

# Moral, Metamorphosis, Merriment: The Mix of Earnest and Play in Henryson's Fables\*

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The fourth of Robert Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* tells how a fox looks at the sky and sees written there a warning. He determines to change his wicked ways, and goes to a cleric (the wolf) who advises him to abstain from meat as a penance. To circumvent these strictures, the fox dunks a kid into water, calling it a salmon, and eats the kid. The fox settles on a hillock to warm his belly in the sun, and jokes that his stomach would make a good target for any hunter. The shepherd, seeking the lost kid, discovers the fox and kills him with an arrow. Henryson's fifth fable tells how a king, the lion, calls all of his subjects to court. Upon discovering that one animal, the mare, is missing, the lion sends the fox (who first tries to excuse himself) and the wolf as envoys to command the mare to attend. They find the mare, who explains that she has a "respite," written on her hoof, that grants her a year's leave. The fox senses a trap, and draws back. The wolf, eager to prove his ability to read, rushes forward to inspect the hoof, and is kicked in the head. The two ambassadors return to court without the mare. Along the way, the fox kills and eats a lamb. When they return to court, the lion asks about the mare. The fox deflects the

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question, and tells the lion to ask the wolf, since he has a doctor of law's "red cap" (actually blood from the wound). While this joking goes on, the lamb's mother arrives, and accuses the fox. The fox is judged guilty and hanged, the "new-made doctor" wolf acting as presiding priest.

The fourth of Robert Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* ends with some words from a dying fox. Apart from a (natural enough!) expression of unhappiness over his imminent demise, Schir Lowrence delivers what can stand as a very particular and personal eulogy for the beast fable form overall. Shot through the belly by a shepherd's arrow, and literally nailed into the earth, this is a fox that can run no more.

"Now," quod the foxe, "allace and wellaway!  
Gorrit I am, and may na forther gane;  
Me think na man may speik ane word in play,  
Bot now on dayis in ernist it is tane."<sup>1)</sup>

What makes this farewell to fable form so particular is Lowrence's perspective—a viewpoint that, by the end of this paper, we will identify with his nature as a fox. That looming demise notwithstanding, his complaint is quite precise, and (odd as it may seem) not really about death. What bothers him, says Lowrence, are two things: that he can go no farther, and that people seem to take everything—even playful words—too seriously.

Let us look at this last point first, for it speaks to concerns beyond Lowrence's, and speaks about the fable form itself. Schir Lowrence laments that a figure speaking within a tale can be received *in play*, or *in ernist*. He puts this in terms of a stark opposition—an opposition that not

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1) Henryson, *Morall Fabillis*, lines 768–771. Subsequent citations will be given in-text. For printing purposes, I have emended Middle English *thorn* to "th" and *yogh* to "y" or "gh."

incidentally suggests the fundamental characteristics of the medieval beast fable. Missing in the fox's division, however, is a third possibility, that a listener (such as the shepherd, or us) might hear a combination, a pattern of play and earnest both. As we shall see by the end of this fable, Lowrence's first point--that a fox should "forther ga"--becomes an important element in Henryson's eventual creation of just such a combination, and in his creation of what I will argue is a substantially new sort of beast fable. For the idea behind such a pattern, we need look no farther than the poet's prologue:

And clerkis sayis, it is richt profitabill  
Amangis ernist to ming ane merie sport (19-20)

The word "ming" becomes the mortar that mixes earnest and play into a very different type of tale. Metamorphic in its energy, the idea of "mingling" brings new complexities to Schir Lowrence's seemingly simplistic division. Furthermore, and beyond this tale, this opposition of earnest and play has pervaded the criticism of beast literature.

Most readings of Schir Lowrence and his son Lowrence have (not surprisingly) stressed their wickedness. They are usually understood as banished outsiders, excluded from the dominant culture, tragically deprived and thus rightly deprived of a voice. Or, the fox is the trickster hero of the Renart tales, but also a murderer justly condemned to death, and discarded--from court and even from narrative--for the good of the moral whole. As one critic has argued, Lowrence's death is a necessary good, "for the sake of morality and the re-establishment of authority" (McKenna 118). Even if Lowrence's life is a good thing, it is only because his career allows society to define itself--in a contrasting pattern of order and rectitude.<sup>2)</sup>

