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June 29, 2010

**The Craft(ing) of Reynard:
Dissecting the Trickster Fox in Medieval England**

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An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Mount Holyoke
College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Medieval Studies
Under the direction of Carolyn Collette and Harold Garrett-Goodyear

Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley, MA
May 2010

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank Carolyn Collette and Harold Garrett-Goodyear: the advisors who guided me through not just the process of researching and writing my thesis, but who also have encouraged and taught me ever since the September of my sophomore year. Their wisdom and kindness has meant so much to me through the years. From them I learned how to never take anything for granted – not even the very definition of what we call “medieval” – and that while we may never find an answer to what we seek, it is the way we question, the way we explore, and the way we listen to and debate with each other that has the most meaning in study and in life.

Thank you also to my other brilliant medievalist professors at Mount Holyoke. Thank you to Wesley Yu, a member of my thesis committee, whose excitement and passion for his subject gave me a much-needed boost of mental energy at the end of the semester. Thanks also to Christine Andrews, Michael Davis, Craig Davis, Patrick Healy, and Stephanie Hayes-Healy, among others.

Thank you to Jennifer King and Patricia Albright, who provided me with the incredible experience of working at Mount Holyoke’s Archives & Special Collections for the past three years. I learned there what happens to papers and books – whether they be medieval or nineteenth century – after their original creation and usages, and why we as archivists and historians want to preserve them and keep the past alive for people in the present and the future.

The most important aspect of my Mount Holyoke education was being part of a community of medievalists made up of not only faculty, but also students. I was incredibly lucky to find dear friends in this small

group of medievalists: Lakshami Mahajan, Elizabeth Carlson, Sarah Gorski, and Marika Malkerson.

Thanks must of course also go to my family, for their unwavering support and love. To my mother, Els Heij, who has always been my most enthusiastic audience, and whose belief not only in my work but also who I am as a person keeps me grounded, and at the same time encourages me to never limit myself. To my father, Joe Mariano, who has always supported me as a scholar. To my sister Sophie and brother Ben, whose eye-rolling gives me perspective. To my mother's cousin, Lydia Hagoort, who is a role model not only as fellow historian and archivist, but also as a loving friend.

And to my late grandfather, opa Gerrit Heij, who introduced me to Dutch literature through *Max en Maurits*, and whose legacy as a medievalist has been my strongest motivator throughout this project.

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I

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing foreign about animal literature in modern Western society. On the contrary, the genre has been thriving in the last hundred years or so, especially in the genre of children's literature. E.E. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* continue to be some of the most iconic stories written for children of this age, and all feature animals carrying out the roles of humans. However, these modern books are the descendants of medieval literature that was most definitely not written specifically with children in mind. The nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century children's stories in fact have a long and violent history.

Animal stories also have an extraordinarily rich history, particularly in the eleventh through fifteenth centuries in Europe, and especially in the fourteenth century in England. A vast body of medieval literature and visual imagery relies on animal anthropomorphization and animal/human hybridity. Out of these depictions of animals grew a distinct set of animal iconography that was understood not only by English people, but also by people living in the Low Countries, France, Germany, and other places in Europe. One of the animal symbols that remain most constant throughout this art and literature is the fox as trickster. In the descriptions of foxes from texts like the *Middle English Physiologus*¹ (a bestiary translated into English in the fourteenth century), and *On the Properties of Things*² (an encyclopedia also translated into English in the fourteenth century), the traits of real foxes living in nature – like living in underground dens and playing dead to catch prey – are given human motivations. The crafty fox is often compared to the devil, who lives underground and tricks souls into his keeping. Born out of the

¹ *The Middle English Physiologus*. (Ed. Hanneke Wirtjes. Early English Text Society. Oxford University Press, 1991.)

² *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.)

medieval interest in animal literature – and dependent on traditional animal symbolism – was *Reynard the Fox*.

William Caxton's 1481 English version of the story begins with all the king's courtiers gathered around him at the royal court, all except for one of his favorites, Reynard the fox.³ One by one, the courtiers present their complaints about Reynard to Noble, the lion king. Isengrym the wolf speaks up first, telling the king about how Reynard had broken into his house, violated his wife, and then urinated on the eyes of his children. Courtoys the hound, Tybert the cat, and Chauntecleer the cock, among others, follow, reporting stories of theft, humiliation, and murder. The only creature speaking in defense of Reynard is his nephew, Grymbert the badger. The king decides that Reynard should be found and brought back to court so that he can judge the fox's fate. He sends Bruyn the bear out to find Reynard, who is lurking at his favorite home deep in the woods, the castle of Maleperduys. After greeting Bruyn courteously, he invites him to eat his fill of honey he has found in a nearby log before they go to court. Bruyn is unable to resist the offer, and he sticks his head and paws into the log, but he finds that he can't remove them. A gleeful Reynard

³ *The History of Reynard the Fox*. (Trans. William Caxton. Ed. N.F. Blake. The Early English Text Society. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.)

observes as Bruyn starts bellowing in fear, and local villagers come running with pitchforks to kill the bear. Left without any options, Bruyn forcibly pulls himself out of the log, tearing out the fur on his head and paws. Bloody and near death, he manages to jump into a stream and swim for miles back to court.

Next, the king sends Tybert the cat to fetch the fox. Reynard has a plan in place for the cat as well, and promises Tybert a meal of plump mice if she goes into a barn on their route to court. Tybert creeps into the barn, but she is spotted by the local priest whose barn it is. The priest and his mistress run out of their house – the priest naked and the woman barely covered – in order to catch the cat. Apparently, Reynard had trespassed on their property a few days before, and when they saw the small animal body of the cat, they think it was the fox returning. In their confusion, they try to kill the cat, but she is too quick for them and climbs up the priest, castrating him. Like Bruyn, the cat is seriously injured when she returns to court without Reynard.

Grymbert the badger volunteers to find his uncle Reynard. Reynard goes willingly with Grymbert, but the badger tells Reynard that

he should only return in a spirit of penitence and piety. Reynard gives his confession to Grymbert, who forgives him his sins. Reynard reports his crimes, including a curious story about his past as a monk with Isengrym. He then promises not to commit more murders, although he comes close to breaking his oath by the time they reach court.

At court, Reynard goes to the king and pledges his service to him, and accuses the others of making false accusations. The other courtiers want none of that, and they cry out for justice. Although he is pained by Reynard's apparent humility and reminders of their friendship, the king is roused by their pleas, and judges that Reynard will be executed. On the scaffold, Reynard weaves an intricate tale of lost treasure hidden by his late father, who apparently had been a traitor in his life. Reynard convinces the king that he can only have access to the treasure if he lets the fox live, because only he knows where to find it. The king and queen let him off with his life, and he tells them that they must go alone to find the treasure, while he makes a pilgrimage to Rome to repent for his sins.

Incredibly, they believe him, imprison Isengrym and Bruyn, and grant Reynard's wish to make his pilgrim's shoes out of the paws of

Isengrym and his wife Erswynde, who thereafter are forced to walk on bloody stumps. Reynard is also given a bag and staff, which complete his pilgrim's garb. The bag is made of a section of Bruyn the bear's skin. On pain of death, Bellyn the ram and Kywart the hare are forced to accompany Reynard. They go first to Reynard's house, supposedly so that he can take leave of his wife Ermelyn and their children. Reynard invites the hare into his house, leaving the ram outside. A few hours later, Reynard hands Bellyn his pilgrim's bag, and says that it contains a special message for the king while Reynard stays at home with his family.

When the king opens the bag, he sees Kywart the hare's head. Enraged, the king orders Bellyn to his death. The wolf and bear, however, are more discerning, and they recognize that Reynard must have been behind the hare's death. They convince the king of this, and, desirous of peace within his kingdom, the king throws a seven-day feast in honor of them. The feast is interrupted by Corbant the rook, who rushes to the king to tell him that Reynard has killed his wife. In true fox fashion, Reynard had lain on the ground, his tongue hanging out, and waited for the bird to come peck at him. As soon as she was close enough, the fox snatched her and bit her head off.

Anger again sweeps over the court, and it is proclaimed that the fox should be taken from his castle by force. He returns, and a trial ensues to decide his fate once again. It seems that Reynard is going to face death, but his aunt Dame Rukenawe the ape steps in. She speaks on and on, telling fables, and quoting Seneca and the Bible, all to trick the king and his courtiers to release the fox. Reynard follows after her, and proceeds to accuse Bellyn of being a Jew, saying that he had killed the cat in an attempt to frame Reynard. Bellyn's Jewishness, Reynard claims, proves that Bellyn is a trickster who in his greed for the buried treasure wanted to have Reynard executed so that Bellyn could be free to find it. His and his ape aunt's long speeches regain in part the king's sympathy for Reynard. Instead of executing the fox, the king decides that the wolf and fox will instead engage in a battle that will decide his fate. Isengrym – furious at Reynard – is of course all too willing to fight Reynard to the death. The battle will take place in two days, which it turns out, is long enough for the fox to plan how he will use his deceit to overpower the wolf. The ape helps him, urging him not to go to the bathroom for a full day before the battle, and to coat his body with grease.

When the time comes to do battle, it appears as if Isengrym will win due to his superior size and strength. However, Reynard distracts him by releasing the urine he had been storing up for the last day into the wolf's face. When Isengrym tries to grab him, the fox simply slides away, being covered in grease. These tricks allow Reynard to strike his nearly fatal blows on to the wolf, and he is declared the winner. Although Isengrym survives after three days on his suspected deathbed, he is humiliated. Reynard, purely by virtue of his ability to trick everyone he encounters, is restored to his full glory at court, even receiving a promotion.

Reynard is successful because he fools others. He knows his enemies well, and so he plays on their shortcomings, greed, and weaknesses in order to manipulate and trick them. Foxes are constantly being depicted as tricksters in the more than two thousand years of writing that still exists about them. The ability to understand the fox symbol is dependent on the widespread nature of animal literature. Animal literature is a vast category, most significantly including animal fables and beast epics, bestiaries, encyclopedias, and hunting manuals. Versions of these texts were widely circulated in late medieval England,

some unique to England, but many (especially in the cases of animal fables and beast epics) were fairly international, read and written throughout Western Europe. The internationalism of *Reynard the Fox* and animal literature in general made it possible for the work to be relatable to various European countries.

The first version of the Reynardian beast epic – the forebear of *Reynard the Fox* – was composed in Ghent (in modern-day Flemish Belgium) as the Latin verse epic *Ysengrimus*, in c. 1148-9.⁴ Over the course of almost a millennium, the form changed in language, and style, but the story retained much of the same content, and continued to be interesting and relevant to various cultures. Following the *Ysengrimus*, the next version was the *Roman de Renart*, a series of about forty episodes written in France from c. 1170 to 1240 about a fox named “Renart le Goupil.”⁵ The fox became simply *Renart*, a name which stuck to the character, even in various other languages throughout the history of the beast epic. Around the same time, Reynard traveled to Germany, and his story was written down by the German Alsatian Heinrich der Glicosaere, who titled his

⁴ Kenneth Varty. *Reynard, Renart, Reinaert, and Other Foxes in Medieval England: the Iconographic Evidence*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999.) 23.

