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David M. Raabe

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DIVERSITY IN THE NARRATIVE-MORALITAS RELATIONSHIP  
OF ROBERT HENRYSON'S  
THE MORALL FABILLIS OF ESOPE THE PHRYGIAN

A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Department of English  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
David M. Raabe

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Accepted for the faculty of The Graduate College of  
the University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

Graduate Committee

Name	Department
Glen A Newkirk,	English
Stanley Hubert	History
Refs. of Grad Faculty	
 Chairman	

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## Preface

Words most likely to be unfamiliar to those having less than a close acquaintance with Middle Scots are included in a glossary at the end of this paper. Definitions given are those which seem best to fit Henryson's usage in the quotations cited.

I wish to record my gratitude to Dr. Richard L. Lane for his wise counsel and for introducing me to Robert Henryson and others of the fascinating realm of medieval literature.

D.M.R.

Chapter I  
Introduction

Most of the recent critical comment on Robert Henryson's The Moral Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian has been directed toward the relation between the two parts of each fable: (1) the narrative itself and (2) the moralitas, an allegorical interpretation which follows each narrative. The moralitas interpretations do not always follow expected patterns and, in fact, may seem highly artificial and contrived when compared to the more natural and familiar animal stories which make up the fables themselves. It is probably this element of the unexpected in Henryson's interpretations of the thirteen fables that has called attention to the fable-moralitas relationship.

One of the most notable illustrations of this element is "The Taill of the Cok and the Jasp," in which a cock, scratching for something to eat in a heap of trash, finds a precious jewel ("jasp") which has been swept out of a house by careless servant girls. The cock displays marvelous worldly practicality in addressing the stone:

'O gentill Jasp! O rich and Nobill thing!  
Thocht I the find, thow ganis not for me.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>H. Harvey Wood, ed., The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson, (Edinburgh and London, 1958), lines 79-80 of the fables. All quotations from the fables refer to Wood's edition which is based, with a few modernizations, on the only surviving example of the Bassandyne printing of 1571.

Noting that the "cullour cleir" of the jasp may do fine "confort to the sicht," the cock reflects, however, that his particular concern is "to fill my tume Intraill" (l. 91). He remarks that the jasp belongs someplace where it would be "exaltit in worschip and in grit honour," such as a king's crown. Advising the stone to go improve its own station, the cock leaves "to seik his meit."

Only Henryson can fault such wisdom. In the moralitas, he points out to our surprise that the jasp actually betokens:

perfite prudence and cunning,  
Ornate with mony deidis of vertew,  
Mair excellent than ony eirthly thing,

(ll. 129-130).

which makes men reign in honor and enables them to conquer vices and spiritual enemies. The cock, then, in view of this, is a fool who mocks science. And, after all, "Quha is enemie to science and cunning, / Bot Ignorants, that understandis nocht?" (ll. 148-149).

No one can express amazement at the fact that Henryson constructs an allegorical interpretive framework over a literal tale; this is as common as any literary mechanism of medieval times.<sup>2</sup> What is more likely to surprise is the degree to which the poet departs from the expected interpretation. Sure to come into question as a result is the strength of the bond, if any, between fable and moralitas, and some critical attention has indeed been focused on this area.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., the bestiaries, translations of the Gesta Romanorum, etc.



Charles Elliott notes that Henryson's "overall method shows a dichotomy . . . which is due to the unfailing moralitas."<sup>3</sup> That there is a dichotomy is impossible to deny. Denton Fox, however, does not agree with Elliott that the moralitas is the cause of the division. Fox sees the fable-moralitas structure as the result or effect of a more basic cause rather than being the cause itself: "The fundamental conflict of the Fables, [is] the conflict between man's carnal and spiritual sides, between the natural and supernatural worlds, between the actual and the ideal. . . . This theme . . . determines the form and style of the Fables."<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, Aesopic fables have followed the adventures in narrative form of animals whose humanlike characteristics have become familiar throughout the world.<sup>5</sup> The moral tacked on the end is not exclusive to Henryson by any means, but seems, together with the often almost clinical amorality of the fables themselves and the shady natures of such characters as the fox, to have formed a particularly delightful and acceptable combination of entertainment and edification which has appealed to many people over the years.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Elliott, ed., Robert Henryson Poems, (Oxford, 1963), x.

<sup>4</sup>Denton Fox, "Henryson's Fables," ELH, XXIX, No. 4, (Dec. 1962), 356.

<sup>5</sup>See Marshall W. Stearns, Robert Henryson, (New York, 1966). Stearns reviews Henryson's sources for the fables (as far as have been determined) and presents summaries of pre-1949 criticism.

It has been noted that:

in the doings of beasts who act and talk as men, fables present the folly or shrewdness of mankind. In typical actions they exhibit common sense and worldly wisdom. . . . Medieval beast stories often have the form, and generally the effect, of satire. . . . With their clear types of human nature, their witty dialogue, their criticism of manners, they were popular for centuries in every country of Europe. . . . Without attacking romance these satires confront romantic idealism with the selfish shrewdness of real life.<sup>6</sup>

It is true one can learn a great deal about human nature and this world from the fables, especially through Henryson's genius for realistic narrative. But is this as important as what can be learned about the nature of God and the "next world" from the moralitas? Probably not--in the Middle Ages. Remembering that Fox pointed out the basic conflict of the Fables as between man's carnal and spiritual sides, we note his remark that

the break, in each poem, between the fable proper and the moralitas is of course a reflection of the gap between the actual and the ideal. But this gap is more apparent than real, since the moralitas and the fable are intertwined in innumerable ways. And though the moralitas is necessary to complete the fable, its abstractions do not supersede or cancel the tangible world of the animals. We are left, at the end, with a single whole: the fable and the moralitas, the visible world and its significance, have become one.<sup>7</sup>

Fox makes an excellent case for the existence of a

<sup>6</sup>Charles Sears Baldwin, Three Medieval Centuries of Literature in England, (Boston, 1932), 90.