These responses reflect a broader state of beast literature criticism and approaches that, like the fables themselves, seem to push the beasts toward the periphery of their various worlds. There, they are either denied a substantial voice, or given one that merely emphasizes loss or privation. In more playful readings, an animal such as the fox is a mystery: fascinating perhaps, compelling in his elusivity, but also the embodiment of a never—ending *désir*—where both animal and rhetoric are eternally dissatisfied.<sup>3)</sup> For graver critics, these beasts end up as exiles from the very abundance that they help to delineate: letters that describe a rich culture and rich language, but letters eventually discarded because they are different from what they describe. This is seen as only right, for these beasts (to quote a particularly serious reading) represent “the use of language as a weapon and as a disguise for evil intentions.” Indeed, in such a view, the established culture and its language (the “standard”) can be harmed by these beast—word—weapons, and what results is very far from play.<sup>4)</sup>

Keeping such gravity in mind, I would like to approach Henryson’s animals as if they are themselves not only fabulists, but fabulists with something to say about the fables that they both speak and inhabit. If our moralizing impulse recalls the humorless shepherd, and if animals like the lion (at least initially) seem to take up that same role of stern judge, then

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2) See McKenna 101. Compare Fox, 231. Jean Batany’s article, “Animalité et Typologie Sociale,” makes an interesting supplement to McKenna’s argument, especially in his suggestion that “moralizing” texts show something like a cultural melancholy over a lost (and mythographic) order.

3) Jean Lacroix, in “Du Je à L’Autre” 82, uses the phrase “incessants discours” to describe an unending cycle of verbal pacts made and broken in the 14th century Italian beast—poem *Rainaldo e Lesegrino*. Like Henryson’s fables, *Rainaldo* represents a compellingly grey area between the moralized fable and the Renardian romance.

4) “This is not comedy but tragedy.” Wackers, “Mutorum Animalium Conloquium” 172.

it is the fox and others like him that will counter this gravity with a ludic and elusive energy. We will see how Lowrence's son goes to the court of his king, the Lion, and how the lion sends Lowrence out as an envoy and representative of court—mandated order—in other words, as both fable and fabulist, as animal speaking for an authorial voice. We will see how the fox meets a mare and recognizes something like a kindred spirit, and how a new sort of speaking beast develops. We will follow this new and hybrid creature to court again, and watch its energy infect and transform the animals there, even the righteous lion—and perhaps even the righteous reader.

The fifth of Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* opens with an attractive conflation of natural and political heraldry. It begins in the countryside: the king's unicorn, announced by the blast of "ane buisteous bugill," announces to one and all that the lion plans a parliament, and that all are commanded to attend. The summons that the unicorn reads leaves little doubt of the lion's sense of his own preeminence and command:

"My celsitude and hie magnificence  
Lattis yow to wit, that euin incontinent,  
Thinkis the morne with royall deligence  
Upon this hill to halde ane parliament.  
Straitlie thairfoir I gif commandement  
For to compeir befoir my tribunall,  
Vnder all pane and perrell that may fall." 5)

The lion utters the first in a linked series of pronouncements reminding the gathered beasts that they can expect from him a balanced mix of

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5) Henryson, *Morall Fabillis*, ed. Fox, lines 859–865. Subsequent citations will be given in-text.

mercy and might. While submissive animals will receive nothing but kindness, the lion's anger will fall on any who "makis debait"—that is, on those who struggle physically, or, in a sense of the word already current, those who argue against the king.

"I lat yow wit my micht is merciabill  
 And steiris nane that are to me protrait;  
 Angrie, austerne and als vnamyabill  
 To all that standfray ar to myne estait.  
 I rug, i reif all beistys that makis debait  
 Aganis the micht off my magnyficence. (929-34)

The lion is thinking in terms of a parliament, and his use of the word "debait" is only one in an increasingly overt series of indications that he sees his "might and magnificence" as based in no small part upon his control of words--of the physical order, to be sure, but also of the verbal. The king sees himself as a creator: his next pronouncement repeats the idea of balanced strength and kindness, and stresses that he himself conceives and causes that balance. The lion not only controls his own self, he in substantial ways makes himself as well; godlike, authorlike, he mixes the elements that make up lion and king. Furthermore, it seems that he can control and create the other beasts with equal facility and authority.

My celsitude and my hie maiestie  
 With micht and mercie myngit sall be ay.  
 The lawest heir I can full sone vp hie,  
 And make him maister over yow all I may;  
 The dromedarie, giff he will mak deray,  
 The grit camell, thoct he wer never sa crous,  
 I can him law als lytill as ane mous. (936-42)

If this is the self-portrait of an artist, it is significant that the lion paints himself in terms of balanced severity and permissiveness. Politically, this is an idealized figure of monarchy present in European consciousness since the *Aeneid's* Anchises' ghost spoke words of advice to his son.<sup>6)</sup> Verbally, the lion controls his world's *debat*; he does so with a mixture of discipline and forbearance that suggests the demands that face not only king but *makar*: as a ruler, he must temper sternness with compassion; as a narrative-shaper or poet, he must give some order to his material, but he also must let it speak. These seemingly opposed energies, restraint and freedom, underlie all beast literature, but in a variety of forms and ways. Animal bodies and animal characters, just as diverse as the tales that tell them, are the medium that convey these opposed energies, and eventually combine them.