⁵ Ibid. 24.

work *Reinhart Fuchs*, consisting of about 2260 lines.⁶ In the next century the form of Reynard that is still read and celebrated today as the greatest piece of Dutch medieval literature was composed as the 13th century 3500 line Flemish *Van den Vos Reynaerde*.⁷ Although a mini-epic poem, *Rainaldo e Isegrino*, was also written in the early 13th century in Italy, it is really *Van den Vos Reynaerde* that stands out as the main version written in the 13th century.⁸ *Van den Vos Reynaerde* is still extant in two manuscripts written in the 14th century, and the story simmered and changed a little through the 13th and 14th centuries in the Low Countries until its title changed to *Reynaerts Historie* and *Reynaert de Vos* in various editions in the 15th century.

Gheraert Leeu, one of the most important Dutch early printers, indeed, one of the most significant printers of his time in any culture, published a prose version called *Die Hystorie van Reynaert de Vos* in 1479.⁹ Although the basic story did not change that much, the language Leeu used is remarkably closer to modern Dutch than the Dutch of the *Van den Vos Reynaerde*. Leeu served as a significant portion of the bridge

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. 25.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 27.

connecting the largely continental Reynard cycle to the English translation of the late fifteenth century by William Caxton.

Caxton was born in approximately 1422 in the Weald, Kent, England.¹⁰ He is known most widely as the first printer in England, having translated many works in other languages such as Latin, French, and Dutch, and printed these and English texts, for the benefit of the populations of England and Flanders. He began his career as an apprentice to Robert Large, a prosperous and well-known merchant, in London in 1438.¹¹ Large became the mayor of London a year later, and his position of power likely helped Caxton become respected as a merchant himself. After Large died in 1441, Caxton moved to Bruges.¹² He was destined to remain in the Low Countries “by the space of xxx yere for the most parte in the contres of Braband, Flaundres, Holand, and Zeland.”¹³ Caxton was a member of the Company of Merchant Adventurers, and he later became a governor of the Company, bringing him into a position of power in the world of trade. Eventually, Caxton learned how to use a

¹⁰ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. (Ed. W.J.B. Crotch. Early English Text Society. London: Oxford University Press, 1928.) xxvii.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. xxviii.

printing press, and became involved in the business of printing in continental Europe. After the invention of the printing press, the art of printing was taken up as a money-making enterprise and as an opportunity to spread ideas more widely than was possible before. Those who were involved in printing were often engaged in a rich exchange of material, as evidenced through the types of texts being printed in various locations in the decades that followed the invention.

One example of such exchange was that which existed between William Caxton and Gheraert Leeu.¹⁴ Although Leeu was not the only printer working in Holland when he began, both Caxton and Leeu each served to bring their respective countries further into the world of print. Physical evidence of a direct dialogue between the two is difficult to find, but the most compelling argument for some kind of interaction is that much of their early work runs parallel in important places. Significantly, it was Leeu's 1479 edition of *Die Hystorie van Reynaert de Vos* that Caxton translated into English and printed as *Reynard the Fox* at Westminster in 1481.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Leeu* in Dutch means "lion;" Gheraert Leeu printed various texts about anthropomorphized animals, so his surname seems fitting.

¹⁵ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. 62.

Various other parallels exist in their work. In the same group of years in which they were printing their Reynardian texts, Gheraert Leeu printed two editions of his Latin incunable text *Dyalogus creaturarum moralizatus* (*Dialogue of Creatures Moralized*) in Gouda in 1480.¹⁶ As the title suggests, the work is about anthropomorphized animals, pointing to the possibility that Leeu was interested more greatly in this genre and the symbolism behind it beyond the Reynard story. He printed multiple editions of both *Die Historie van Reynaert de Vos*¹⁷ and *Dialogus creaturarum moralisatus*¹⁸ through the 1480s; many of these versions were incunabula and/or contained woodcuts. Also of interest is that they both wrote similar texts describing the histories of their respective regions. Gheraert Leeu in 1478 in Gouda printed *Die cronike of die hystorie van hollant*, which traces the history of the Dutch provinces from its supposed first invasion by Brutus, all the way up to events happening in the current year.¹⁹

The story of Brutus was not original to the Dutch provinces. In fact, it was one of the old stories explaining the founding of Britain (the

¹⁶ Gheraert Leeu: *meesterprenter ter goude, 1477 – 1484*. (Stedelijk Museum Het Catharina Gasthuis. Gouda, 1992.) 42.

¹⁷ *Incunabula Printed in the Low Countries: A Census*. (Ed. Gerard van Thienen and John Goldfinch. Nieuwkoop: De Graaf Publishers, 1999.) 344.

¹⁸ *Incunabula Printed in the Low Countries*. 13.

¹⁹ *Gheraert Leeu: meesterprenter ter goude*. 30.

name “Britain” was supposed to have derived from “Brutus”) found in such medieval works as Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The History of the Kings of Britain*, an English text written in Latin and finished c. 1136.²⁰ The story goes that Brutus was the grandson of Aeneas, and that, anxious for his own land to settle, he journeyed north to Britain to found that country. This creation story was a significant one because it connected Britain not only to Rome, one of the most important empires of the late antique world, and one that had enjoyed a strong presence in Britain a millennium before Caxton, but also to Troy, an even older civilization of mythical vastness and power. Trojan ancestry meant more than simply political and militaristic power; it meant a connection to the gods. The significance of this is multifold: first, Caxton printed a text called *Descripcion of Britayne* – influenced by his early printing of the *Polycronicon* – in 1480 at Westminster²¹, and second, his first printed volume was the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy* in 1475 for Margaret of York, his first major patron.²² Clearly, both printers were interested in including histories of their countries amongst their early work, indicating both some kind of

²⁰ Geoffrey of Monmouth. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. (Trans. Lewis Thorpe. London: Penguin Books, 1996.) 9.

²¹ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. 40.

²² *Ibid.* 2.

nationalistic pride, and similar interests, motivations, and inspirations.

The fact that they both printed versions of the same creation story points to some kind of a shared sense of identity.

The Reynard story's international and timeless appeal, particularly in northern Europe, forces the scholar to wonder why it proved to be both entertaining and relevant to various cultures and times. Besides the obvious categorization of *Reynard* as a piece of animal literature, the text is really all about breaking outside of traditional boundaries. The *Ysengrimus* and its descendants relied on much older fables, the most famous of which were written by Aesop in the sixth century B.C.E. The various tropes that make up the Reynardian cycle, such as animal anthropomorphization, ignoble violence, and bawdy humor are all ones that figured significantly in the folklore and fabliaux that were close relatives to animal fables. Although these themes, and the genres of folklore and fabliaux, are often subjected to the categorization of "low" literature, this label makes little sense when considering who read *Reynard the Fox* in Caxton's England. In fact, Caxton very much meant his translation to be crucially important to people of various social classes.

The fact also remains that it proved to be appealing to people not only of various social classes, but also time periods and geographical locations. Boundaries are constantly being broken in *Reynard*. The story is derived from ancient Greek iconography, yet is written down in medieval Ghent, supports medieval religious values, is perfectly applicable to pre- Early Modern political philosophies, and is later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries manipulated to appeal to children and to support nationalistic ideas.

The borders between species never seem clear. The characters of *Reynard* are all animals, with the exceptions of a group of angry human villagers, and a scene with a naked priest and his lover. Yet, the animals are anthropomorphized and have the ability to communicate, act, and manipulate each other in very human ways. The boundaries between the bodies of characters are often penetrated: a female wolf is raped by the fox, the fox wears the paws of the wolf couple on his own feet, and various characters are victims of serious violence to the point, even, of death. Social roles are transgressed simply through characters' changes of costume and other physical signifiers.

One of the few unchanging factors found in animal literature throughout centuries – millennia, even – was the fox's role as a trickster. Although the fox was always deceitful, his role as a trickster was interpreted very differently depending on who his audience was. In fact, Caxton's decision to print his edition proved to come at an incredibly ripe moment in history. Caxton's English edition of the text, signifying its first formal introduction into English literature and culture, came at a time when conceptions of deceit were changing. Caxton himself was hugely critical of deceit. In his prologue to *Reynard the Fox*, he writes that the story should be taken as a lesson about recognizing tricksters in places of power. He believed that they lurk in every kind of court, both earthly and ecclesiastical, and that people of all social classes – merchants, bishops, kings – are susceptible to deceit if they are too concerned with money and power. He condemns those who have risen to power through simony, lies, flattering, or violence.

Caxton's ideas are in keeping with earlier prevailing views on deceit, and are in line with comparisons of the fox with the devil in texts like the *Middle English Physiologus* and John Trevisa's *On the Properties of Things*, both of which first appeared in English in the fourteenth century.

However, evidence shows that Caxton's English contemporaries did not necessarily condemn deceit in the same way. Instead, the discourse surrounding political behavior of late fifteenth-century England indicates that the use of deceit could be acceptable – and sometimes even encouraged – as a necessary aspect of astute statecraft. *Reynard the Fox* is thus not only a fascinating example of animal literature, but it also illuminates a crossroads in English conceptions of deceit. In order to examine this crossroads, representations of foxes in medieval literature will be investigated to show how the trickster fox related to immorality and the devil, and how the deceitful fox could have actually been perceived as an astute politician.

II

“A FALS BESTE AND DECEYUABLE”²³:
THE FOX-DEVIL IN THE MEDIEVAL ANIMAL KINGDOM

The overwhelming majority of medieval depictions of foxes was fundamentally negative. In fictitious fables and “non-fictional” texts like bestiaries and encyclopedias, the fox’s conniving character is compared to that of the devil. Both foxes and the devil were said to live underground and to use their wits, their knowledge of humankind’s weaknesses, and ability to create false senses of security in their victims in order to trick them into their keeping. In literature, the fox’s preferred prey, for eating, are often birds of various sorts and small mammals, and the animals he targets for other reasons tend to be larger animals with more power and influence. Sometimes he tricks other animals simply to humiliate them.

²³ *On the Properties of Things: Trevisa’s Translation of De Proprietatibus Rerum*. (Vol. II. Oxford: Clarendon Press.) 1263.

The devil's prey is usually, of course, human souls. The fox's actions are almost always given human motivations, even if they are done by real foxes in nature, like living in underground dens or fighting other animals. As one of the least trusted animals in the universe of animal symbolism, it is not surprising that the fox would be compared to the most evil and least trustworthy creatures thought to dwell in the human sphere, the devil.

It is interesting that the fox would be compared to a creature that does not in reality exist in nature, but it is in keeping with much medieval animal literature that a religious identity would be given to the fox. For example, the lion is often connected to earthly kings – in *Reynard the Fox*, the king is a lion – and also to Christ, who is said to be the king of kings, the king of heaven. What does it say about medieval religious belief that the devil would be able to outwit and take advantage of Christ, the son of God? And, what does it say about medieval ruling systems that a courtier – and not the most powerful or popular courtier at that – would consistently be able to outsmart the king? The latter question will be taken up again in the following chapter. This chapter will be a discussion of depictions of the fox in medieval literature and imagery found pre-1481, that is, before *Reynard the Fox* was printed in English. All of the examples

given have evidence of having been fairly widely-known in England throughout the eleventh through fifteenth centuries, and a significant number of them were produced in the fourteenth century, which may point to a rise in interest of animal symbolism, or it might be illustrative of a culture increasingly concerned with the vernacular. In fact, various fox stories as well as texts describing the natural world were produced in English in the fourteenth century. Both the *Physiologus* and *On the Properties of Things* were translated into English, and the few examples of English medieval fox stories after Marie de France were also written in this century: *The Vox and the Wolf*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*,²⁴ and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.²⁵ Michelle Brown, in her introduction to the 2006 facsimile of the *Luttrell Psalter*, argues that the incredible quantity of imagined creatures depicted in the *Psalter* points to an attempt made by its illustrators to depict a new kind of social order in response to the tumultuousness of the fourteenth century. English people

²⁴ "The Nun's Priest's Tale" was based on an Aesopian fable of conflict between the fox and the cock.