<sup>7</sup>Fox, 356.

careful, meticulous calculation on Henryson's part to build and direct the entire fable toward the point to be made in the moralitas. By using the aforementioned tale of the cock and the jasp to prove his contention, Fox resolves one of the most apparently disparate fable-moralitas combinations of the thirteen.<sup>8</sup> Admitting that "the characters and incidents of [Henryson's visible] world, are solid and substantial in themselves," he is careful to warn us that "it is possible to make the mistake of thinking that the narrative parts of the fables, with their sympathetic and lifelike animals, are an end in themselves and should be read on a strictly literal level."<sup>9</sup>

Elliott does not agree that this would be a mistake. He states,

The fables take in the broad tradition of the beast-story and are self-sufficient. Preoccupied with narrative details [on Henryson's part?] yields its own reward in spite of the ever-present equating of animal with man for man's behoof. . . . Henryson exploits the narrative potential of his material so that it becomes independent and satisfying in 'literary' terms. From this the 'sentence' (lesson) is deliberately detached . . . [and shows] direct and blatant 'teaching'.<sup>10</sup>

Marshall W. Stearns, one of the most comprehensive of recent Henryson scholars, strikes a compromise in balancing fable against moralitas: "In his Fables [Henryson] relegates

<sup>8</sup>Fox, 347.

<sup>9</sup>Fox, 348.

<sup>10</sup>Elliott, x-xi.

most of his moral sentence to the end of each story, and it is difficult to escape the impression that he intends his fables to be at least as entertaining as they are instructive."<sup>11</sup>

A fourth critic also takes a middle-of-the-road view toward the relationship between fable and moralitas. Harold E. Toliver, noting that there is a "radical separation of moral judgment and human sympathy"<sup>12</sup> between moralitas and fable, respectively, allows that "at times, at least, the fiction as fiction requires special interpretation over and above what the moralitas says about it."<sup>13</sup> He apparently admits to finding some inconsistency in the Fables with the following statement: "The lack of absolute agreement between the moral and the medium is not as important as it might seem: each affords an insight into the other."<sup>14</sup> But Toliver's use of the term "medium" seems to imply that the narrative itself, in his opinion, is intended as a vehicle for conveying the moral lesson. The moral then would be the raison d'etre of the poem as a whole.

<sup>11</sup>P. 107.

<sup>12</sup>"Robert Henryson: from Moralitas to Irony," English Studies, XLVI, No. 4, (Aug. 1965), 301.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 302.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 305.

But rather than specifically assigning either fable or moralitas the role of independent entity, or even dominant element, Toliver observes that "we approach man the animal directly in the moral . . . and obliquely in the fable, and each approach has its own validity. . . . The dualism of form and content, in fact, like the awareness of the state as stage in Shakespeare, is capable of adding levels of awareness not possible without an explicit moral."<sup>15</sup> The moralitas, he maintains, "is designed . . . to reveal another dimension in the tale, a dimension which dissolves both sympathy [for the 'real' world of the fable] and moral judgment in an ironic solution. This is to say that moral judgment and a sense of human worth reinforce each other. . . . They fuse into one complex attitude rather than standing separate."<sup>16</sup>

In summary, concerning the relation of fable to moralitas, these three views comprise the alternatives offered: (1) an integration of the fable with, and indeed subordination to, the didactic intent of the moralitas, as substantiated by Fox, (2) independence of the animal narrative from the moralitas, as asserted by Elliott, and (3) the view that the two elements combine to make a kind of whole which is greater than the sum of its two parts, as expressed by Toliver.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 302.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 300.

There is, however, a fourth possibility which allows for the validity to a degree of all the above interpretations: simply that what Henryson has achieved in the Fables cannot be resolved to any great degree of certitude as long as the thirteen works are viewed as a whole, or characteristics of each, or any, are applied to all. That is, the literary result of the Fables as a work cannot be tied up in a "bundle" and labeled, except in a general manner.

The individual distinctions of the poems necessitate that they be examined as separate units, despite their brevity; and no deeper generalities can be made about them than can be made about any work of a similarly anthological structure--for example, the much longer and more complex Canterbury Tales. Any implications that what is said of one of the fables is applicable to all must be seriously questioned and scrutinized. Stearns, as most, is guilty of the generalization in such a statement as the following: "Opinion is divided as to whether the Testament of Cresseid or the Moral Fables of Aesop is [Henryson's] best poem."<sup>17</sup> "Work" might be a more appropriate designation for the latter; the fables are certainly not a single poem of sustained narrative interest as is the Testament. The dissimilarities of various of the fables, when examined, offer evidence of the reasonability of viewing them as anthology,

<sup>17</sup>p. 7.

rather than as a single "organism."

A principal point of difference between various of the fables is the degree to which they relate to one or the other of the two "justifications" for writing the fables as stated by Henryson in his prologue. One reason for their creation is, literarily, "to repreif the haill misleving / Off man be figure of ane uther thing" (ll. 6-7). The other purpose of the fables is entertainment:

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

(ll. 19-21)

One can expect to find in the fables, then, both didacticism and "merie sport." It would not be unreasonable to expect that, if all the fables were to be uniform, a poet of Henryson's capability could easily produce a proportionate blend of these two elements in each of his tales, tempering the lighter vein of the narrative with moral "sentence" in each case and consciously working to form a lasting bond between the two. But this he does not always do.

Viewing the Fables as a whole, as Henryson does in the prologue, one cannot dispute that the group contains a balance of entertainment and instruction. There exists plenty of each in the overall offering--and within certain of the individual poems. But it is not to be assumed that the poet achieved a balanced blend of fun and seriousness in every fable. At times his purpose in a given fable is almost

entirely to entertain. In other fables, he virtually ignores the comic possibilities of his situation to concentrate wholly on complaint or criticism of an abuse--social or moral. In the latter types, his tone is serious. In the former, his attempts at justifying the intentional lightness of the narrative are cursory and take place (appropriately) only in the moralitas.



## Chapter II

## 'Merie Sport'

"The Taill how this foirsaid Tod maid his Confessioun to Freir Wolf Waitskaith," called commonly "The Fox and the Wolf," exemplifies the fable in which Henryson's goal is primarily entertainment; and his product, something quite close to pure comedy. The word "foirsaid" in the title refers to the fox's appearance in the previous fable of the collection, "Schir Chantecleir and the Foxe."<sup>1</sup>

In the very first stanza, Henryson establishes the nature of his "hero." As the fable opens, it is day. The fox, being a predator by nature, does his hunting under the cover of darkness. The same point is made in another fable<sup>2</sup> in which Henryson describes the fox's entrance on the scene after being summoned out of a thicket of bushes: "Lowrence come lourand, for he lufit never licht" (l. 2294). Though the two foxes are not the same individual animal (ours is skinned at the end of the story and the other fable appears later in the chronology), it is clear that the two

<sup>1</sup>The fox is commonly called "Lawrence" or "Lowrence" as a familiar name which Wood says is the equivalent of the English "Reynard," 229. "Tod" as a traditional Scots generic term for "fox" predates the use of "tod" to mean a bushy clump or bundle by some 400 years: see OED, XI, 99; therefore, the supposed derivation, proposed by some critics, of the former term from the latter because of the fox's bushy tail is doubtful.