Henryson's fables, I would argue, reflect this diversity in a particularly mature and self-reflective way. We should note that the lion states that his might and mercy will be always *myngit*; this, of course, is the same word that Henryson uses to introduce the mixing of earnest and play. Here are two metamorphic pairing, parallel and complementary; like any truly metamorphic moment, the changes go far beyond the readily apparent. Let us look at some of the details of the lion's reign and rule and at how these particulars lead to "strange new forms" (to echo Ovid himself) of narrative.

The connection between control of speech and rule of nation is an ancient one. By sending a beast as his announcer, then announcing his complete mastery of not only animals but animal forms, the lion links political and poetic control. Cicero gives an idealized description of eloquence's shaping power:

Quid tam porro regium, tam liberale, tam munificium, quam

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6) *Aeneid* VI.853. The lion's words seem to be a direct echo of the passage.

opem ferre supplicibus, excitare allicos, dare salutem, liberare periculis, retinere homines in civitate?

[(Eloquence) is so kingly, so worthy of the free, so generous, as to bring help to the suppliant, to raise up those who are cast down, to bestow security, to set free from peril, to maintain men in their civil rights.] (Cicero 1.8.32)

This king seems to have such thoughts in mind. He thinks of himself as a shaper of events, of beasts, and of narrative. Furthermore, like Cicero's passage does, he suggests an ethical core or foundation to his creative work. The implication is significant: as the source of that work, the lion wields the *significatio* that both backs and justifies the fable.

The group that first gathers around the lion furthers the notion of his overall control. He is at the precise center of all sight, thought, and action: whatever happens and whatever will happen has its origin in him.

Befoir thair lord the lyoun thay loutit law.  
Seing thir beistis all at his bidding boun,  
He gaf ane braid and blenkit him about,  
Than flatlingis to his feit thay fell all doun--  
For dreid off deith, thay droupit all in dout. (922-26)

Unbidden, the beasts arrange themselves in a way that reflects the lion's agenda. The gathering itself works a statement for but also by the lion, and the individual animals become functioning elements in that message:

Compeirand thus befoir thair lord and king,  
In ordour set, as to thair stait effeird,  
Of euerilk kynd he gart an part furth bring (985-87)



Each presented beast is representative of its species and so by extension is representative of the lion's overall control of both gathered group and society at large.<sup>7)</sup> Absence, then, presents more than an incidental problem: when it is announced that the grey mare has not come, the king would seem to be missing more than a horse: he is missing many horses. This in turn could initiate an unravelling of the lion's heraldic tapestry, and bring the significance of the entire gathered group into question. We should take care to note that this uncertainty works on the level of political emblem, but also, and especially by virtue of its beast-fable context, on a field more purely rhetorical. What the lion seeks is a convergence of two threads of representation: the exemplary roles, respectively, of barons and beasts. The mare's absence is a threat in both respects.

The king's response to this crisis of missing mare would seem to be a stubborn insistence upon the representative role that he wants his gathered animals to play. Out of all the possible actions that he could take, the king chooses an epistolary course, and immediately demands that a message be taken to the mare. Especially important is the form of the letter—it will be a beast. In this choice, the king stays true to a form that he showed when he used the unicorn and leopards as heralds. This second sending, though, will duplicate neither the force nor the orderliness of that earlier envoy.

The first sign of difficulty comes as soon as an envoy is chosen. When all cry that the fox should go, Lowrence tries to refuse the mission. His reluctance contrasts with the earlier unicorn, who showed nothing if not vigour and alacrity (“withouten taryng”) when performing his charged task.<sup>8)</sup> It also, as we shall see in more detail later, links him to the mare: a confederacy of recalcitrance. This confederacy has profound implications.

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7) For the significance of “compear” see Fox, *Poems of Robert Henryson* 236; also Kindrick, *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* 167.

8) See lines 841–52.

Simply by refusing, or trying to refuse, the fox marks an important moment in any survey of the beast-fable: put in the simplest terms, it is when the talking beast moves from talking for to talking back to and even with its sender.