²⁵ *Sir Gawain* featured a fox hunt.

living in that century experienced the Black Death, the Hundred Year's War, various religious heresies, and peasant uprisings.²⁶

All these texts illuminate the medieval concepts of hybridity and fuzzy boundaries between humans and animals. (See Image 1) Dorothy Yamamoto provides a useful summary of what lay at the heart of medieval animal imagery and literature: "Where there are boundaries, and borderline areas, there is always a danger of frontiers being crossed and categories becoming mixed, with formlessness or hybridization the result."²⁷ Although to modern minds perhaps reserved for the realms of science fiction or fantasy or children's literature, the concept of transgressing bodily boundaries – that is, transformation of the body – is found littered throughout the literature and visual art of the Middle Ages. The belief in the symbolism surrounding animals is absolutely dependent on an ability to imagine hybridity and transformation. If one can't fathom that an animal could possibly have any human characteristics, then it is impossible to regard Reynard as a trickster – how could a fox otherwise do such human things as give confession, outwit a king, or talk to an aunt,

²⁶ *The Luttrell Psalter: a facsimile*. (Ed. Michelle P. Brown. London: The British Library, 2006.) 1.

²⁷ Dorothy Yamamoto. *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.) 29.

who happens to be an ape?



Image 1: "Hybridity and Transformation." *The Luttrell Psalter*. Folio 266 r.

Physical transformation is not reserved to a particular genre, but is found in sacred texts, courtly romances, fabliaux, hunting manuals, bestiaries, animal fables, advice manuals, intellectual treatises, editions of classical literature, and many other kinds of literature, as well as figured into architecture and manuscript illumination.

For example, in the pages of the fourteenth century Luttrell Psalter, most of the marginalia is made up of creatures that are composed of more than one kind of species. They are often animal/human/plant hybrid figures, sometimes known as “grotesques” or, more kindly, “babewyns.” These are not forms found in nature; rather, they were imagined by humans. Although they are accompanied by little verbal explanation – in fact, it is difficult to decipher the relationship between much of the marginalia to the psalms they accompany – they are still able to tell their own stories. Michael Camille, in works such as *Image on the Edge*²⁸ and *Mirror in Parchment*²⁹ has done much work to bring marginalia out from their physical and metaphorical edges, and into the center of scholars’ analyses of manuscripts. In fact, it is important to not mentally relegate

²⁸ Michael Camille. *Image on the Edge: the Margins of Medieval Art*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.)

²⁹ Michael Camille. *Mirror in Parchment: the Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.)

manuscript marginalia to the kind of space they inhabit on the page (that is, on the edge, precariously close to slipping out of sight), just as one must not negate the importance of animal literature. It is far too easy to ignore both because they deal with such fantastical subject matters, and so they are not typically treated with the same gravity that scholars often accord to, for example, the imagery found on the center of the page (miniatures) or above the doors of the church (tympanums), or to courtly romance or theological texts. Simply the fact that a text uses imagined creatures – creatures made up of animal bodies and human characteristics – to tell a story does not mean that the story is any less true than one relying on fully human characters. A human story is a human story, even if it is told by foxes and wolves.

After the invention of the printing press, the decoration of texts changed, though the process was gradual in the last decades of the fifteenth century and early years of the sixteenth. The issue of hybridity was less obvious in most woodcuts and engravings, for various possible reasons. Among those reasons are the practical ones, including the fact that the medium of print meant that more of the same thing were produced than was possible when most texts were manuscripts. Early

Reynardian printed texts from the late fifteenth century often contain a particular style of woodcut, where the subjects are mostly animals, sometimes dressed in human clothes, but usually not. Clothing was for the most part accorded only to animals enacting particular human roles; the lion wears a crown and other kingly symbols, and the wolf monk wears a robe and cowl. There are a great number of incunabula, texts containing printed words but hand-decorated imagery, which still exist from this period. One incunable text in particular was printed by Gheraert Leeu: the *Dyalogus Creaturarum Moralizatus*, which is kept at the Bijzondere Collecties of the Bibliotheek van de Universiteit van Amsterdam (Special Collections of the Library of the University of Amsterdam.) This text is a collection of animal fables, accompanied by hand-colored illustrations. Although his Latin-language edition is the most well-known, he also printed the same text in Dutch and English. Gheraert Leeu, remember, was the highly significant Dutch printer who produced the 1479 copy of *Die hystorie van Reynaert die vos* that Caxton used to translate from. According to a biography of Leeu published by the Stedelijk Museum Het Catharina Gasthuis in Gouda, the hand-colored woodcuts found in his edition of the *Dyalogus* are considered a

masterpiece by scholars studying his work as well as the more general public.³⁰ The *Dyalogus*, as an incunabile text, illustrates the bridge between earlier illuminated manuscripts and the woodcuts quickly becoming more commonly used in printed books. It is curious that Caxton did not print an edition of this text; it certainly would have corresponded well with his printing of *Aesop's Fables* and Leeu's *Reynaert*. It is also interesting to note that Caxton did not include illustrations – woodcuts or otherwise – in his edition of *Reynard*, although his successor, Wynkyn de Worde, later did. In fact, Caxton's text stands out as an un-illustrated edition in the midst of a tradition of Reynardian woodcuts arising not long before Caxton printed his *Reynard the Fox* and far into the sixteenth century. It is not clear why Caxton chose to publish his without illustration; he did incorporate woodcuts into other books he printed, like his *Aesop's Fables*.

It is in part because of the volume of animal literature and imagery that the symbolism of animals was fairly universal in its use in northern Europe. Although a manuscript could be illuminated in one place, much of the basic symbolism it contains could often be understood somewhere

³⁰ *Gheraert Leeu: meester prenter ter goude*. 9.

else, even if the language of the text could not be understood. Animal symbolism works like any other kind of symbolism known internationally: it transverses cultures and speaks a language of its own.

Jan Ziolkowski argues that

animals have earned this universal status not because they are so much the same the world over but because people are so much the same; for most animals in fiction are not portrayed realistically, but instead are anthropomorphized: that is, human motivation, characteristics, and behavior are attributed to them.³¹

The concept of animal/human hybridity applies not only to creatures physically having bodies with the characteristics of more than one species, but also to creatures that have the body of one species, but the internal characteristics of another. Usually, this is seen in anthropomorphized animals: animals that retain their own bodies, but who act like humans. Sometimes, humans are described to have the characteristics of particular animals, for example, the devious, fox-like courtier and the king who rules like a lion.

It is also important that a significant number of animal stories probably circulated orally, which greatly expands the pool of people familiar with them. It is, however, much easier to focus on surviving texts.

³¹ Jan Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals: Medieval Latin Beast Poetry, 750-1150*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.) 6.

Examples of literary sources of animal anthropomorphization that were read fairly widely in medieval England are works such as the fables of Aesop and Marie de France, the Middle English *Physiologus*, the encyclopedia *On the Properties of Things*, and hunting manuals, as well as the English poem *The Vox and the Wolf*. The breadth of these examples illustrate how animals figured prominently not only in “fictional” stories (fables, the *Vox and the Wolf*, and *Reynard the Fox* itself), but also “non-fictional” texts (bestiaries, encyclopedias, and hunting manuals.) These texts, and more, are examples of literature that fifteenth century English readers of *Reynard the Fox* would likely have been familiar with. By the time Caxton printed his 1481 English edition of *Reynard the Fox*, most English people were fully prepared to understand what its characters represented, because we know, through the study of the aforementioned texts, England was already steeped in international animal iconography. Additionally, these texts provide evidence for the pre-fifteenth century concept of the fox’s deceit being devil-like, which becomes a foil for the political treatment of deceit in Caxton’s time.

In his book *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers*, Edward Wheatley describes the scope of medieval use of fable, that

In the Middle Ages, fables were taught in schools, quoted in sermons, depicted in manuscript margins, painted onto walls, and told and retold by the literate and illiterate alike. Such historical information signals the first intellectual leap that we as modern readers must make in confronting this subject: we must be able to imagine an era during which fable was taken seriously as a vehicle for social, political, and religious communication.³²

This passage should indicate to the reader that animal fables were known widely by people of various social classes and provided important means of expression. Proof for the use of fables in medieval grammar schools can be found, in part, in Priscian's Latin *Praeexercitamina*, a guide for medieval education based on the grammar treatise by the Greek Hermogenes. Priscian lived c. 500 in Mauretania and Constantinople, and provided some of the groundwork for medieval education. This is one of the few instances where animal literature was read by medieval children.

A passage from the *Praeexercitamina* relates that

A fable is a composition made up to resemble life, projecting an image of truth in its structure. This is what orators first offer to children, because they can easily introduce impressionable young minds to the

³² Edward Wheatley. *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000.) 3.

better things. The great authors of antiquity also used fables, men like Hesiod, Archilocus, Horace.... all [stories] have in common the label Aesopian, because Aesop was accustomed to use fables frequently among groups. This technique applies to the needs of life and becomes realistic if the things which happen to the subject are then related to the experiences of real men. For example, when one wants to talk about beauty, a peacock may be brought in; if it is one's purpose to treat of cleverness, let him tell about a little fox; if he wants to show how human beings are imitators, let that be place for apes....³³

Something that fables often do well is to firmly take hold of certain problems, whether they are political, religious, or social, and to present them in such a way that is veiled and subtle. In this way, the dialogue becomes safer for all parties because using metaphor, although understood by many, could potentially serve to remove blame from the author and her or his audience.³⁴ This could certainly have been true for Aesop, who was often written into history as a Greek slave writing in the sixth century B.C.E. by people like Herodotus (writing in the fifth century B.C.E.), though Plutarch described him in the first century C.E. as an advisor to the king of Lydia in the sixth century.³⁵ In either case, writing

³³ *Mastering Aesop*. 36.

³⁴ There is little evidence that the use of animal symbolism in medieval texts actually came out of a desire to appear innocent of directly attacking people of higher status. Instead, it seems that although particular texts do exhibit characteristics of the times in which they were produced, the anonymity of, for example, the king figure in all the versions of *Reynard the Fox* allows the story to relate to various time periods and monarchies.

³⁵ *Mastering Aesop*. 36.

in the veiled format of fable must have given Aesop more leverage than he otherwise would have had. Medieval authors often characterized Aesop as being a devious trickster figure just like the fox.

Marie de France, who wrote in Old French, was another fabulist connected, if the stories are true, with the court of a foreign monarch. Mary Lou Martin attempts to trace Marie's existence in *The Fables of Marie de France*, mentioning that she may have been a countess, the wife of a nobleman, a nun, the half-sister of Edward II of England or possibly an abbess at Shaftesbury.³⁶ It is generally agreed that Marie, whoever she may have actually been, was writing in the twelfth century and was associated with the English court. Martin argues that twelfth century England was characterized by a fear of change and sentimentality towards the past. As can be suggested for the composition of *Reynard the Fox*, "Marie's social observations and admonitions in her work represent an effort to codify modes of behavior at a time when the old codes were rapidly changing."³⁷ The early versions of *Reynard* were being recorded at roughly the same time that Marie was writing, and it is not likely that this

³⁶ Mary Lou Martin. *The Fables of Marie de France*. (Birmingham: Summa Publications, Inc., 1984.) 2.