<sup>2</sup>"The Taill of the Foxe, that begylit the Wolf, in the Schadow of the Mone."

have similar personalities. Lawrence, here is one

Quhilk durst na mair with waitting Inter-  
mell,  
Als lang as Leme or Licht wes off the day,  
Bot, bydand nicht, full styll Lurkand he  
Lay.

(ll. 618-620)

When darkness falls, the fox is "Merie and glade that cummit  
wes the nicht" (l. 627).

He emerges from the woods in which he has been hiding and goes to a hill where he has a clear view of the night sky. There follows a detailed, stanza-long description of the positions of the planets in relation to the constellations of the zodiac (which will be examined later). The fox can read the heavens better than an ocean-going navigator, and he proceeds to do so:

But Astrolab, Quadrant, or Almanak,  
Teichit off nature be Instructioun,  
The moving off the hevin this Tod  
can tak,  
Quhat influence and constellatioun  
Wes lyke to fall upon the eirth adoun.

(ll. 642-646)

Seeing his fate clearly in the stars, the fox makes an accurate evaluation of his earthly role. He was born to do "wrong." "'With mischeif myngit is my mortall men'" (l. 651). The fox realizes that it is his destiny to sneak about by night and survive by preying on other animals. This is the way Nature has made him and he should, speaking from a natural and practical point of view, accept this role and make the best of it. The stratification of society and, indeed,

of the entire universe was a well-grounded fact in medieval times. Everyone was born to his particular level, and attempts to circumvent the natural order of things were to be looked on as folly or worse.<sup>3</sup> This "celestial pecking-order" forms part of a heritage from the Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, which man in the Middle Ages knew well.

The fox, recognizing his lot, should have let it go at that. Instead, he makes the mistake of feeling sorry for himself and laments aloud:

'Allace' (quod he), 'richt waryit ar we  
                   thevis,  
 Our lyifis set ilk nicht in aventure;  
 Our cursit craft full mony man mischevis;  
 For ever we steill, and ever ar lyke pure:  
 In dreid and schame our dayis we Indure;  
 Syne widdinek, and Crakraip callit als,  
 And till our hyre hangit up be the hals.'

(ll. 656-662)

He views his natural function as "misleving" and decides that the sooner he can find "sum Confessour" to shreve him clean of his "sin," the better off he'll be.

From a Christian point of view, the fox is doing the right thing. He believes he has sinned and desires absolution. The trouble is, he is not really a Christian; he is a fox. It is a fox's nature to steal. To ask absolu-

<sup>3</sup>A lesson learned painfully by some characters in the fables, e.g., the valiant but pretentious wether in "The Taill of the Wolf and the Wedder," to be examined later.

tion for one's natural function is ludicrous. Accordingly, his attempt at confessing--to Freir Wolf Waitaskaith who happens by--forms the first highly comic episode of several that befall the fox.

It may be dangerous to attempt to point out the most humorous parts of any story since humor can be a highly personal matter of taste, varying from individual to individual. But Henryson's fables have stood for five centuries, and in this particular narrative there exists very little deserving of such lasting esteem other than the "merie sport." Also, Henryson's apparent source for the climactic comic episode of this fable dates back still farther, suggesting further the universal appeal it has held. Critic John MacQueen points out that Henryson has built the fable around the single episode of the "transformed salmon," which was possibly borrowed from a Latin source.<sup>4</sup> If one can presume, then, to distinguish the humorous episodes, it may be said that the fox's confession is the first of three in this fable--and is Henryson's own.

Having first misinterpreted his own natural role, Lawrence's second mistake is picking the wolf to administer absolution. Obviously, a wolf is, on the very simplest level, an unlikely spiritual advisor. Henryson is aware of

<sup>4</sup>"His model may have been Fable XLVII, which appears in some manuscripts of the Romulus of Gualterus Anglicus," Robert Henryson, (Oxford, 1967), 145.

this since the poet himself has added the dialog as an original creation not appearing in the apparent source work.<sup>5</sup> And there are several indications in the work which, taken together, point up the incongruity, to an unmistakable degree, of the wolf's role. His very name, for example, "Waitskaith," means literally "one who lies in wait to do hurt."<sup>6</sup> Henryson gives the wolf all the outward trappings of his respectable profession, but he does it in such an obvious and peremptory way that we cannot help but think they are primarily for show. The wolf, states Henryson, "To preich and pray wes new cummit ffra the Closter / With Beidis in hand, sayand his pater noster" (ll. 668-669). And the poet points out that the wolf was "in science wonder sle," (l. 667) which may be taken two ways. If we assume "science" to mean learning in general and "sle" to mean "accomplished," the statement seems honorific. But in other connotations, "science," as a descriptive term for the "black arts," can actually be in opposition to religion; and "sle" can as easily mean "crafty" or "subtle." The phrase, therefore, has ironic connotations, and it is unlikely that the word-wise Henryson has overlooked this.

"'Welcome, my Gostlie ffather under God,'" (l. 672),

<sup>5</sup>See MacQueen, 147.

<sup>6</sup>Wood, 232.

Lawrence says to the wolf. "'Ye ar Mirrour, Lanterne, and sicker way, / Suld gyde sic sempill folk as me to grace'" (ll. 677-678). The wolf's true character is again reflected in the description of him voiced by Lawrence. The latter, bowing and scraping, mistakes--perhaps intentionally--the natural appearance of a wolf for signs of piety:

Your bair feit, and your Russet Coull off  
                   gray,  
 Your lene cheik, your pail pietious face,  
 Schawis to me your perfit halines.