In response to his election, Lowrence points out his physical deformities; apart from the practical impediments that they might present for travel and other diplomatic chores, one implication would be that such a specimen would make a poor representative of the group and king. Especially in this congregation, the raggedy fox compares poorly with the unicorn and with the gorgeous panoply of beasts that marked the beginning of the gathering. Lowrence then denigrates his fittingness on another level, by suggesting that the wolf is better equipped in mental capacity:

“Aa schir! Mercie! Lo, I have bot ane ee!  
Hurt in the hoche and cruikit as ye may se;  
The wolf is better in ambassatry,  
And mair cunning in clergie fer than I.” (995–98)

With this pair of excuses—one physical, the other intellectual—the fox suggests, perhaps unwittingly, a figurative correspondence between corporeal and mental soundness, one that echoes the poet’s apostrophe to Lowrence’s “phisnomie” and that also anticipates the words of the mouse to the toad in a later fable: *Distortum vultum sequitur distortio morum*: ugly morals or character lie behind an ugly face.<sup>9)</sup> This does not suggest a contiguous sameness as much as it does an analogous one: toad face or fox face become a sort of text, with a disturbing story within. At the most basic level, Lowrence claims a double incapacity: he looks bad (which itself suggests a degree of physical incompetence, especially in the animal world), and his “cunning in clergie” is weak: that is, his command of

9)For “phisnomie” see lines 975–76; for the paddock and the mouse, 2826–2832.

letters and laws, his ability in disputation, and perhaps even his capacity for thought are all inferior.<sup>10)</sup>

On another level, the fox's response suggests a two-fold pattern that could support the lion's wish to merge the political and the literary, or beast-court and beast-symbol. A choice of envoys is before the lion: a reluctant body, or (as demonstrated by the wolf's eagerness both here and especially when he encounters the mare) a willing mind.<sup>11)</sup> The lion takes a third path—in doing so, he becomes something very like the sort of “new” fabulist that I anticipated at the beginning of this paper, and chooses both. With this choice come particular opportunities and problems, as moral becomes metamorphic and edges toward merriment.

When the lion sends fox and wolf on the mission—“Rampand he said: ‘Ga furth, brybouris baith!’” (999)—he establishes some new points, and ones not entirely to his advantage as governor of the social or verbal order. The image of the speaking king reflects on the lion's control, especially of his voice: his “rampand” posture, while impressive and even iconographic, also hints at the lion's tempestuous nature—as king in general and, through his precipitate use of “brybouris,” (a word that suggests “rogue” as well as “false talker”) as wielder of the ruling word.<sup>12)</sup> Marianne Powell, speaking of the political animal, has pointed out that the lion is “a king not quite in control.”<sup>13)</sup> A key contributing element to this

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10) Kindrick, in *Henryson and the Medieval Arts of Rhetoric* 167, suggests the specific, practical impediments that Lowrence's bodily flaws pose for an ambassador.

11) See lines 1017–1021 of this fable. See also Caxton's *Reynard* 55.

12) For “rampand,” compare Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurudices*, lines 120–21, where Orpheus, “rampand as ane lyoun ravenus,” begins to lose his mind...and control of kingdom and self...in his grief over the loss of Eurydice.

13) In the very useful *Fabula Docet* 143. The idea that I forward here—that the lion might have a fluctuating degree of control over his voice—engages Powell's larger argument concerning this fable, that it represents an uneasy and not entirely successful combination of narrative and moralizing intent.

uncertain command is the lion's own voice, and especially as that voice is extended through other beasts.

Since Aristotle (if not before) a close connection has existed between physical deformity and comedy : the notion that what is distorted or ugly is ridiculous—and that we are permitted to laugh.<sup>14)</sup> This in mind, when the king changes his representatives from unicorns and leopards (fine looking creatures all, to say the least) to a crooked and maimed little fox, this suggests not one but multiple layers of change.

The lion signals a very particular attitude toward his ambassadors and toward the mission as a whole when he names them *brybouris* even as he sends them out. This sending marks an articulated and formal change in the beast gathering. The two envoys form a miniature group of their own; their duty as ambassadors preserves and exaggerates their representative quality; but the lion's name for them alters the rules of representation. At first glance, the lion seems to undermine his own purpose by calling his envoys something so pejorative, especially since we may already suspect that both the elected beasts are false quantities: the fox a flawed physical representative, and the wolf not very cunning at all. The lion apparently knows this; why, then, does he pick such a pair to carry his banner and word? An easy answer (and, these days, a politically charged one) is that the lion is consciously deceptive, that lies are at the very least one of the tools of his rule.

The particular focus of this concern, however, is not so much with the administration of a kingdom as it is with the administration of language. As I have suggested, these are closely intertwined, especially in Henryson's fables. However, when the lion calls his envoys *brybouris*, there is little diminishment (at this point in the tale) of his authority as king, or even as truth-telling king; rather, he acknowledges his understanding of how language—specifically, his beast-language—works. Necessarily, as

14) See esp. Rhetoric II.XII.16. Compare Cicero *De Oratore* II. lviii.

message bearers, these two are, as a standard definition of the fable says, *a forma veritatis remota* : far removed from both the surface and substance of truth.<sup>15)</sup> They are not the king, but to be distinguished from him. They are not the message itself, but they are, by their very unsuitability, clear models of how kings and fables segregate meaning and material.