³⁷ *The Fables of Marie de France*. 5.

was simply coincidence. Rather, it is proof that animal literature and symbolism was of continued importance. Both texts are clearly didactic, even if the morals may have been interpreted according to the different contexts in which they were read. In his Foreword to *The Fables of Marie de France*, Norris J. Lacy writes,

Significantly, the practice of blurring the bounds between species and investing animals and objects with human characteristics has the effect less of showing how close they may be to us than of indicating how much like animals *we* are.... The morals are always about *us*, and they constitute a veritable catalogue of human ignorance, ambition, and treachery, relieved only occasionally by praise of virtue or intelligence.³⁸

The following fable is an example of one of the many that contain a trickster fox. (see image 3) Scholars of the various Reynardian texts often point to this story, which in fact was originally written by Aesop, as being the primary source for the twelfth century *Ysengrimus*.³⁹ In their 2009 edition of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, the first edition to feature an English translation,

³⁸ Norris J. Lacy. Foreword. (Mary Lou Martin. *The Fables of Marie de France: an English Translation*. (Birmingham: Summa Publications, Inc., 1984.) i.

³⁹ *Of Reynaert the Fox: Text and Facing Translation of the Middle Dutch Beast Epic Van den Vos Reynaerde*. (Ed. Bouwman and Besamusca. Trans. Thea Summerfield. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009.) 10.



Image 2: "The Sick Lion." Goethe. Reineke Fuchs. 164.

Dutch literary scholars André Bouwman and Bart Besamusca argue that this fable was one which was available to the author of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, a man who describes himself simply as Willem, and that this, more than the *Ysengrimus*, was a likely source for that thirteenth century Middle Dutch version. In any case, this story was certainly not new to Marie de France – Aesop is said to have been its original recorder, although it may have been circulating in oral tradition earlier. The story tells that the lion, who was the king, was sick, and sent for the fox, known for his medical abilities. Being cautious as well as sly, the fox did not immediately go to the king, who, in anger, asked the wolf why the fox was not coming. This fable does not explain why the wolf would be suspicious of the fox – but it is in keeping with their traditional relationship – and so he tells the lion that the fox is most likely not coming to help out of malice. When the fox hears of this, he goes to the lion, and tells him that the only cure is to flay the wolf, and to wrap the lion in it. The wolf, amazingly, is still alive, although he suffers terribly. The moral of the story is that the wolf receives his just punishment for unfairly condemning the fox. However, the fable seems to be much more complex

than that; obviously, the fox is also operating with some sort of deceit, and may have previously given the wolf some reason for suspicion.

A similar scene occurs in the various versions of *Reynard the Fox*, although by the time the fifteenth century Dutch and English versions are printed, it has morphed into a more nuanced and complex story. In Caxton's *Reynard*, Isengrym the wolf's skin is removed in order to provide Reynard with a set of sturdy shoes for Reynard's pilgrimage to Rome. The king allows the removal of Isengrym and his wife Erswynde's own hind feet for Reynard's purposes, because Isengrym was one of the major courtiers condemning Reynard before he was granted a pardon from the king, so this act of torture is basically his punishment. To add insult to injury, as Erswynde lies on the ground suffering, Reynard tells her that she should be glad, because her feet will be going to Rome and will reap the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage. In addition to the wolf-shoes, Reynard also acquires a large section of Bruyn the bear's skin to make a scryppe, a bag used on pilgrimage. In both the cases of the wolves and the bear, characters suffer the removal of their skin because the fox has convinced the king that he, in fact, was the innocent accused of a crime,

while his accusers were committing slander, and were therefore punished for something they did not actually do.

68. The Sick Lion and the Fox

A lion was very sick, overcome and worsened by disease. All the animals went to him. They spoke among themselves and considered how they should treat him and if anyone could give them advice on the subject. Many of them were in favor of asking the fox for a treatment, since he knew how to heal animals and how to talk to the birds. They had him summoned by a messenger. The fox went to answer their call, but first he hid near the room, for he was cunning and sly. The lion got very angry and called his provost, the wolf, to ask why the fox hadn't yet come. The wolf answered, "There's nothing detaining him but the malice of his own mind, because I sent him my messenger. I'll have him found and brought here, and you will have him hanged or otherwise put to death, and thus you will punish him in such a way that his relatives may take a lesson from it." The fox, having heard himself condemned, was greatly upset. Step by step he came forward until he was well in sight of the animals. "What do you want here?" said the lion, and the fox answered him, "So help me God, Your Majesty, I don't know what I could have done before I found the treatment for your disease. I have wandered many a day since receiving your call. As a matter of fact, I was in Salerno, where the doctors, who heard of your illness, prescribed that a wolf be skinned alive for you and that his blood be collected in his skin and put on your chest until tomorrow. This will cure you of your disease." They took the wolf who was there, and they held him until he was skinned alive. They gave the skin to the lion, and the wolf ran away in terrible pain. As he was leaving the house, flies and gadflies came and stung him fiercely. The fox went up to him very slyly and asked him what he would do now that he was sitting there without his skin: "I see that your paws are torn apart. Another time, I hope you're punished so that you won't do wrong to others that will come back to yourself!" He

who seeks the downfall of others should have that very misfortune befall him, as with the wolf who wanted to bring misery to the fox.⁴⁰

The fact that fables were used so frequently in medieval education and were made known to people of various backgrounds indicates that the beast epic genre, based on animal fables, spoke to a broad population in a language they could understand. Another kind of text that followed similar parallels was the bestiary, a book that lists animals and attributed certain characteristics to them. Although the bestiary is not supposed to be fictional in the way that fables are, they both use similar iconography and depend on the shared, assumed symbolism present in the fictitious texts. Animal fables typically use real animals as characters; they may be animals that would normally not be found in the same geographic regions (for example, there are no lions naturally occurring in Flanders), but they do exist somewhere. Bestiaries, however, do not operate on the same principles. Instead, they feature a mix of animals like lions, foxes, eagles, and serpents, as well as mermaids or sirens. Just like their classical ancestors, bestiaries weave commonly understood animal knowledge – the sort of knowledge that could be discovered through observation of

⁴⁰ *The Fables of Marie de France*. 175 – 177.

nature – with superstition coming out of history and religious beliefs. In this sense, they occupy the same kinds of imaginary realms that texts featuring hybrid creatures in marginalia do.

One such fascinating bestiary is *The Middle English Physiologus*, which is available in only one surviving manuscript, British Library MS Arundel 292, dated to approximately 1300 and written probably at Norwich.⁴¹ Scholars disagree as to when the original Greek *Physiologus* was first composed, but it is generally understood that it was written sometime in the second, third, or fourth centuries C.E.⁴² The *Physiologus* cannot be understood as a complete invention by its author, but rather coming out of a tradition of similar works describing the natural world, like the *Historia animalium* by Aristotle⁴³, and Pliny's *Naturalis historia*.⁴⁴ Both of these earlier writers claimed to be authoritative on the subject, and also that their knowledge came from observation of nature as well as past knowledge. Although they present their material as fact, they both include information that modern science could hardly accept as truth.

Hanneke Wirtjes, the editor of *The Middle English Physiologus*, tells that

⁴¹ *The Middle English Physiologus*. ix.

⁴² Ibid. lxx.

⁴³ Ibid. lxxviii.

⁴⁴ Ibid. lxix.

Aristotle makes claims like “animals can be impregnated by the wind (541. a. 26-31.)”⁴⁵

The *Physiologus* works in much the same way; it presents itself as a compilation of information about animals found in the natural world, and yet it is muddled by contemporary and past superstitions, and even further by the inclusion of Christian beliefs and symbolism. Much of the information incorporated into the entries for each animal presented is Christian, and this indicates a departure from the earlier standard content of bestiaries as well as another layer of symbolism, although Christian authors such as that of the *Physiologus* managed to retain much of the traditional iconography. Christian iconography was not unfamiliar with animal symbolism. Animals were often featured in religious texts, especially accompanying the presence of the four Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. On the pages of books like *The Book of Kells* and *The Luttrell Psalter*, the Evangelists are symbolically represented by their particular creatures: Matthew is shown as the angel, Mark the lion, Luke the ox, and John the eagle.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

The following passage is the entry for the fox, again working as a trickster. It describes the way in which the fox kills its prey, particularly birds, in nature. The fox lies on the ground, sometimes in a ditch, and waits for birds to come to it. As soon as they are close, the fox suddenly leaps up and devours the nearest victim. This same trick is used by Reynard in *Reynard the Fox*, and it is described when Corbant the rook goes to Noble, the lion king, to complain that Reynard had killed his rook wife, Sharpbecke. Reynard, evidently, had lain down on the ground as if dead, but when Sharpbecke came to investigate, poking at the tongue hanging from Reynard's mouth, he leapt up and ate her. The fox is also often shown to carry its bird prey by grabbing the bird's neck, and tossing its body onto his back. (see image 3)

The author of the *Physiologus*, not uniquely, compares the fox's manner of tricking its victims to the way the devil tricks people into committing sins. This comparison supports the notion of the trickster as demonic, and that deceit was thought to be practiced by the devil, indicating that a pervasive conception of deceit found in late medieval England was highly negative.



Image 3: "Fox with Bird." *The Luttrell Psalter*. Folio 31 r.

Natura wulpis

A wilde der is dat is ful of fele wiles:
 Fox is hire to name for hir qwedſipe.
 Huſebondes hire haten for hire harm-dedes:
 De coc & te capun 3e fecched ofte in de tun,
 & te gandre & te gos, bi de necke & bi de nos.
 Haled is to hire hole: fordi man hire hatied,
 Hatien & hulen boðe men & fules.
 Liſtneð nu a wunder dat tis der doð for hunger:
 Goð o felde to a fur3 & falledð darinne,
 In eried lond er in erð-chine, for to bilirten fuzeles.
 Ne ſtered 3e no3t of de ſtde a god ſtund deies
 Oc daredð, ſo 3e ded were, ne drazeð 3e non onde.
 De rauen is ſwide redi, weneð dat 3e rotiedð,
 & oðre fules hire fallen bi for to winnen fode.
 Derflike wiðouten dred he wenen dat 3e ded beð.
 He wullen on diſ (foxes) fel & 3e it wel feledð:
 Li3tlike 3e lepedð up & letted hem ſone,
 3elt hem here billing raðe wið illing,
 Tetoggeð & tetiredð hem mid hire teð ſarpe;
 Fret hire fille & goð ðan ðer 3e wille.

Significacio

Twifold forbiſne in diſ der
 To frame we mu3en finden her:
 Warsipe & wiſedome
 Wið deuel deredð dernelike:
 He late he ne wile us no3t biſwike,
 He lat he ne wile us don no loð
 & bringeð us in a ſinne & ter he us sloð.
 He bit us don ure bukes wille,
 Eten & drinken wið unſkil,
 & in ure ſkemting
 He doð raðe a foxing.
 He billed one de foxes fel

Wo so telled idel spel,
 & he tired on his ket
 Wo so him wið sinne fet;
 & deuel ȝeld swilk billing
 Wið same & wið sending
 & for his sinfule werk
 Ledeð man to helle merk.