(ll. 679-681)

It immediately becomes questionable whether or not the wolf actually takes seriously the fox's expressed desire for spiritual cleansing. The wolf's initial reply--accompanied by a chuckle--seems to imply that he will go along with the game but that something tells him the fox is acting in a manner that, for him, is out of character: "'Na, selie Lowrence' (quod the Wolf), and leuch: / 'It plesis me that ye ar penitent,'" (l. 684-685). Having further informed the wolf of his sore conscience and desire to repent, the fox is advised to "'sit doun upon thy kne'" (l. 691), for the purpose of giving confession.

At this point, Henryson injects himself into the narrative a bit obtrusively--for he is not present as storyteller at any other point of the fable, except obliquely in the first few lines. The poet states:

Quhen I this saw, [the confession] I drew  
ane lytill by,  
For it effeiris nouthir to heir, nor spy,  
Nor to reveill thing said under that seill.

(ll. 694-696)

Though this interjection is somewhat out of place, it does serve two distinct purposes. It speeds up the narrative-- for we have already heard the fox lamenting the fact that he is a "thief" and we needn't be exposed to a repetition. Secondly, the poet's attitude toward the sanctity of the confessional is quite a proper one and provides a sharp contrast to the complete impropriety which we will see displayed by the fox.

"'Art thow contrite, and sorie in thy Spreit / For thy trespas?'" asks the wolf (ll. 698-699) when the confession is completed. The fox's reply, though it is at least honest, shows that he is mentally unfit to be shriven of his sins as he supposedly desires. His nature is too strong:

'Na, Schir, I can not duid:  
Me think that hennis ar sa honie sweit,  
And Lambes flesche that new are lettin  
bluid;  
For to repent my mynd can not conclud,  
Bot off this thing, that I haif slane sa  
few.'

(ll. 699-703)

This fazes the wolf but little, and he proceeds to the next question: "'Will thow forbeir in tyme to cum and mend?'" (l. 706). The fox answers that he has no other craft; he is ashamed to beg, and cannot work, "'Yit wald

I fane pretend to gentill stait'" (l. 711). The wolf's reply to this second evidence of bad faith is astounding:

'Weill' (quod the Wolff) 'thow wantis pointis  
           twa,  
 Belangand to perfyte Confessioun.  
 To the thrid part off penitence let us ga:  
 Will thou tak pane for thy transgressioun?'

(ll. 712-715)

The wolf, in effect, is telling the fox that he has "struck out" on two of the requisites for absolution and is asking if he would care to try for a third. This outrage upon the sacrament of penance is continued by the fox, who allows that he might submit to a penalty, "'swa it wer licht, / Schort, and not grevand to my tendernes'" (l. 720). The wolf declares that he should forbear eating meat until Easter, and the fox agrees provided that he be allowed:

'To eit puddingis, or laip ane lyttill  
           blude,  
 Or heid, or feit, or paynches let me preif,  
 In cace I fall no flesch unto my fude.'

(ll. 727-729)

The wolf capitulates, giving him leave to do this twice a week because "'neid may haif na Law'" (l. 732). Having obtained his "forgiveness," the fox leaves the wolf and goes off to try his luck at fishing.

His subsequent action forms the second, and probably the climactic, comic episode. The fox is quickly and thoroughly frustrated in his half-hearted attempt to catch fish. He bemoans his lack of boat and net and is terrified by the high waves. As he is mourning his luck, he notices a herd



of goats. Reverting to his true nature, he steals a kid from among the herd--and runs with it to the sea. Then, taking the kid by its two horns,

in the watter outhir twyis or thryis  
He dowkit him, and till him can he sayne:  
'Ga doun, Schir Kid, cum up Schir Salmond  
agane!  
Quhill he wes deid; syne to the land him  
drewch,  
And off that new maid Salmond eit anewch.

(11. 749-753)

This baptismal sacrilege is the final effrontery by the fox to the laws of the church, and it cements the hopelessness of his case. The third and last comic episode is Henryson's "frosting on the cake."

Having eaten his fill, the fox repairs to a spot beneath a bush to bask his distended belly in the sun. As he strokes and admires it, he says recklessly, "'Upon this wame set were ane bolt full meit'" (l. 760). It would, indeed, be fitting that such a belly should have an arrow through it; the keeper of the herd which the fox has just plundered, sorrowful over the loss of the kid, appears and "obliges" the fox by drawing back his bow and pinning the thief to the earth with an arrow.

The dying words of the fox reveal Henryson at his humorous best:

'Now' (quod the Foxe), 'allace and wellaway!  
Gorrit I am, and may na forther gang.  
Me think na man may speik ane word in play,  
Bot now on dayis in ernist it is tane.'

(11. 768-771)

The fable proper ends with the herdsman withdrawing his arrow and taking the fox's skin for the theft of the kid and for "uther violence" that Lawrence has done.

The comedy, then, of the three episodes above should be evident. Are there elements of tragedy in the fable which might detract from the comic effect? The fox does lose his life in the end, and his "flaw" is certainly apparent: stupidity and presumptuousness in attempting to violate the plan of nature--to say nothing of his violation of the holy sacraments. But there can be little argument that the fable is principally comic. The fox remains a comedian even on his "deathbed." His demise is not out of proportion to his mistake. Indeed, he so flagrantly abuses laws of nature and of God that skinning is almost too good for him. His end is fitting to his actions in the fable--in contrast to other characters in fables less concerned with humor.<sup>7</sup> Twice the fox does the preposterous and is unabashed to see it taken for the reasonable--first, his specious penance and, second, his outlandish "transformation" of the kid. He should not be surprised when, for a third time, he challenges the laws of sense and probability--this time in suggesting his "wame" as a fit target for an arrow--and it comes true. The sudden appearance of his executioner is more justified logically than the fox's new-made fish.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., the innocent lamb in "The Tail of the Wolf and the Lamb," to be examined subsequently.

Critical comment on this fable is somewhat sparse. Stearns seems preoccupied with speculating on the personal danger to Henryson that might possibly have been incurred by the poet's illustration of the "abuses to which the act of confession may be put."<sup>8</sup> He points out, "it is certain that since the Scottish Reformation, in contrast to that of England, was considerably delayed, the poet was running counter to the explicit attitude of both church and state, and it is possible that he was incurring a greater risk than may at first be realized."<sup>9</sup> Stearns's latter statement is so finely worded as to be indisputable, but the suggestion that Henryson, under some degree of intimidation explicit or otherwise, may have purposely refrained from condemning specific church abuses is not borne out by literary history either in England or on the continent. Chaucer, writing before the Reformation in England, provides a most obvious case in point. His characterizations of the Pardoner and Friar, for example, in the Canterbury Tales, show that the English poet labored under no such compunctions as those Stearns implies for Henryson. The Pardoner is a despicable charlatan; and the Friar, like Freir Wolf Waitaskaith, is known for his easy penances. One of the most notable examples of poetic censuring of this kind occurs in Dante's Divine

<sup>8</sup>P. 27.