This brings us back to our initial image of the king as a sort of detached omnipotence, a creator—from-on-high. This is the king with the power to change a dromedary into a mouse. Impressive indeed, this power; the king's pride is justified; but with this power come difficulties: what we might call protean energies. At the beginning of the catalogue of gathered beasts, the narrator lists a vanguard of mythical creatures:

The Minotaur, ane monster mervelous;  
 Bellerophon, that beist of bastardrie,  
 The warwolff, and the Pegase perillous  
 Transformit be assent of sorcerie (887–90).

Frightening beasts all, but all obedient and submissive to the lion's power. Pegasus in particular is paradigmatic of this; he brings with him the example of an ancient story of fierceness tamed. Presumably, this is the story of Bellerophon and the winged horse that helped him to defeat the Chimaera.<sup>16)</sup> Henryson, it seems, has confused the slain with the slayer; this might seem surprising, considering that he appears to know the basic story. However, Bellerophon is frequently misidentified in the Middle Ages; curiously unfixed, he moves with some freedom here and there in the medieval genealogy of gods and heroes.<sup>17)</sup> Henryson makes a somewhat

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15) For the full discussion, see Quintilian, *Instituto Oratoriae* 2.4.

16) See Elliot, *Robert Henryson* 153.

17) Demats, *Fabula* 71–77. This remains a particularly valuable discussion of

understandable mistake, then, but there is more at stake here than the correct assignment of names: his error is symptomatic of larger difficulties.

The challenge is this: by including such mythic creatures in his fable, especially his *morall* fable, Henryson is adding an unconventional and lively—even volatile—element to a narrative that is, by convention, particularly controlled. A useful parallel is what Paule Demats says of moments such as when the *Ovide Moralisé* piles new details, small alterations, and even wholesale additions to its literal translation of Ovid’s Latin: an accretion of material, usually in the service of a coherent allegorical narrative, that as a body alters the game.<sup>18)</sup> Henryson, of course, is not translating as fixed or canonical a text as Ovid’s when he writes his fables, but he is following a remarkably conservative tradition. Most of all, he is, like the author of the *Ovide Moralisé*, negotiating on several fronts: between that letter and his, between the body of the letter and the body of the beast, between an equally varied array of intents and expectations—a “jeu subtil des entrelacements” that each translator begins anew and falls into again (Demats 75). In the broader field of beast narrative overall, this parallel between the translation of authors like Ovid and of lore like Aesop—or even of natural science like Aristotle’s—will coalesce to become something closer to an outgrowth than a parallel, as retold classical fables confront both their pagan and animal natures. Here, though, and closer to home: as Henryson’s lion translates Pegasus and the beast Bellerophon, he and his court find something like the “essential traits,” not of Ovid’s *perpetuum carmen*, but, surprisingly, of the wolf.

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medieval mythography.

18) “Chaque addition, en ajoutant un rouage à la délicate machine, le rend plus fragile et plus difficile à manier. Si l’on songe que de longues allégories viennent sans cesse interrompre le jeu subtil des entrelacements et des transitions, on mesure à la fois la vanité de l’entreprise et l’enormité du travail, et l’on s’étonne de reconnaître encore, après tant d’efforts pour “enrichir” le poème latin, les traits essentiels des *Métamorphoses*.”

The lion translates the beasts of the mythic pattern by performing a corresponding transformation of his own. As I have suggested, the lion's sweeping description of his ability to magnify, level, or destroy his subjects suggests both enormous potency in creation or destruction, but also a potential for disorder. Seen in the context of Pegasus and Bellerophon, this potential gains some focus. The disorder that threatens the lion is in many respects a verbal one, and even literary, for the lion claims a corresponding, metamorphic role Ovid-like, Vergil-like, a poet or *magus*-poet, he can subdue, if not a winged horse, then a humped camel.<sup>19)</sup>

Again, compare the movement from unicorn and leopard to little fox. The reduction of beast coincides with a diminishment in style: small replaces large, humble replaces heightened, and vernacular comedy replaces not only Roman epic but even—and for the moment, at least—moral, didactic fable. This last movement—particularly, from classical mythology to contemporary Scotland—introduces another aspect of the lion's role as translator: the language itself. For that, let us return briefly to the ambassadorship of the fox and wolf.