Significacio

De deuel is tus ðe fox ilik,
 Mið iuele breides & wið swik,
 & men, also ðfoxes name,
 Arn wurði to hauen same.
 For wo so seied oðer god
 & ðenkeð iuel on his mod
 Fox he is & fend iwis –
 De boc ne leȝeð noȝt of ðis.
 So was Herodes fox & flerd
 Do Crist kam into ðis middel-erd:
 He seide he wulde him leuen on
 & ðoȝte he wulde him fordon.⁴⁶

William Caxton was evidently familiar with the work of John
 Trevisa, who translated *On the Properties of Things* from Latin into English
 in 1389. There is no evidence that Caxton printed *On the Properties of*
Things himself, though his assistant, and later his successor, Wynkyn de
 Worde did publish an edition of the text in the sixteenth century. Caxton

⁴⁶ Ibid. 11, 12.

did print Trevisa's *Polycronycon* in 1482.⁴⁷ In his prologue to that text, he names *On the Properties of Things* as another text that Trevisa had translated, this one out of the original Latin text composed by Bartholomeus Anglicus.⁴⁸ *On the Properties of Things* is a major medieval compendium of knowledge, consisting of information about everything from minerals to animals to angels to humans. Like the *Physiologus*, it was supposed to be used as a reference for the properties of natural things, but it incorporates superstition and religion into its descriptions. *On the Properties of Things* follows the same basic idea that the fox's deception was devil-like. The fox here is described as not being able to move straight-ahead; instead, it runs sideways, because its legs are longer on one side than the other (a physical indication of duplicitousness.) Again the description of the fox's hunting techniques is vilified because it pretends to be dead in order to catch its prey. Apparently, the fox is the most foul-smelling animal, and it sprays its urine onto its foes so that it can overcome them through trickery rather than strength. Drawing on the authority of Pliny, this author tells that the fox's only saving grace is its

⁴⁷ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. 64.

⁴⁸ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. 65.

apparent usefulness in medicine, and that its grease, marrow, blood, and tongue all have healthful properties.

Many of the traits in *On the Properties of Things* accorded to the fox correspond to descriptions found elsewhere, including in *Reynard the Fox*. To make up for its size and strength when fighting other animals, Reynard uses his deceitfulness to win over his enemies. The tricks described in *On the Properties of Things*, like urinating into the faces of its enemies and pulling in his ears and tail are used by Reynard. A significant scene in which Reynard does these things occurs when he fights with Isengrym near the end of the story. Because the wolf is so much larger and stronger, Reynard spends the day prior preparing for their battle, not getting rid of any urine and covering himself in grease to evade the wolf's grasp. In *Reynard the Fox*, the fox is aided by his aunt, an ape.

De vulpe. Capitulum cxiiii.

The fox hatte *vulpes* and haþ þat name as it were 'walowynges feet asyde' and goþ neuer forþright but alway aslont and wiþ fraude. And is a fals beste and deceyuable for whanne him lakkeþ mete he feyneþ himself deed, and so foweles comeþ to him as it were to a carrayne. Þanne he takeþ hem and sleep and deuoureþ hem, as Ysidorus seiþ *libro xii*. Þe fox halteþ alwey for þe right legges beþ schortere þan þe lifte legges. His skynne is swiþe hery, row3, and hoote. His taile is

grete and rowȝ, and whan an hound wenep to take him by þe taile he takeþ his mouþe [and teeþ] ful of heer and stoppeþ it. Þe foxe fightep wiþ þe brokke for dennes and defouleþ þe brokkes [badger or beaver] denne wiþ vryne and wiþ dritte and haþ so þe maistry ouer him wiþ fraude and guyle and nouȝt with strengþe. Þe foxe wonyep in place and dennes vnder eorþe and steleþ and deuoureþ more tame bestes þan wilde. Aristotil seiþ *libro viii*.... And is a glotoun beste and deuoureþ moche and gendreþ blynde children þerfore as doþ þe leoun and þe wulf, as Aristotil seiþ *libro vxi*. For as Solinus seiþ, in alle bestes þat gendreþ brood incomplete þe cause is glotonye, for if kynde suffrede hem abide forto þey wexe complete þey schulden slee þe moder wiþ soukyng. And þerfore kynde makeþ hem nought be ful complete leste þey schulde slee here owne modres by glotony and grete coueytise of mete. Þe foxe is a stynkyng beste and corrupte and corruppeþ ofte þe places þat he wonyep inne conynualliche and makeþ hem bareyne. His wombe is white and þe nekke vnder the þrote and his tayle is reede and his bakke. His breþ stynkeþ and his bytyng is somdele venemous, as Plinius seiþ. And whanne houndes purseweþ him he drawep inne his taile bytwene his legges; and whanne he seeþ he may not skape he gadereþ vryne in þe tayle þat is ful hery and rowȝ and þroweþ þat vryne vpon þe houndes þat pursueþ him; and þe stencche of þat vryne is horrible to þe houndes and þerfore þe houndes spareþ him somdele. Þe foxe feyneþ him tame in tyme of nede, but by nighte he awayteþ his tyme and doþ schrewed tornes. And þough he be swiþe gyleful in himself and malicious, ȝit he is good and profytable in vse of medicyne, as Plinius seiþ *libro xxviii, capitulo viii*. For his grece and mary helpeþ moche aȝeins schrynkynge of senewes, as it is ysede. His blood is acounted temperyng and dissoluyng and departyng harde þinge and is good þerfore to breke þe stoone in þe bladder and in þe reynes, as it is ytrowed. Plinius setteþ þere oþere opynyouns of grete men of propretees fo foxes, of þe whiche I rekke nought to make mencion. But he seiþ þat if a man vpon him haþ a foxes tonge in a rynge oþer in a broche he schal nouȝt be blynde, as wichchees meneþ.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *On the Properties of Things*. 1263, 1264.

Medieval English hunting manuals also reduced the fox to a low, foul category. According to Anne Rooney in her book *Hunting in Middle English Literature*, there were three books of hunting written in medieval England (other hunting texts were written in continental Europe and imported into England): *The Art of Venery*, *Boke of Huntynge*, and *Tretyse off Huntynge*.⁵⁰ English hunting texts usually focused on beasts of venery (the hart, hare, boar, and wolf.) The hunting texts written on the continent were often more focused on useful knowledge about the actual techniques of hunting, whereas English books were largely more interested in the noble hunt for beasts of venery, and its role in the lives of the nobility and the court. Foxes, on the other hand, were considered to be, usually, beasts of chase, but sometimes were even downgraded to vermin. Fox hunting was widely-known to be a favored English sport, depicted in the *Luttrell Psalter*, and only outlawed a few years ago in England. In a website called “Icons: a Portrait of England,” the fox was nominated to be an icon of England in a poll of popular opinion. The page says that,

The red fox . . . is one of our most distinctive wild mammals, noted for its wily resourcefulness and its intelligence. In medieval times, it was the central character in the stories of Reynard, the scheming trickster

⁵⁰ Anne Rooney. *Hunting in Middle English Literature*. (Cambridge: The Boydell Press, 1993.) 176.

who was always getting himself into scrapes, but was highly skilled at talking himself out of them too. When held to account for his actions by the lordly Lion, Reynard was not above a measure of defiant backchat. It was in this guise that he came to symbolize the rural peasant's contempt for feudal landowners. In the centuries that followed, the fox found itself playing an unwilling starring role in the last of the major bloodsports to be outlawed in England. Hunted down by packs of dogs, as well as humans on horseback, it was supposedly getting its just deserts for its predatory nature – which may have come as a surprise to it, since it wasn't aware of being capable of moral choice, being only an animal.⁵¹

The fox, clearly, continued to be a feature of English rural sport long after the medieval period. The fox hunt was one feature of the way in which superstition was constructed around the fox, and the role of the fox was so often as a vilified and hunted trickster. (see image 4)

⁵¹ "Icons: a Portrait of England," < <http://www.icons.org.uk/nom/nominations/fox-the> >



Image 4: "Fox Hunt." The Luttrell Psalter. Folio 64 v.

III

“ACH FELLE REYNART”⁵²:

ANCIENT FOX THEMES IN PRE-REYNARDIAN ENGLAND

Although there were many other symbolically important animals in medieval art and literature, representations of the fox seem particularly rich. The fox was clearly an animal that carried historical precedence and cultural significance for England, even if the story of *Reynard the Fox* did not appear in English until 1481. Before that year, stories were written about the fox in England, and just as we have seen in other animal literature, it always acted in a similar manner, even when motivations attributed to it may have changed. The continued reliance on iconography had the effect that the fox was not capable of having its own agency as a character. Its actions cannot be simply blamed on individual

⁵² *The History of Reynard the Fox*. (Trans. William Caxton. Ed. N.F. Blake. The Early English Text Society. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.) 91.

motives, because they are almost always traceable to earlier designations of character. If the fox character is limited because it must fulfill certain symbolism to maintain the essence of its foxiness, then its potential complexity beyond the standard iconography must be diminished. If bestiaries, hunting manuals, and encyclopedias state that the fox is a trickster, and if many of the animal fables involving the fox support this, then the fox must continue to be deceitful in order to be recognizable to an audience well-steeped in traditional animal symbolism. It is perhaps for that purpose of being understandable that the fox in *Reynard the Fox* does little that has not already been stipulated in these genres.

Although much of the medieval literature about foxes was, as we have seen, common to much of western continental Europe as well as England, there was also a tradition of using the fox as a storyteller in both literature and visual imagery particular to England. England's use of Reynardian themes and characters indicate some level of familiarity with the Reynardian tradition before Caxton. Besides always being portrayed as a trickster, medieval fox stories usually include other themes, including the ancient rivalry between the fox and the wolf and the fox's continued use of ignoble violence. The fox features in unique English works such as

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, but it is most significantly depicted in the English poem *The Vox and the Wolf*. The only remaining version of the poem exists in MS Digby 86 (folios 138 r – 140 r), which dates from sometime between the last quarter of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the fourteenth.⁵³ Various scholars, including Kenneth Varty and Jill Mann, have tried to trace the origins of *The Vox and the Wolf*. Because the story is one that reflects a Reynardian tradition, the existence of *The Vox and the Wolf* is an important piece of evidence pointing to English knowledge of the Reynard cycle before Caxton’s translation. The entire poem is based on the exchange between the fox and the wolf at a well, and this same scene occurs in various other traditions, including the French *Roman de Renart*; the Dutch and Flemish versions: the *Ysengrimus*, *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, *Den Hystorie van Reynaert de Vos*; and their English descendant, *Reynard the Fox*.

Intriguingly, one of the earliest portrayals of the fox and wolf at the well theme appears in early medieval Jewish literature. Citing Haim

⁵³ Jill Mann. *From Aesop to Reynard*. 229

Schwarzbaum's research on the medieval Jewish Fox Fables,⁵⁴ Kenneth Varty illustrates how these earlier Jewish fables relate to the *Reynard* cycle. In the same period that the *Ysengrimus* was composed, Rabbi Rashi (in c. 1070) and Petrus Alphonsus (in c. 1109 – 1114) were writing fables about foxes. Schwarzbaum believes they both may have been influenced by Rabbi Meir (c. 135 – 170 C.E.) and Rabbi Hai Gam (d. 1038.) All four were writing in Hebrew. Closer to the composition of *The Vox and the Wolf*, Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan wrote his 117th fable of the *Mishlé Shu'Alim* (Fox Fables) in the mid thirteenth-century.⁵⁵

In his version of the fox fable, Rabbi Rashi draws on three Talmudic passages to create a fable-exemplum. The passages are, “(a) the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the teeth of the children have become blunt (Ezekiel, 18: 2); (b) just balances, just weights (*Leviticus*, 19: 36); (c) the righteous man is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked person comes in his stead (*Proverbs* 11: 8.)⁵⁶ In this version, a fox convinces a wolf to intrude on a Friday evening Sabbath banquet, but upon seeing the wolf,

⁵⁴ Haim Schwarzbaum. *The 'Mishlé Shu'alim' (Fox fables) of the Rabbi Berrechiah Ha-Nakdan: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Fable Lore*. (Kizon: Institute for Jewish and Arab Folklore Research. 1979.)