<sup>9</sup>P. 28.

Comedy. To illustrate, note the fact that the Italian poet assigns Boniface VII, a prominent pope, to one of the lowest regions of Hell for his sins and abuses against the church.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Henryson hardly implies that the kind of conduct which we get from the fox, or from his confessor, the wolf, bears any strict resemblance to actual practice. There are enough "laughs" in the sheer incongruity of their actions to assure the fable independence from any narrower satirical implications, intentional or otherwise. The mor-  
alitas avoids any mention at all of actual parallels to the religious violations of which the animals are so flagrantly guilty. Henryson's concern would seem to be with the humor.

The stanza describing the positions of the stars and planets draws some attention. Elliott describes it accurately as a catalog, the common medieval device of a lengthy list, and notes that it serves the practical purposes of displaying the fox's learning and identifying the warm season in which the action takes place (mid-July to mid-August since "Phebus" is in the sign of the Lion).<sup>11</sup> The pertinence to the fable of the latter observation is not elaborated upon.

MacQueen delves quite a bit deeper into the astrolog-

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<sup>10</sup>Among which were simony, usurpation, avarice, and prostitution of his office to political expediency. See L'Inferno, trans. Dorothy Sayers, (London, 1964), p. 35 and Canto XIX, l. 52, p. 189.

<sup>11</sup>p. 136.

ical significance to the fox of the celestial arrangement. He points out that "the favourable Jupiter . . . is in his own house, Sagittarius. Saturn, however, the greater infortune [sic], is in a position of particular power; he is in his house Capricorn, and at the same time, because his other house, Aquarius, is the ascendant, Saturn is Lord of the Ascendant."<sup>12</sup> MacQueen makes some other interesting observations which go far towards substantiating a conscious effort on Henryson's part to give the stars--which Lawrence knows so well--a direct bearing on the animal's fate: "Capricorn, it should be noted, is the Goat, and it is Lawrence's theft of a kid which leads to his death; Jupiter is in Sagittarius, the Archer, and Lawrence is killed by an arrow." The critic may be stretching the point, however, when he attempts to relate the position of Mercury to the fox's demise: "Mercury is in his exaltation in Virgo, and . . . Virgo has power over the abdomen, diaphragm, and intestines, the appetitive organs pierced by the goatherd's arrow."<sup>13</sup>

The fox's display of knowledge of the night sky does seem to relate in another way to his basic problem of attempting to run counter to his own nature. Lawrence is at home under the stars. It has already been shown that Henryson made much of the fox's being a nocturnal creature--

<sup>12</sup>p. 146.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

it is when he ventures into the light of day that he runs into trouble. His theft of the kid takes place in the daylight; and the point is well made by the poet that when Lawrence is killed he is baking his bloated belly in the bright sun. He should have waited for his own element--darkness.

In retrospect, MacQueen would seem to be quite correct in his observation, noted earlier, that Henryson has built the fable around the comic episode. The poet has added a good deal of comedy of his own with the result being a very ironic and funny story.

In order to remain consistent with his aims and with the pattern established for his fables, Henryson must, of course, attach a moralitas. He must at least make a token gesture at applying the story to real life for man's behoof, even if the poet knows--and we know--that the fable deserves its place with the others solely on the basis of its considerable comic value. What Henryson does add in the moralitas is cursory and platitudinous. The appendage is only twenty-one lines in length, the first four of which merely explain the fact--by this time well-established--that there is a lesson to be gained from such a fable:

This suddand deith, and unprovysit end  
 Of this fals Tod, without provision,  
 Exempill is exhortand folk to amend,  
 For dreid of sic ane lyke confusioun.

(ll. 775-778)

The poet institutes no direct allegorical equivalents; and, in fact, the only specific reference to any of the events of the narrative is an exhortation to the reader to beware the "suddane schoit"--like that received by the fox in his belly. Whereas in other, more didactic, fables Henryson is not loath to assign a significance to even the most seemingly inconsiderable detail,<sup>14</sup> in this one he chooses to bypass such pregnant possibilities as the wolf, the "salmon," and the herdsman, and to offer "sentence" in generalities only.

The principal message is one which medieval man must have heard at every turn, one which provided the accepted guideline for living and the predominant philosophies in the Middle Ages, and one which must surely have seemed a réchauffé by the late fifteenth century--the admonition to repent:

Ceis of your sin, Remord your conscience,  
Obey unto your God and ye sall wend,  
Efter your deith, to blis withouttin end.

(ll. 793-795)

Henryson suggests the fox as an example of one who exhibits too great a degree of concern for this "lustie lyfe," with the implied consequence for such individuals being something less than everlasting bliss in the next world. It remained, of course, for the thought-leaders of the Renaissance to reverse the dominant focus to the "here-and-now" from the "hereafter" although Henryson's warning shows

<sup>14</sup>In "The Preiching of the Swallow," e.g., chaff in the fields is representative of "gudis vane" (l. 1934).

that the sentiment existed in his time as well--as it always had to a greater or lesser degree.

Specifically, the poet's target in the moralitas consists of those who "now hes gude professioun, / Yit not repentis" (ll. 779-780). Technically, the fox fits this description--he never sincerely repents his thievery despite the pang of conscience he displays early in the fable--but he does go through the motions of cleansing his soul. The fox at least realizes his "need" for absolution and takes the first step--seeking out a priest--in apparent good faith. Thus, the allegorical parallel would seem more consistent had Henryson allowed the fox to represent, say, those who repent in word but not in spirit--rather than those who do not repent at all. Moreover, distorters or abusers of church solemnities would seem to provide a more compacted target for the moralist. But our concern must be, in the final analysis, not with what the poet might have done, but with what he does. And in this instance he chooses to "scatter his shot."