When the king's messengers reach the mare, certain patterns from the court are repeated. Again, an offer is made to the fox, and again, he refuses; as he did earlier, Lowrence elects the wolf as an alternate. This time, Lowrence may feel that has successfully farmed the dangerous work off to another; and, for a period of time, this seems to be the case. The pattern of the court holds true, however, and Lowrence becomes implicated, more than he wants or knows, in the perilous aspects of this ambassadorship as well.

None of these difficulties is apparent, however, in the fox's conversation with the mare; some genuine and not surprising antagonism

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19) A wealth of medieval stories describing Vergil as a magician-poet are printed by D. Comparetti in the long appendix to his *Virgilio nel Medio Evo* vol. 2. 173-273.

notwithstanding, the two quickly establish, underneath the almost formulaic words of challenge and response, something very like a complicity: one which excludes and then victimizes the wolf. Their colloquy hints at codes and innuendo: when Lowrence tells the mare that she is in contempt of court, and must go and attend, she replies as if his words are inconsequential, or even a joke. “‘Let be, Lowrence,’ quod scho, your cowrtlie knax” (1005). This may operate as the first warning to the fox to be on his guard, mentally and physically. “Knax” in this context means speech or jargon, and also trickery, or even joking; apart from the prohibition she makes, the mare suggests a new level of speech simply by raising the notion of such talk. If this is such a code, the mare may be suggesting a substitution rather than a cessation of “knax” instead of court-countenanced lies, she urges, let us make some of our own. Most immediately, the first such joke is a pun, a warning to clever listeners such as the fox that “knocks” as well as mockery are imminent.<sup>20)</sup>

The mare then tells her visitors that she has permission to be away from court: a ‘respite’ written on her rear left hoof. She invites them to read it, then take the message back to court. Fable readers will recognize this traditional tale, and will feel no surprise when, quoting a proverb from an old scroll, the fox draws away, the wolf rushes forward, and the mare kicks the wolf in his head. What fable readers may not recognize is ourselves. The fox avoids harm by reading the mare as if she is a fable, a cautionary tale in the flesh. This is already apparent before the punctuating kick takes place, apparent in the more-than-traditional *repartee* between fox and mare.

It is this new language, rather than the specific “respite” presumably written on the never-read hoof, that is borne back to court: the king’s messengers return with a reply that does not answer the original command as much as it does the style and language of the command. Informed by

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20) Compare blows as drinks in the pilgrimage episode of the *Ysengrimus*.



the *knax* collaboration, uneasy as that collaboration is, between fox and mare, the message will come back to the lion and his parliament not as any sort of immediate response—either positive or negative—to the lion's imperious command, but as a joke.

When Lowrence draws attention to the wolf's bloody head, the lion responds with levity.

The lyoun said: 'By yone reid cap I ken  
This taill is trew, quha tent unto it takis;  
The greitest clerkis ar not the wysest men;  
The hurt of ane happie the uther makis.' (1062–1065)

The lion's proverbial tag is a near-exact translation of the speech that Lowrence gave earlier to the mare, when he declined to approach her by quoting an old scroll: *Felix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum* (1033). By uttering his version, and especially by linking the tag not to some found *skrow* (scroll) but to more immediate events, the lion appropriates the written text of earlier on, makes it spoken, makes it Scottish; above all, he stitches the proverb to a new authority—not to a dusty and absent vellum, but to the red letter of his own returned ambassador.

This resonates even on the grammatical level. The Latin phrase is syntactically more complex, even (precisely) fractured, with apposed, clustered nominative and accusative subjects, while the English juxtaposes two slightly vague but conceptually linked words: *ane* and *uther*. We might do well to note that “other,” especially in its early (and particularly Scandinavian) roots, suggests not so much “the different one” as it does “the second one.” With the Latin phrase as spoken by Lowrence, the alien danger that teaches is expressed by a language that shares its topic's alterity. With the English, apprehension itself is more immediate, less layered; with no intermediary step of translation, the experience of the

language is followed more directly--and, ironically enough, more confusingly--by understanding.

This confusion has multiple sources. Above all, multiplicity itself is the culprit: late in the tale, as many narrative threads come together, as various identities are masked and unmasked and masked again, the assignment of a tag as simple as “hurt” or “happy” becomes a tall order.