⁵⁵ *Reynard the Fox: Social Engagement and Cultural Metamorphoses in the Beast Epic from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Ed. Kenneth Varty. Ibid. 246.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 247.

the people beat it (this seems logical; imagine a wolf coming into a courtyard with plans to join a group of people for Sabbath.) (see image 5)

ÆSOP'S FABLES



THE FOX AND THE GRAPES

A HUNGRY Fox saw some fine bunches of Grapes hanging from a vine that was trained along a high trellis, and did his best to reach them by jumping as high as he could into the air. But it was all in vain, for they were just out of reach: so he gave up trying, and walked away with an air of dignity and unconcern, remarking, "I thought those Grapes were ripe, but I see now they are quite sour."



Image 5: The Fox and the (Sour) Grapes. *Aesop's Fables*. 1.

The wolf escapes with his life, and plans to take vengeance on the fox, but the fox manages to dissuade the wolf by telling him that the Jews in fact have a particular grudge against his father, and thus had their own particular reason to act against the wolf. Then, the fox quotes the aforementioned passage from *Ezekiel*. The second part of the fable finds the fox leading the wolf to a well on a night with a full moon. The fox gets in one of the buckets in the well; the well has two buckets, and when the fox sinks into the well, the other bucket rises. In response to the wolf's confusion as to why the fox has gone into the well, the fox replies that he has found a large cheese in the well. Greedy, the wolf climbs into the other bucket, and due to his larger weight, causes that bucket to sink while the fox's bucket goes up to the surface. The cheese was never real; instead, it was the reflection of the full moon in the water. The wolf wonders how he is to come back to the top, and the fox answers by quoting the *Leviticus* and *Proverbs* passages. There is a certain amount of irony and comedy here. The wolf is tricked twice in a row by the fox, and the fox then uses the Bible as an excuse. The fox is of course not a righteous man, and there is no just outcome. Comedy is mingled with religious teachings in a way that must have been successful, as the fable remained in Jewish tradition

as well as the Christianized tradition of the majority of medieval Europeans.

Petrus Alphonsus, who was a converted Spanish Jew, wrote another exemplum-fable based on the same theme. A fox comes upon a farmer and a wolf arguing about the ownership of oxen. The fox decides that the oxen will go to the farmer, who in return will give him two hens. To placate the wolf, the fox promises him a large cheese. Later, the fox takes the wolf to a well at night beneath a full moon, and points to the moon's reflection in the water, saying that it is the promised cheese. The fox goes into one of the two buckets hanging at the well, and descends. When he reaches the bottom, he calls out that the cheese is too heavy for him to carry alone, and the wolf goes into the other bucket, which raises the fox. The fox flees the scene and leaves the wolf alone at the bottom of the well. In both versions of the story, the small fox outwits the more powerful wolf. In the latter version, he does so in order to get food (two chickens) without being punished when he does not later fulfill his promise to the wolf. These versions may be utilizing the trickster fox figure in order to show how a marginalized group can use its intellect and

wit to turn the tables on the larger majority (the persecuted Jews using what they have to survive in a largely Christian society.)

The theme makes an appearance in the *Roman de Renard* and other versions of the Reynardian epic, but the Middle English *The Vox and the Wolf* focuses entirely on that scene. It is not clear from either Schwarzbaum or Varty that the Jewish tales had a direct impact on the English version, and Varty fails to draw any direct connections between the Dutch/Flemish versions upon *The Vox and the Wolf*. There is more evidence of English-French literary exchange before Caxton, but it is curious that more substantial pre-Caxton connections between England and the Low Countries have not appeared in most Reynardian scholarship. After all, *Reynard the Fox's* direct parent was Leeu's Dutch *Den Hystorie van Reynaert de Vos*, not the French text.

The Vox and the Wolf follows much the same format as the other stories, with some variation. A hungry *vox* (fox) is looking for food, and comes upon a farmhouse. There he sees chickens, but Chauntecler the cock (the same character appears in the Reynardian tradition as well as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*), threatens him and sends him running. Exhausted and thirsty, the fox sees a well with two buckets. He jumps into

one of them and sinks into the well. He realizes that the water stinks, and that he can't come out of the well on his own because of the pulley system created by the two buckets. Crying out, he is heard by the wolf, who comes over to the well, even though he is suspicious of him (apparently they are neighbors and know each other well.) “‘A,’ quod þe vox, ‘ich wille þe telle . . . Ich am reneuard, þi friend. . .’”⁵⁷ The fox explains that on the bottom of the well there is meat and drink, and, in short, heaven. Convinced that going into the well means going to his death, but therefore heaven, where he will never again be so hungry, he begs the fox to be his priest so that he can be shriven. The wolf even confesses that he should not have believed his own eyes when he saw his wife in bed with the fox. Satisfied, the fox tells him he is forgiven, and to go into the other bucket if he wants to find bliss. As soon as the wolf starts descending, the fox begins to rise, grinning. Leaving the wolf, the fox goes to a friar and tells him that there is a wolf in the well. The friar and the local villagers go to the well, pull the wolf up, and kill him.

So is it now knowen to yow alle by hys owen wordes that is a deffamer of wymmen as moche as in hym is ye may wel marke euerycheone, Who shold lust to do that game to one so stedfast a wyf/ yf it be so as he sayth

⁵⁷ *Middle English Humorous Tales in Verse*. (Ed. George H. McKnight. Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1913.) 30.

yf she wyl save the trouth I wote wel/ she shal saye as I doo/ Tho spack
erswynde the wulfis wyf/ Ach felle reynart/ noman can kepe hym self
fro the/ thou canst so well vttre thy wordes and thy falsenes and treson
sette forth/ but it shall be euyl rewarded in the ende./⁵⁸

Erswynde, the wolf's wife, tells a slightly different version of the story in Caxton's *Reynard the Fox*. Instead of Isengrym being duped into going into the well, it was she who came upon Reynard crying at the bottom of the well. Addressing Reynard, she said that "thou saidest that thou haddest there so many good fysshes eten out of the water that thy bely wolde breste."⁵⁹ When she goes into the other bucket and becomes stuck (just as her husband did in the other versions), Reynard tells her that she should take a lesson from her situation. He also says that if one of them had to be stuck in the well, it was better that it was her, and not him.

I taught yow good/ wyl ye vnderstane it and thynke on it/ that ye
another tyme take better hede and bileue noman ouer hastily/ is he
frende or cosyn/ for euery man seketh his owne prouffyt/ They be now
fooles that do not soo/ And specyally whan they be in leopardye of
theyr lyues.⁶⁰

Did Reynard really think that he should claim personal responsibility for teaching Erswynde about not believing tricksters? Why would he warn her about not listening to everything she hears, and being

⁵⁸ *The History of Reynard the Fox*. 91.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

more discerning about deceit? This passage is reminiscent of when, after her feet had been removed to make Reynard's shoes, he told her that she should be glad that they were going to Rome on *his* paws. It is possible that these two interactions could be explained as some sort of remorse felt by Reynard, although he does not ever try to comfort his other victims in this manner.

Perhaps he feels compelled to comfort her because they have a shared, and murky, history. A major theme of Reynard's vileness is his rape of Erswynde; it is also an aspect of his un-chivalric approach to violence. Isengrym twice accuses Reynard of assaulting his wife. The first time this is presented, it is when Isengrym tells the king in the first scene that Reynard had come into his house when he was away, and trespassed against the will of his wife. The second occasion is more graphically described, although the story is twisted several times, sometimes placing blame on Reynard as a rapist, and at other times – when Reynard is presenting his version of the story – accusing Erswynde of carrying out a consenting, adulterous affair with the fox. The text tells us that Reynard convinced Erswynde to go out onto an icy lake with him so that he could teach her how to fish. As Reynard was expecting, her tail got caught in the

ice so that she couldn't move, allowing him to leap onto her and rape her. When Isengrym comes by and see them, Reynard runs away, and warns the nearby villagers that there are dangerous wolves by the lake. The villagers come, armed with staves and pitchforks, forcing Erswynde to rip her tail out of the ice, tearing a section off. She and Isengrym barely make it away. This passage – the necessary tearing off of a body part – is reminiscent of the scene in which Bruyn the bear must pull his head and paws out of the log, removing chunks of fur, to escape the villagers Reynard warned. The wolves and the bear were also forced to part with parts of their body to outfit Reynard in his pilgrim's garb.

Although it may seem to the modern reader that rape would primarily be a crime against the actual, physical victim, the prevailing medieval view of rape was often more concerned (if the victim was a woman) about the suffering of the man who laid claim to her, that is her husband or father. In *Reynard the Fox*, rape is used to emasculate and mock Isengrym as yet another aspect of the continued battle between the wolf and the fox. The affection shown to Erswynde by the fox – an ironic, perhaps mocking affection, in this case – and her husband the wolf, does not at all lessen the crime done against her. She is also not accorded her

own voice, and is not allowed any authority when she tries to defend herself. Although she was clearly frightened and in pain when she was left caught in the ice, her husband is easily convinced by rumor – and Reynard's own words – that she in fact desired the fox.

We have already seen how the fox conducted himself in battle; instead of fighting honestly, he used his terrible urine as distraction and grease as a means of evading his foe's grasp when in battle with the wolf. (see image 7) Another interesting (and unfair) tactic used by the fox was to call for help from humans when he had led his enemies into a trap. In fact, the only time humans make an appearance in any of these stories is to go after one of the fox's victims. This happens in the scene when Bruyn the bear becomes stuck in the log, when Tybert the cat goes into the priest's farmyard, and when Reynard tells the friar about the wolf in the well in *The Vox and the Wolf*.



Image 6: "Battle." *Reineke Fuchs*. 195.

All of Reynard's successes and violence are related to his ability to trick other characters. Completely self-interested, the fox stops at nothing to humiliate, wound, rape, and murder his victims – even when he is not in need of food or the preservation of his life. We have seen how his deceit was condemned as demonic throughout medieval animal literature, and by Caxton himself, but this is not necessarily how Reynard would have been received by the people Caxton was printing for in the later quarter of the fifteenth century.

IV

“SUBTLY FALSE SHREWIS”:
DECEIT AS A POLITICAL TOOL

In his 1481 edition of *Reynard the Fox*, William Caxton made a plea to his readers that they read and take to heart all the lessons that they would find there. His prologue (Caxton was virtually never shy about sharing his opinion of whatever he was printing in prologues and epilogues) basically speaks for itself:

In this historye ben wreton the parables / goode lerynge /
and dyuerse poyntes to be merkyd / by whiche poyntes
men maye lerne to come to the subtly knoweleche of su-
che thynges as dayly ben vsed & had in the counseylles
of lords and prelates gostly and worldly / and / also
emonge marchantes and other comone people / And this
booke is maad for need and prouffyte of alle god folke /
As fer as they in redyng or heeryng of it shal mowe
Vnderstande and fele the forsayd subtly deceytes that day-
ly ben vsed in the world / not to thentente that men shold
Vse them but that euery man shold eschewe and kepe
Hym from the subtly false shrewis that they be not dece-
yuyd / Thenne who that wyll haue the very vnderstan-

dyng of this mater / he muste ofte and many tymes rede
 in thys boke and earnestly and diligently marke wel
 that he redeth / ffor it is sette subtylly / lyke as ye shal see
 in redyng of it / and not ones to rede it ffor a man shal
 not with ones ouer redyng fynde the right vnderstan-
 dyng ne comprise it wel / but oftymes to rede it shal cause
 it wel to be vnderstande / And for them that vnderstan-
 deth it / it shall be right Ioyous playsant and prouf-
 fitable ⁶¹

He urges his audience, whatever sort of men⁶² they may be, spiritual or not, lords or merchants or other commoners, to read and reread *Reynard*. Apparently, the fundamental reason why Caxton thought it was important to read the text was because Reynard-like characters could be found anywhere in daily life: in courts both clerical and worldly, and amongst merchants and more common people. It would not be fitting to be unable to recognize deceitful characters, and by reading about the character possibly most famous for his deceit, the hope would be that readers would be prepared to sort out who could be trusted and who could not.