There is a further parallel between the moralitas and the character of the fox in the narrative. Henryson devotes one-third of his twenty-one lines to the observation that some people are, "throw consuetude and ryte, / Vincust with carnall sensualitie" (ll. 782-783). For them, even though they may be contrite for a time, as was the fox, there is no hope. They "can not forbeir, nor fra thair sinnis fle"



(l. 785). This thought is more closely related to the narrative than to the moralitas of which it is a part. The fox cannot repent even if he wants to; though in his case, it is not so much custom and habit that cause him to revert to his thieving ways as it is his nature--this is all foreordained in his horoscope. We can see how this moralitas picture of prisoners of habit is borne out--in practice at least--by the story of the fox. What Henryson does not do is integrate it with the rest of the moralitas. Following the seven lines devoted to this subject, the poet--instead of giving a warning to the reader against falling into habit, as we might reasonably expect--only mentions again the "suddane schoit" which can come at any time and "smytis sair withoutin resistance" (l. 790). The examination of habit, then, is a digression. Habit and repentance, like oil and water, don't mix. The actual "sentence" here is concerned with repentance, and this is something which those who are bound by custom cannot partake of, even if they want to. So the principal message here is short and--not sweet--rather, bland: a vapid generality compared to, say, the uniqueness of the moralitas of "The Tail of the Cok, and the Jasp." In the story of "The Fox and the Wolf," the moralitas seems little better than an unimaginative afterthought.

The comic side of Henryson's literary skill, so evident in this fable, is sufficient to stand him in good stead in

literary history. Says one scholar, "The essence of the humorous situations [in Henryson's fables] derives from his acute appreciation of illogical behavior and attitude, and it is this appreciation, combined with his narrative power, which makes Henryson the finest humorous and satirical poet of the Middle Scots period."<sup>15</sup>

The fable of "The Fox and the Wolf," as an allegory, stands in considerably pale contrast to the ingenious comparisons Henryson draws in other fables and by virtue of which the poet has gained singularity in an age opulent in its allegory. But the tale, as comedy, is eminent.

Another of the fables which is high on narrative interest and relatively low on moral significance is "The Taill of Schir Chantecleir and the Foxe," a reworking of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.<sup>16</sup> The rooster Chantecleir keeps a flock of hens for a widow. One day he is beguiled by the shrewd fox, who appeals to the rooster's vanity--he is "infect with wind and fals vanegloir" (l. 474)--as a crowing artist. The fox flatters the cock into closing his eyes and twirling around on his toes as he crows. When

<sup>15</sup>Donald MacDonald, "Verse Satire and Humor in Middle Scots," unpubl. diss., (Northwestern Univ., 1958), 106. MacDonald notes that G. Gregory Smith, an early twentieth-century Henryson editor, places the "Middle Scots period" in the latter half of the fifteenth century and the early decades of the sixteenth.

<sup>16</sup>MacQueen, 220-221, makes a good case for Henryson's tale being a direct adaptation of Chaucer's version of the traditional popular story.

he does this, the fox catches him up and runs for the woods, pursued by the widow's dogs. Chantecleir then takes his turn at fooling the fox, telling him that he will convince the dogs that he and the fox are friends if the latter will just release him. The fox does this and Chantecleir flies to safety in the nearest tree.

The tale is full of action and psychological byplay. Henryson's principal departure from the Chaucerian model consists in the addition of a dialogue among three of the hens for whom Chantecleir has served as "lemman:" Pertok, Sprutok, and Toppok. At first they lament his capture, but soon begin to rationalize that he was not such a great lover after all, and finally decide that, as a lecher and adulterer, the cock is only receiving his just due from a vengeful God. That Henryson felt called upon to amend Chaucer's version of the story with this picture of female inconstancy and backbiting may perhaps be attributed to the greater influence of this traditionally northern European view of woman upon the Scots than upon the literature of southern Europe, France, or England. But at any rate, this, like much of the rest of the narrative portion of the tale, bears little debt to the skimpy moralitas.

Henryson equates the cock with proud men and the fox with false flatterers. Flattery and vainglory, the poet advises his readers, are "vennomous" and should be avoided. In retrospect, the tale itself does little to drive this

point home. Neither Chantecleir nor the fox suffers to any considerable extent for his sin. Chantecleir receives a scare, and the fox misses a free meal. In fact, if a lesson were to be drawn from the narrative concerning flattery, the quality could be seen to work one way as well as the other. The cock uses flattery to get out of his predicament just as the fox used it to get him into it. So there is an inconsistency in the quality between fable and "sentence." This moralitas, like that of the story of "The Fox and the Wolf," seems little more than an addendum. The narrative prevails on its own merits.

Chapter III  
Social 'Misleving'

Two subsequent fables provide a marked contrast to the comedy of "The Fox and the Wolf." In "The Tail of the Scheip and the Doig" and "The Tail of the Wolf and the Lamb," Henryson concentrates on the more serious of his two objectives: reproving man's "misleving." Both fables involve members of the ovine family who are vanquished by wolves, and both depart utterly from the "merie sport" so predominant in either of the two fables previously discussed. Each portrays a miscarriage of justice in the narrative; and in each moralitas, Henryson elaborates at length on the allegorical equivalents of his beasts, in the society of his day.

In the one tale, a dog calls a sheep before the Consistory<sup>1</sup> for the purpose of "recovering" from him "Ane certaine breid." It is not clear at first that the sheep is innocent and the dog's claim is fabricated. Henryson writes "ane Doig, because that he wes pure, / Callit ane Scheip to the Consisterie" (ll. 1147-1148). We are not sure from the word order whether it is the dog or the sheep who is poor. But the equating of the sheep with "pure commounis" in the moralitas and a later reference to the dog as "fals" clarify the ambiguity of the poet's syntax. The sheep is

<sup>1</sup>"ecclesiastical court," Wood, 240.

being unjustly accused simply because he is poor.

"Ane fraudfull Wolff" is judge, and other members of the kingdom of beasts occupy other legal positions. Henryson introduces them one by one in a manner somewhat reminiscent of another of the fables, "The Sone and Air of the foirsaid Foxe, callit Father wer: Als wa the Parliament of fourfuttit Beistis, haldin be the Lyoun," called commonly "The Trial of the Fox." But rather than in an unembellished catalogue, as we are shown the animals in the latter fable, each member of the wolf's court holds a specific office. That things look dark for the sheep becomes increasingly apparent as we are told who he is up against:

Schir Corbie Ravin wes maid Apparitour,  
 Quha pykit had ffull mony Scheipis Ee;  
 . . . . .  
 The Foxe wes Clerk and Noter in the Causs;  
 The Gled, the Graip, at the Bar couth stand;  
 As advocatis expert in to the Lawis.

