to illustrate a single moral or a particular social weakness. The characters are, respectively, purely exemplary or allegorical equivalents of human roles. The allegory is sometimes imaginatively realized, but the characters have no life beyond it.
In the fables which set about truly to teach and delight, the correspondences between human and animal produce delightful characterization and multiple reflections on human conduct as well. Increased anthropomorphism combines with a constant awareness of the characters' animal natures to create characters in the full sense of the word. Chauntecleer or Lowrence or Sigrim are the products of imaginative minds developing the simply talking animals of Aesopic fable into fully realized individuals. These fables are not always comic; "The Preiching of the Swallow" and "The Paddock and the Mouse," through excellent characterization and, especially in the former, skilful narrative structure, communicate the wisdom of enlightened observation of the mortal world. The delight of these fables is that of characterization and, especially in "The Preiching of the Swallow, superb poetry. Comedy, however, is the hallmark of most of the Middle English fables that live up to the possibilities of the genre. Eight of Henryson's Fabillis, the Nun's Priest's Tale, The Vox and the Wolf, and Lydgate's "The Churl and the Bird" and "The Hownde and the Shepe," as well as the better sermon exempla, are comic. As we have seen, the comedy is largely that of comic irony developed from characterization. The fable characters, a delightful combination of human and animal traits, give us many memorable tales, but they also reflect on human behaviour, if sometimes only in a comic way.

What sets the fable apart from other short fiction is not simply the fact that it has animal characters or that it is didactic. The Middle English fables we have examined are not really animal stories, and neither do they all have a didactic purpose or an appended moral. Rather, they are marked by their peculiar characterization. Fable characters to some extent have human attributes. They function in many ways as human beings, have human
skills, and often are part of a complete society. Indeed, human characters appear in the fables as well and form part of the animals' society, often to the extent of speaking and dealing with them as if there were nothing unusual in discussing legal niceties with a fox and wolf. Human beings in a general and sometimes a specific way are the models for the fables' characterization. Inevitably, the characters will reflect back upon their models, especially as, being animals, their human qualities will stand out sharply. The skill of the fabulist in playing upon the ironic double nature of his characters often produces more suggestions about his human models than a simply human character might manage, and herein lies the success of many fables both as entertainment and as a comment on humanity, though the two purposes are not always distinguishable. Because of the nature of fable animals, the fable can serve as the vehicle for a moral statement. It also contains the germ of satire in the very paradox of its characterization, and satire to varying degrees is found in many of the Middle English fables, often linking lesson and laughter.

Beginning with the premise that natural creatures were to be observed for man's edification, the Middle Ages took up the fable, and spread it through schoolrooms as a vehicle for moral instruction and a means of teaching the skills of writing. Fable animals did not long remain natural creatures. Quickly developing their powers of speech and reason, they became fully-fledged characters, not animal and not human, but with so much of both natures that the two are inseparable. From the schoolroom and the pulpit the fable moved into the hands of those who saw in it more than a didactic or rhetorical tool, and transformed the plots of simple apolouges into memorable narrative poetry about paradoxically human animals. Chaucer had many
reasons for insisting "my tale is of a cok," but an audience who has been
watching Chauntecleer knows better than to take him too literally.
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TEXTS

Entries are arranged by authors' names. In the case of anonymous works or collections, they are arranged by editors' names.


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