Evidently, Caxton also seemed to believe that *Reynard the Fox* was the product of much older knowledge and wisdom. Of course, he was

⁶¹ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. 60.

⁶² Besides a few female patrons, including Margaret of York, Caxton almost never makes reference to a reading public made up of women at all.

right, but he does not make any reference to possible sources for the Dutch version he translated. By describing it as a history containing “parables [and] goode lerynge,” he is setting the text up as something that has come down through the ages, and he implies that the subtle knowledge which people will come by when they read the book is something that is being purposefully handed to them and must be carefully noted. In a way, Caxton is shouldering a responsibility he seems to believe he has when he chooses to share this wisdom with his readers. Additionally, by being the one who is giving English people this “subtle knowledge,” he is in turn handing off the responsibility to his countrymen (and women.)

If Caxton is to be trusted for telling the truth about his views on deceit, he would have been aligned with an earlier, traditional approach to the concept. In his book *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, Paul Strohm defines the medieval idea of deceit and its use in literature:

The strategic deployment of a false exterior self is a staple of medieval moralizing discussion, as manifested in personified characters like ‘false-seeming’ and hypocrisy, dressed in their friars’ copes in order to deceive the world. But revealed in the cases of such staples of moral

allegory are permanent 'traits'; unalterable dispositions that may be read off as moral flaws.⁶³

The fox is just such an example of a creature possessing an "unalterable disposition." In the medieval use of the fox, and Reynard in particular, the character was clearly meant to illuminate a particular moral flaw – deception.

However, Caxton's anxieties about deceit did not necessarily correspond with the presiding opinions of many of his English contemporaries. In fact, according to Strohm, England was experiencing a "pre-Machiavellian moment" in the period of 1450-1485, coinciding (not coincidentally) with the Yorkist dynasty.⁶⁴ Such a "moment" refers to an increase in political discussion happening amongst educated and connected people operating both within and outside the court. Although the War of the Roses was an English struggle, such political discourse was an international phenomenon, and was occurring in other realms like Burgundy and France.

One of the subjects of this discourse was the difference between earlier conceptions of Fortune, and the idea of *vertue*, more contemporary

⁶³ Paul Strohm. *Politique: Languages of Statecraft Between Chaucer and Shakespeare*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.) 37.

⁶⁴ *Politique*. 1

to the period. Fortune, a personified, allegorical figure, was thought to rule people's lives, and there was especially an interest in how Fortune influenced the lives of rulers. With her great wheel, Fortune could cause people to fall from the top of their luck to the very bottom, and back around again. Vertue in the fifteenth century, on the other hand, referred to the idea that people could be more in charge of their lives (perhaps doing away with fate all together), using their own wits and political savvy. Vertue is not exactly the same idea as the modern concept of virtue, which refers more to the moral character and goodness of a person. In fact, it would not be a stretch to say that a person could act with unvirtuous *vertue*. That is, one could live by the principles of *vertue* without being particularly concerned with common goodness. Although the fox relies on his cunning, and not his fortune to succeed, this does not indicate an easy separation between fortune and deceit as political savvy in the Middle Ages. A page from the Festal Missal, a manuscript created at Amiens in 1323, and now housed at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (the National Library of the Netherlands) depicts a Reynardian Wheel of Fortune. (see image 7) Although the animals to the

left and top are difficult to distinguish, an educated guess⁶⁵ would lead one to surmise that the creature seated on the throne and dressed as a king is a fox, the creature falling to the right is a rabbit the animal being crushed beneath the wheel is a sheep or a ram, and a wolf, dressed in what may be a monk's habit, climbs up the wheel to the left. This can be interpreted as the cycle of the wolf and fox's power and influence – they feed off each other, and as one is at the top, the other is waiting for him to fall so he may be in power.

⁶⁵ We know that at one point, the wolf was a monk, and so it is possible that the illustrator here chose to depict him in that role. The animal on the left also looks to be larger than the animal on the top, so that shows an additional reason to believe that the fox (the smaller of the two) is on the top and the wolf climbing up.



Image 7: Reynardian Wheel of Fortune. *Festal Missal*.

As Strohm argues, there was a rise in the time of his “pre-Machiavellian moment” of what he calls “thoughtful self-interest,” in which actions that would normally be considered immoral could be excused in influential people. Deceit in the form of perjury was one such action. This meant that if a ruler committed perjury, knowingly and successfully (*success* being the determining factor), then it could be argued that he or she was simply acting in a way to make his or her goals possible. It seems that, from contemporary letters and literature, oath-breaking, otherwise considered a crime against society values, one’s lord and/or subjects, and God, seemed in this view, to sometimes be merely a part of what one must do to attend to one’s duties. Perjury could be equated simply with astute leadership, or even accord one a “perverse badge of honor”.⁶⁶ If political, financial, and/or social success was the goal, then deceit could conceivably be an acceptable technique in order to achieve that goal. The emphasis on success does turn the table on the victims of the trickster. Deceit is a game played by two (or more) parties, and it will only work if the victim is willing (or foolish) enough to be lulled into a false sense of security. An additional lesson seems to be

⁶⁶ *Politique*. 31.

illuminated in the story of *Reynard the Fox* – that one must not be so blinded by greed (for treasure or for honey), that one becomes capable of being duped.

Philippe de Commynes was a late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century writer and diplomat who was connected to both the courts of Burgundy and France. He wrote about Lord Wenlock, captain of Calais, who in 1470 deceived both Edward IV of England and the duke of Burgundy in favor of the earl of Warwick and the Lancastrians. In this passage, he seems to declare himself an exposé of other people's deceit, encouraging people to be aware of their neighbor's "artful tricks." In a sense, he is calling attention to the same thing Caxton pointed out: that one should be aware of the deception that is often circulating around them. His motives, however, are not clear, especially because Commynes himself was apparently suspected of deception, and took part in some questionable and possibly traitorous activity himself.

Because it is necessary to be well informed of the deceptions and evils of this world, and equally the good deeds, not at all so as to use them but to guard against them, I will declare a deception or artful trick – whatever one would wish to call it, but it was shrewdly conducted – for I also wish that one should hear the deceptions of our neighbors, and our own.... With respect to these secrets, artful deceptions or deceptions, that have been accomplished in our part of the world, you

won't hear a truer account from anyone, at least with respect to those which have occurred during the last twenty years or more.⁶⁷

During that same period, William Caxton was living in the Low Countries, having moved to Bruges in 1441 and remaining there for another thirty years. Caxton began working in the Low Countries as a trader, and there was an active community of English merchants in the region. The court of Burgundy and the English monarchy had a complicated, though at the time, peaceful, relationship. English merchants who worked in the Low Countries often doubled as ambassadors of a kind, and their actions and dealings followed guidelines set out by both the English and the Burgundians. A powerful group of merchants, the Merchant Adventurers, were granted special permissions from both courts. Their unique position required them to be accountable for their own doings, and helped alleviate the suspicions held by the citizens of Bruges (at the time the seat of the duchy of Burgundy), and so brought the English more business.

Caxton became a governor of the English Nation of Merchant Adventurers at Bruges in approximately 1462.⁶⁸ The charter for the group

⁶⁷ *Politique*. 37-8.

⁶⁸ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. xlix.

was revised to accommodate merchants in their contemporary political climate, but the governorship generally followed guidelines in the original 1404 Charter for the Merchant Adventurers, which stated that:

Furthermore we give and graunt to the said Governors which are in such sort to be chosen by the aforesaid Marchants, special power & authoritie... to minister unto them and every of them in their causes and quarrels whatsoever, which are sprung up or shall hereafter fall among them in the parts aforesaid full and speedie justice, and to reforme all manner of questions, contentious discords, and debates moved or to be moved between the English Marchants remayning in those parts, and to seeke reformation, to redresse, appease, and compound the same: and further to redresse, restore, repayre and satisfie all transgressions, damages, misprisions, violences, and injuries done or to be done by the aforesaid Marchants of these parts. And to require, demaund, and receive the like restitutions, reparations, satisfactions and amends of the Marchants of those parts or of their deputies... and to punish with reason according to the quantitie of their fault in that behalfe all and singuler the English Marchants which shall withstand, resist or disobey the aforesaid governours so to be chosen or their deputies... or any of the aforesaid statutes, ordinances or customes.⁶⁹

A high level of conduct was therefore expected of English people working abroad, and Caxton would likely have been involved in the politics of the area as well as in keeping the justice necessary to the Merchant Adventurers. If he was so engaged in the politics and interests involving England and Burgundy, he could only have been aware of the discord in England surrounding the intrigues of the Yorkists and

⁶⁹ Ibid. liv.

Lancastrians, and he surely would have been aware of the deceit being played out on his side of the channel.

When Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy, wife of Charles the Bold (the duke of Burgundy), and sister to Edward IV of England, arrived in Bruges, she almost immediately became Caxton's first significant patron in 1468.⁷⁰ Margaret was a bibliophile and newly arrived from England, so it is not a great surprise that Caxton would have fallen so quickly into her favors. Although it is not clear what sort of position Caxton had at the Burgundian court, it is thought that he worked as a kind of hybrid ambassador and merchant at first, before he became a translator and printer as well. It was for Margaret that Caxton printed his first book, Lefevre's *Recueil de Histoires de Troie*. In his epilogue to Book II, he alludes to the current troubled state of the world. It is interesting to note that he refers to himself in his prologue as a citizen and merchant of *London*, not Bruges, though he had been living in the Low Countries for the past few decades, and he printed this text on the continent (Bruges, Ghent, and Cologne.)

⁷⁰ Christine Weightman. *Margaret of York: Duchess of Burgundy 1446-1503*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.) 209.

Epilogue to Book II

Thus endeth the seconde book of the recule of the historyes of Troyes / whiche bookes were late translated in to frenshe out of latyn / by the labour of the venerable persone raoul le feure preese as a fore is said / And by me Indigne and unworthy translated into this rude englysshe / bythe comandement of my said redoubtid lady duches of Bourgogne: And for as moche as I suppose the said two bokes ben not had to fore this tyme in our englyssh langage / therefore I had the better will to accomplishe this said werke / which werke was begonne in Brugis / & contynued in gaunt And finysshid in Coleyn In the tyme of ye troublous world / and of the grete deuy sions beyng and reygnyng as well in the royames of englond and fraunce as in all other places vnyuersally thurgh the world that is to wete the yere of our lord a-thousand four honderd lxxi. .⁷¹

It is difficult to imagine that Caxton was not aware of troublesome politics between England and Burgundy and within each realm, and so reading *Reynard the Fox*, which Caxton printed later in Westminster, in 1481, in the context of what he would have been surrounded at the Burgundian and English courts, as well as the mercantile world, gives a new level of meaning to how Caxton saw his role and his views on the world that he inhabited.