(ll. 1160-1176)

These formidable adversaries are "confidderit straitlie in ane band" against the sheep, and are intent on procuring the sentence. "Thought it wes fals, thay had na conscience" (l. 1180).

The sheep is not without some legal knowledge of his own. "Off his awin heid, but Advocate allone," (l. 1185) he "declines" the judge, the remote place, and the time of day that the court is meeting.<sup>2</sup> He cites the fact that the

<sup>2</sup>It is evening: the court was convened "Quhen Hesperus to schaw his face began" (l. 1174).

members of the court are all his "ennemies mortall:"

And ye, Schir Wolff, hes bene richt odious  
To me, for with your Tuskis ravenous  
Hes slane full mony kinnismen off mine.

(ll. 1191-1193)

The wolf asks the parties to choose two arbiters to decide "Quhidder the scheid suld answer in Jugement / Befoir the Wolff" (ll. 1206-1207), and they agree on the "Beir" and the "Brok." The processes followed by these arbiters are detailed in a stanza which reveals an underlying attitude on the part of the poet:

Of Civile Law volumis full mony thay revolve,  
The Codies and Digestis new and ald;  
Contrait, Prostrait Argumentis thay resolve,  
Sum objecting, and sum can hald;  
For prayer, or price, trow ye that thay  
wald fald?  
Bot hald the glose, and Text of the Decreis,  
As trew Jugis; I beschrew thame ay that leis.

(ll. 1216-1222)

They rule that the case should be heard by the wolf, and there is no appeal from their decision. Such phrases in the above as "trow ye that thay wald fald?" and "I beschrew thame ay that leis" reflect an irony in Henryson's view of the arbiters' actions, which are overtly presented as extremely thorough, but are really too fastidious for the poet's taste. "The implication is certainly of the letter that kills," says MacQueen.<sup>3</sup> The bear and the badger are acting in a manner too impersonally technical to be humani-

tarian. Stearns calls this list of authorities which the arbiters consult, a "satire."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is further irony in Henryson's subsequent comment on the decision: "On Clerkis I do it, gif this sentence wes leill" (l. 1229). On the surface, the poet seems to be saying that the legality of the ruling is not a matter for him to judge but would best be left to experts in law. The implication, however, is that the process is so obscured by preoccupation with esoteric detail that common sense does not apply. The use of the word "leill" seems significant to this view. It carries the connotations "honest" and "true," beyond that of legality. Henryson could have used such a term as "lauchfull," but he is not questioning the niceties of lawful validity. His implied concern here is for the justness of the finding. In this respect, he seems to find it wanting.

In contrast to the protracted pedantry of the arbiters, the Wolf renders his judgment immediately. And for Henryson, this time there is no qualification or indirectness in his expressed opinion of that judgment:

This Cursit Court, corruptit all ffor meid,  
 Aganis gude faith, Law, and eik conscience,  
 For this fals Doig pronuncit the sentence.

(ll. 1241-1243)

The wolf charges the sheep to pay to the dog either the bread it was claimed he owed or the equivalent of five shillings in silver. Henryson again makes clear his position:

<sup>4</sup>P. 30.



Off this sentence (allace) quhat sall I  
 say,  
 Quhilk dampnit hes the selie Innocent,  
 And Justifyit the wrangous Jugement?

(11. 1248-1250)

The guiltless sheep is obliged to go to a merchant of the town and sell the wool off his back to buy the bread the dog asks, following which the sheep, "Naikit and bair syne to the feild couth pas" (l. 1278).

It is a particularly bad time to be without one's wool since, as we are told later in the moralitas, it is the middle of winter. But the sheep's fate is not as severe as that of the lamb in "The Taill of the Wolf and the Lamb." In the latter story, again a wolf is the antagonist. This time, however, he participates to a greater degree; and the two adversaries confront one another without the presence of others; they are the only two characters in the fable.

The wolf is characterized in the very first line of the narrative as being "richt ravenous and fell" (l. 2616). He descends to the bank of a stream to quench his thirst. The lamb, "selie . . . meik and Innocent" (l. 2625), also drinks from the river, but downstream a "lytill space" from the wolf. Battle lines are drawn as soon as the wolf espies the lamb. He storms down on the poor animal with snarling teeth and an "awfull angrie luke:"

'thow Cative wretchit thing,  
 How durst thow be sa bald to fyle and bruke,  
 Quhar I suld drink, with thy foull slavinging?'

(11. 2631-2633)

The lamb quakes for dread; and since he "dar not say thair-off ye leid," points out as tactfully as could be done that the wolf's claim that he is polluting the stream is contrary to reason because of his downstream position:

'Thocht I can nocht, Nature will me defend,  
And off the deid perfyte experience;  
All hevie thing man off the selff discend;  
Bot giff sum thing on force mak resistance,  
Than may the streme on na way mak ascence,  
Nor run bakwart: I drank beneth yow far;  
Ergo, ffor me your Bruke wes never the war.

(11. 2644-2650)

The language used by the lamb is, as MacQueen notes, "strikingly unrealistic . . . wholly inappropriate to his age and situation,"<sup>5</sup> and is the language of natural philosophy and formal logic. If it is this, the speech at the same time conveys the most poignant pathos of the fable:

'Alswa my lippis, sen that I wes ane Lam,  
Tuitchit na thing that wes contagious;  
Bot sowkit milk ffrom Pappis off my dam,  
Richt Naturall, sweit, and als delitious.'

(11. 2651-2654)

The wolf scoffs at the lamb's language and compares it to that of the lamb's father, with whom the wolf has "a score to settle." He had warned the lamb's father that

'I suld be wrokkin on him, or on his barne,  
For his exorbetant and frawart pleid;  
Thow sall doutles ffor his deidis be deid.'

(11. 2660-2662)

The wolf's answer is, of course, a non sequitur. He ig-

<sup>5</sup>P. 131.

nores the fact that everything the lamb has said is true. In contrast, the lamb's next reply is directly pertinent to what the wolf has just said. He reminds the wolf what "haly Scriptour" says about the son bearing the iniquity of the father:<sup>6</sup>

'Off his awin deidis ilk man sall beir the  
           prais,  
 As pane ffor sin, reward ffor werkis rycht;  
 For my trespas quhy suld my sone have plycht?  
 Quha did the mis lat him sustene the pane.'