Stepping back, we must ask: isn't the assignment of a moral, once reached, the same in any case? In even simpler terms, is one better than the other? Perhaps, depending upon a reader's theoretical tendencies, the answer is as *myngit* as the lion's combined characteristics. Lowrence's Latin seems to reflect his discerning detachment, and seems to reflect almost perfectly the fabular way of reading and teaching; but we will see shortly how this same sense of distance leads to its own kind of blindness, and soon to Lowrence's downfall. The lion's English might suggest a less filtered experience of the wolf's cap's import--in some respects, a linguistic ideal--but also a less critical one. Ultimately, I would argue, the lion's version serves as a commentary on Lowrence's ongoing and variable metamorphosis: in its (relative) imprecision, in its native-ness, and (above all) in its distinctly unpleasant laughter, it signals that the fox's complacency of before is now misplaced. Nor will we--in our readers' chairs--forget that what made the fox so complacent was confidence in his ability to interpret fables, scroll-based or mare-based that they may be. Latin version and English version, bundled in the lion's reiterative translation, extend the mix of discernment and confusion promised earlier with the mare's significant circumlocutions, and add new but still-developing complexities to the language of both court and fable.<sup>21)</sup>

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21) See Machan, “Robert Henryson and Father Aesop” 194. The distinction should be made, as does Machan in this very useful article, between an *auctor*, who speaks (or writes) in Latin, and a *makar*, who works in the vernacular.

This sense of extension works also for the participants at court. Soon after the lion and Lowrence establish a bantering partnership, the rest of the court joins in, and all (except for the wolf) enjoy the joke. The once-limited collaboration between fox and mare, first established as an alternative to *cowrtlie knax*, has come back to court, altered and altering, a protean joke:

As thay wer carpand in this cais with knakis,  
And all the court in merines and in gam,  
Swa come the yow, the mother off the lam. (1066–1068)

The lion has changed—ears, eyes, and voice—along with his envoy. What began as stern is now (at this instant) smiling; earnest is turned to play. Absent mare is replaced by mare-marked wolf—sufficient substitute, apparently, in the eyes of an intermittently demanding and indulgent monarch. The wolf, mocked and honoured simultaneously in his doctor's hat, emerges more and more as a fitting representative for his only sometimes redoubtable king.

And the fox? For the moment, at least while the mockery dominates the gathering and its focus, the wolf is his envoy too. Lowrence has successfully separated himself from the ambassador's role, and becomes sender rather than sent: he joins mare and lion in determining the new mood—now *gam* and *merines*—of the court. He has no amusing hat, but he has contributed to the composition of the one on the wolf, and so takes his place as one of the prime movers in his little world.

All changes with the arrival of the ewe: what was first seriousness, then levity, turns again. At the same time, the fox's role begins yet another transformation, and everyone moves with him, like shifting partners in a group dance. The wolf's red hat remains on his head, but its significance begins a change that—ironically enough—is not a change: what was

before attributed in mockery is still attributed, but in a graver way. This new tone is determined by the grim news that the ewe brings, but also by some subtle associations between the originally ludicrous wolf and his erstwhile companion--this new, less-amusing center of attention--and especially between their respective ambassador's garments or *blazon*. He does not know it yet, but the fox has something like a red cap of his own.

The ewe comes with a serious accusation: in defiance of the king's general peace, the fox has murdered the lamb. Lowrence denies the charge with an argument that echoes the fable's alternating pattern of levity and gravity. Earnestness follows play with concentrated speed, and the fox unwittingly provides a miniature of both recent and still unfolding events:

My purpois wes with him for to haif plaid;  
 Causles he fled, as he had bene effraid;  
 For dreid off deith he duschit over ane dyke  
 And brak his nek.' 'Thow leis,' quod scho, 'fals tyke!'  
 (1079-1082)

The ewe, however, forces a reassessment of this pattern: she calls it a lie. This is a more problematic judgement than it first appears, for Lowrence's account has some elements of truth to it. The lamb was indeed on a dyke, it was playing, and it did die. Lowrence admits all these. What Lowrence fudges, of course, is his own involvement--its nature and its proximity. His technique should be familiar by now: as he has done, repeatedly, in electing others to speak in his place, Lowrence tries to draw back from his material even while he makes it work for him. Blandly painting a picture of a killing but removing himself from it, Lowrence does no less and no more than replace himself with a lamb. The ewe indicts on two levels: narrowly, the details of this case, especially missing details; more widely, the fox's narrative way.

'His deith be practik may be previt eith:  
Thy gorrie gumis and thy bludie snout,  
The woll, the flesche, yit stikkis on thy teith;  
And that is evidence aneuch, but dout!' (1083–1086)

If the fox's use of the wolf's red cap marks a high point of his apparent mastery of *aliena pericula* as both a personal and spreadable lesson, then the ewe's proclamation of physical evidence brings all that danger abruptly home. Her answer to Lowrence's fictions is *practik*—deeds or actual experience. The lamb's blood makes a red mark of its own, both a wound and a garment, and begins to draw together the different meanings of *knax*. The play of material and the play of words are inextricably linked, and a rhetoric that ignores this is a more serious danger than any kick or joke. For Lowrence, suddenly (and almost metamorphically) proximate to what has been always distant, this causes nothing but confusion, and he falls silent, speaks no more, and is forthwith killed.