Although Burgundy and England were reasonably at peace with each other, they certainly shared a tumultuous recent history. Burgundy

⁷¹ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. 6, 7.

had sided with England for parts of the Hundred Years' War, but the duke (Philip the Good) turned his allegiance to France near the end of it, playing an important role in the siege of Calais in 1436.⁷² A pamphlet called *The Libel of English Policy* was written between 1436 and 1438 in reaction to the siege of Calais.⁷³ A spokesman for the cloth exporters wrote what "constituted a well-informed and comprehensive program based on a remarkably mature concept of economic nationalism."⁷⁴ That is, this pamphlet demonstrates an awareness of the relationship between political and economic power, and suggests that people were interested in building up economic and mercantile prowess in order to support English international politics.

Arthur B. Ferguson describes in *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance* a new consciousness of nationalism growing in the fifteenth century, building on the idea of the royal court as the center of English power. Various aspects of the fourteenth century, particularly certain sources of turmoil like the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War,

⁷² Arthur B. Ferguson. *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975) 27.

⁷³ *The Articulate Citizen*. 22.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

helped promote the idea of a nationalistic identity.⁷⁵ The growth of the vernacular in literature as well as policy also reinforced this identity, as well as an awareness of the importance of trade and mercantilism.

English language and trade were both concepts that Caxton was strongly invested in. He writes in many of his prologues and epilogues how he despairs of the state of the English language, hoping that by printing in the vernacular and making literature more readily available to the public, he will have a hand in elevating the language. He was heavily involved in translating works into English, as we have seen with *Reynard the Fox*, not only from Dutch, but also especially from French, German and Latin. As a merchant, and a governor of the Merchant Adventurers at that, Caxton could also not have gone long without being aware that he was *English*.

If Caxton was the product of his time and situation, and if he was engrossed not only in contemporary politics, but also in the discussions occurring amongst the intellectuals of the day, it may be wise to read his words with a grain of salt. After all, he did not change the story of Reynard so that Reynard eventually is punished for his continuous deception (deception against the crown, no less.) Could Caxton's

⁷⁵ Remember that these same conflicts have also been treated as a source for fantastical imagination in English art and literature.

introduction of the text into the England have been a purposeful part of the greater political discourse? What *did* Caxton mean when he wrote “As fer as they in redyng or heeryng of it shal mowe vnderstande and fele the forsayd subtly deceytes that dayly ben vsed in the world / not to thentente that men shold vse them but that euery man shold eschewe and kepe hym from the subtly false shrewis that they be not deceyuyd”? He does write that people should learn about deceit not so that they can copy Reynard-like characters, but so that they can recognize deceitful others in their midst. Unlike Commynes, there is no obvious reason why Caxton should be suspected of deceit himself. Perhaps he performed his tasks successfully without having to resort to deception.

If so, it is possible that Caxton pined for the “moralizing discussion” Strohm alludes to. Ferguson argues that there was a serious frustration and disillusionment in the fifteenth century reacting to the political conflict, foreign economic competition, as well as late fourteenth century anxieties about Lollardy. Coming out of this disillusionment was a distinct sentimentalism about knightly codes of conduct, and the general idea of chivalry. Knights were not ever supposed to deceive their lords, nor should they deceive anyone. Instead, they were supposed to live

honestly and dutifully, always in the name of their earthly lord and God. Writers like William Worcestre, who completed the *Boke of Noblesse* in the 1470s, and Thomas Malory, who wrote *Le Morte d'Arthur* in the fifteenth century as well, are examples of literary figures promoting chivalric ideals. Caxton printed both texts, and he was also a champion of other earlier English writers, such as Chaucer. In his prologue to the *The Order of Chivalry*, which he printed in circa 1484, Caxton clearly states that he is presenting the text to “noble gentlemen,” the successors of Arthurian knights, and he praises “manhode, curtosye, gentylnesse,” recommending that his audience turn to historical English figures like Richard the Lionheart for inspiration.⁷⁶

By placing Caxton in his contemporary political climate, and thinking about him as a product of his own time and situation, one can see how his own words and actions might have been motivated by his understanding of political deceit. Applying these concepts to the actual story and character of Reynard the Fox can be a trickier task. It is important to keep in mind several things about Reynard. First, Caxton did not invent the character. The story was already at least three centuries old

⁷⁶ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*. 80.

by the time he translated and printed it. Second, even the original creators of the Reynard cycle did not make up his character from scratch. Reynard is based on much older ideas and superstitions about the fox in the natural world, which is evident through older fables by writers like Aesop, and through texts about the natural world like bestiaries and encyclopedias.

Although *Reynard the Fox* was not born out of the political and socio-cultural climate of late 15th century England and its neighbors, that context is crucial to understanding how the text would have been received. There is little known concerning Caxton's decision to make *Reynard the Fox* accessible to his English audience besides what he himself wrote, and yet the fact remains that he did choose to do so. Evidently, Caxton believed that his audience would relate to the text, and reading his prologue and epilogue with other writings by his contemporaries, it would seem that he was introducing *Reynard* as part of the dialogue occurring in England at the time. Because of his concern of troubled politics, and deceit as a political tool, he almost certainly believed that the text would have an audience. As a merchant, he had to be aware of the possible popularity of what he sold, and so the fact that this powerful trader saw a market for *Reynard the Fox* only further serves to prove how

relevant the topic of deceit was in his time. Fundamental also to his contemporaries' interest in the text must also have been an assumption that they would be well-enough familiar with animal iconography so that they could correctly interpret the symbolism so vital to the text.

If Strohm was correct in conjecturing that late fifteenth century writing had moved beyond finding examples of immorality for didactic purposes, and instead was more interested in the complexities behind traditional immoral behavior like deception, then that could be applied to Reynard's deceptions as well. Reynard is the ultimate trickster. He is constantly operating within a cycle of making his victims trust him, and then taking advantage of them once they are vulnerable. He goes unpunished because he is so good at deceiving his victims that he can talk himself off the scaffold and back into the king's good graces. If late fifteenth century England was more concerned with a person's *vertue* and the ability to control one's own life, then *Reynard the Fox* would be a perfect example of that view. Reynard gets away with what he does through his own merits, not out of luck, or God's grace, or Fortune's favors.

V

CONCLUSION

In reading the fox literature written throughout the ages, we see that Reynard hardly ever changes. He plays the same tricks over and over again, and he is always meant to be read as an example of deceit. Because of his unchanging character, he provides such an interesting opportunity to understand not simply what sort of character he is, but how the interpretation of him illuminates something about whatever audience is reading him. When we first meet the fox in the older fables, he is represented as a largely flat character, whose function is to pull tricks, often in order to survive. He is a hungry animal looking for prey, and he uses his mind in order to outwit his food. And yet, this trait that could be characterized as a survival mechanism is demonized in the Middle Ages.

His motivations become less simple and more sinister, and each of his natural traits are given human and devilish motivations.

In fifteenth century England, Reynard gets taken up into political discourse, and we see how deceit can actually be a trait that is admired, if used successfully. The motivations are political, relating to power, and perhaps also financial. There definitely is something sinister about this character; he is used by Caxton as an example of what could happen to anyone. He is sinister, then, because he illuminates a potentially unpleasant truth: that it is far too easy to become either the deceiver or the deceived. Anyone can be so taken up by a desire for power and riches that he (or she) would turn to deceit – and murder, rape, and other crimes – to fulfill this desire, this “thoughtful self-interest.” At the same time, people are also at risk of being deceived, and they become the fools of the story if they are not more discerning, and if they get carried away with their own greed. Versions of the story continued to be popular in the sixteenth century in both England and the Low Countries. Many editions from this period included woodcuts, which had a tendency to circulate throughout both areas, indicating a continued exchange of material.

The story is taken up again in the nineteenth century, but for highly different reasons. In her article “Hunting Reynard: How Reynard the Fox Tricked His Way Into English and Dutch Children’s Literature,” Sanne Parlevliet discusses how animal stories made a transition to childhood literature in this time, a fact that illuminates both an interest in a particular kind of childhood innocence, as well as a highly prejudiced, evolutionistic kind of approach to the Middle Ages. Animals were equated to children – both were thought to be simple and innocent creatures – and in turn, the Middle Ages were thought to have existed as the childhood of the modern period, its citizens immature and not yet fully developed. In order to make the story appropriate for this nineteenth century approach to childhood, new versions were often drastically altered – sometimes by veiling the language in metaphor so as to disguise the gruesomeness of the story, and at other times completely changing the plot.

In the Netherlands, Reynard was taken up as a kind of national hero, and certainly as a representative of Dutch values. Its animal content made it ideal for the nineteenth century classroom, and it was further appreciated because the medieval *Van den Vos Reynaerde* was understood to be one of the greatest pieces of medieval Dutch literature. In order to

make the story more appropriate, certain aspects of Reynard's character were played up. One aspect, hardly seen elsewhere, was the idea of "Reynard the Family Man."⁷⁷ The family was the cornerstone of Dutch society in this century; in fact, Dutch culture has emphasized the importance of the nuclear family for centuries, and continues to do so to this day. It was in the home, and amongst family, that good moral character could be cultivated, and so it seemed natural that a text meant to teach strong values should include the family at the heart of it. In order to emphasize Reynard as a father, home scenes were extended, and the fox was depicted teaching his sons moral lessons. Often editions of *Reynard the Fox* included illustrations of the fox, dressed in a shirt and coat, playing with his small children, while his wife sits nearby, entertaining other children.

Even more intriguing was how Reynard was taken up as a national Dutch hero. Besides emphasizing the positive aspects of the story, such as family life, the Dutch seemed particularly interested in how the fox could use his wits in order to succeed over more physically powerful foes. As a

⁷⁷ Sanne Parlevliet. "Hunting Reynard: How Reynard the Fox Tricked His Way Into English and Dutch Children's Literature." (*Children's Literature in Education*. 2008. 39: 107 – 120.) 115.

culture that places great emphasis on the intellect, and as a small country, this interpretation of the fox's actions certainly does seem appropriate. It is also reminiscent of the Jewish Fox Fables discussed earlier; in these the fox often played the role of the trickster in order to survive, representing the persecuted Jewish minority living in Catholic Europe.

Fox stories have at times been manipulated in order to place greater emphasis on different aspects, but they have largely remained the same. The diversity of interpretation lends to the fox, and to Reynard more specifically, a more varied and dynamic history, even when he rarely did anything new. It appears that animal literature is successful – in that so many fables continue to be read through millennia - because of the reader's ability to grasp at the humanity that is present in the story, while being able to fill in her own understanding of the tale. The use of simple, almost allegorical, characters allows much room to fill in meaning particular to different cultures. This has made it possible for the trickster fox to be the cunning starving animal, the devil, the astute politician, the family man, and the national hero.

In his introduction to a 1912 edition of Aesop's Fables, G. K. Chesterton writes:

So in all the fables that are or are not Aesop's all the animal forces drive like inanimate forces, like great rivers or growing trees. It is the limit and the loss of all such things that they cannot be anything but themselves: it is their tragedy that they could not lose their souls. This is the immortal justification of the Fable: that we could not teach the plainest truths so simply without turning men into chessmen. We cannot talk of such simple things without using animals that do not talk at all.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ V.S. Vernon Jones. *Aesop's Fables: a new translation*. (Intr. G. K. Chesterton. Illus. Arthur Rackham. London: W. Heinemann; New York: Double Day, 1912.

VI

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