So what, we may ask, lives on? Has moral triumphed over the twin threat of metamorphosis and merriment, and has the shepherd's earnest trumped the fox's play? Before acceding this, let us turn to another 15th century work, also about the fox, and also uncertain about its identity—as instructive treatise or Renardian comedy—Caxton's 15th century English translation of a prose version of the Dutch *Van den Vos Reynaerde*. In this section, Grimbert the badger has just warned his uncle that the court is filled with reports of Reynard's misdeeds, and that the king has vowed to see the fox dead:

"Puf," said the foxe, "dere newest, is ther nothyng ellis? Be ye so sore aferd herof? Make good chere hardely. Though the kynge hym self and alle that ben in the court had sworn my deth, yet shal I be exalted above them alle. They may faste

iangle, clatre, and yeue counseyl, but the courte may not  
prospre wythoute me and my wyles and subtylte.” (Caxton 56)

What Reynard describes—a verbal pattern that goes from jangling to clattering to counsel-giving—suggests the pattern of fable itself, where animal voice (*jangle*, especially here, suggests the Middle Dutch for “whine”) becomes incrementally more distinct (clatter) and culminates, through *counseyl*, with interpretation and lessons. But there are also “wyles and subtylte”—and these are both metamorphic and insistently comic.

After telling his nephew “puf,” that he does not care that the king and the court want him dead, Reynard proudly draws Grimbert’s attention to the fox children. This is a subtle addition to the profits that Reynard says he will bring to court, for these little ones represent hope for the future.

And they lyke and folowe me wel. For they playe alle  
grymmyng and where they hate they loke frendly and meryly.  
For ther by they brynge them vnder their feet and byte the  
throthe asondre. This is the nature of the foxe. (Caxton 57)

This is a close translation (with one sentence omitted) of the Flemish prose:

Ende si slachten mi seer wel want si spelen al al  
grymmende. Ende die ghene die si haten vriendelijcken te  
ghelaten. Op dat si hem te min hoeden. Soe brenghen sise  
onder die voeten ende byten die kele ont tween. Dit is den aert  
van reynerdus speel. (Van den Vos Reynaerde [P]. ll  
2901–2906).

I give Caxton's source primarily because of one point made obscure by translation. In Caxton's "this is the nature of the fox," the word "nature" conflates two words in the Dutch sentence: *aert* (art, or craft) and *speel*—best translated, perhaps, as "play." Reynard (or Reynaerde) concentrates a great deal of meaning within this speech. He celebrates the lies that he and his children tell and show, but he is strikingly honest in revealing this. At the same time, Reynard combines these seemingly opposed elements with another difficult and strikingly juxtaposed pair of notions: that of "grymmyng" and merriness—or earnest and play. All of these go into Caxton's phrase "the nature of the fox": a portion of artistry, a portion of play, and a deepening sense of truth.

The Dutch phrase that Caxton does not translate refers to such unfortunates that are fooled by the fox's wiles: *op dat si hem te min hoeden*—"they let down their guard." We can compare the fable itself—that is, the fable throughout the Middle Ages as well as this particular one—to the fox-children's victims. Henryson's lion has brought the fable back to its moralizing roots, but only partly so: he has killed this particular fox, but not the fox's metamorphic and merry avatars.<sup>22)</sup> His father had lived on in Lowrence, and he in turn translates into absent mare: rebellious and funny in the narrative, righteous and ascetic in Henryson's moral, and into present wolf—that puzzling mix of *à rire* and doctrinaire—and, most of all, into our increasingly pensive laughter as we turn the page.

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22) What results is as at once animal, textual, and invisible, a continuum of corporeality to elusivity: fox as much as fable becomes, to use Jean Scheidegger's deceptively simple phrase, "l'ouvre introuvable" (Scheidegger 112).

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Abstract

## **Moral, Metamorphosis, Merriment: The Mix of Earnest and Play in Henryson's Fables**

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Moral gravity and ludic energy lie close but uneasily together in the medieval animal fable. These elements are particularly active in Robert Henryson's *Morall Fabillis*; even as he presents his traditionally didactic tales, Henryson explores the tensions and potentials of this mix. This paper focuses upon Henryson's fifth fable, "The Trial of the Fox"—and explores how that trial (and its animal participants) rewrites the fable form.

**Key Words:** Middle English. Middle Scots. Robert Henryson. Animal Fable. Metamorphosis. Reynard.