(ll. 2667-2670)

The wolf's rejoinder is the indignant taunt of one bested verbally: "'Yaa' (quod the Wolff), 'yit pleyis thow agane?'" (l. 2671). He claims the right to avenge twenty generations if he desires and lies that the lamb's father made a poison and spewed it into the wolf's water with his mouth. The lamb recognizes this as false and reminds the wolf that:

Thair suld na man, ffor wrang, nor violence  
 His adversar punis at his awin hand,  
 Without proces off Law and evidence.

(ll. 2680-2682)

The young lamb then shows himself to be every bit as versed in proper legal procedure as his kinsman in "The Taill of the Scheip and the Doig":

'Set me ane lauchfull Court, I sall compeir  
 Befoir the Lyoun, Lord and leill Justice,  
 And, be my hand, I oblis me rycht heir,  
 That I sall byde ane unsuspect Assyis.  
 This is the Law, this is the Instant gyis;

<sup>6</sup>Ezekiel xviii, as MacQueen points out, 132.

Ye suld pretend thairfoir; ane Summondis mak  
Aganis that day, to gif ressoun and tak.'

(ll. 2686-2692)

But the wolf will have none of it. "'Na' (quod the Wolff),  
'thow wald Intruse ressoun, / Quhair wrang and reif suld  
dwell in propertie'" (ll. 2693-2694), and he moves against  
the lamb with all the relentless suddenness of the wolf  
who found judgment against the sheep. He grasps the lamb  
by the neck:

The selie Lamb culd do na thing bot bleit;  
Sone wes he deid: the Wolff wald do na grace,  
Syne drank his blude, and off his flesche  
can eit.

(ll. 2700-2702)

Henryson's final reflection is ironic sarcasm:

Of his murther quhat sall we say, allace?  
Wes not this reuth, wes not this grit  
pietie,  
To gar this selie Lamb but gilt thus de?

(ll. 2704-2706)

MacQueen accurately discerns the logic of Henryson's struc-  
ture in the narrative. The lamb has made the three appeals  
which are open to him; but wrong and thievery, personified  
by the ravenous wolf, hold sway:

The lamb's words in general are absolutely pre-  
cise--the technical language excludes ambiguity.  
He defends himself by irrefutable appeal, first  
to natural law, secondly to moral law, and third-  
ly to civil and canon law, the three systems on  
which human society is built.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>P. 132.

The wolf's replies to the eloquent lamb are unsympathetic and brutal. For the lamb, the end comes quickly.

The prominent difference between the narratives of "The Taill of the Scheip and the Doig" and "The Taill of the Wolf and the Lamb" lies in the poet's handling of the conflicts. He has taken pains to make the former more of a "story" in the usual sense of the term. It is designed to hold the reader's interest more effectively than is the latter. At the beginning of the former we have the dog as antagonist. By nature, the dog is not a predator to the sheep; so we have no reason to believe the end of the story will see the sheep's demise--let alone that it is inevitable. Things begin to take on an ominous aspect as we are introduced to the members of the court--all enemies and antagonists of the sheep. But the protagonist gains some leverage when he shows himself to be well versed in the law. The setting is, after all, a "law court."

The suspense is further heightened and prolonged by the introduction of the arbiters and their lengthy deliberation. The fact that the bear and the badger are not direct enemies of the sheep precludes again any overpowering foreshadowing of doom. On the other hand, it might be noted that these two animals are sufficiently independent by nature--or even fierce--that they certainly would have nothing to fear from a sheep and would not be likely to hesitate in destroying one if it would be of any benefit. The climax of the narrative

is their ruling. The point at which it is delivered marks the shifting of the balance of the struggle in favor of the predators, and the resolution follows inevitably thence.

There is very little suspense, by comparison, in the lamb's story. The only setting is the outdoors--nature--and the poet presents it as nothing more. The wolf is the direct, and only, antagonist. As soon as he sees the lamb, he accuses the innocent beast of polluting the river, and the lines of conflict are drawn. The charge is fabricated by him--as the "bread debt" is fabricated by the dog--but the wolf announces, as early as the third stanza, his intention to kill the lamb. The only real question is how long he will allow the lamb to go on giving his futile speeches before the wolf puts an end to the poor creature. While the arbiters in the former story study and examine at great length legal details which are of questionable significance, a converse situation exists in this story. The lamb's legal argument--his final one--is quite valid, not to mention humane and just, unlike the arbiters' questionable decision. But the wolf dismisses it as insignificant detail. He says, "'That is ane point, and part of fals tressoun'" (l. 2695).

The sheep could have used such an advocate. He has not the least tolerance for legal "nitpicking." Neither the wolf, nor Henryson, wants any trifling to delay the swift and tragic resolution. For the wolf, this is natural because wolves eat lambs. The poet sees the narrative to a speedy

conclusion for the purpose of getting on with the moralitas as soon as possible. In this fable, as in "The Sheep and the Dog," Henryson's principal concern is in the moralitas. Unlike the story of "The Fox and the Wolf," the lesson to be learned from the narrative is more important than the narrative itself.

And in these fables, also in contrast to "The Fox and the Wolf," or the story of Chantecleir, there is no comedy, despite MacQueen's contention that the effect of the story of the sheep and the dog depends "largely on a contrast at once comic and sinister."<sup>8</sup> The sinister is obvious enough. However, the only possible comic element in the tale consists in the particularity of presenting animals endowed with the speech, intelligence, and institutions of humans: the basic premise of the fables and a "suspension of disbelief" which certainly the author and the audience both take for granted after, perhaps, the first fable or two. Moreover, the two fables under discussion are both so fraught with injustice and pain that any veil of "comedy" which may or may not have been imposed to lighten or provide contrast for the seriousness is so transparent here as to be invisible.

The allegories of both the fables are social rather than moral. In both cases, the common people are championed:

<sup>8</sup>p. 127.

This selie Scheip may present the figure  
Of pure commounis, that daylie ar opprest  
Be Tirrane men;

(ll. 1258-1260)

and in "The Wolf and the Lamb,"

The pure pepill this Lamb may signifie,  
As Maill men, Merchandis, and all laub-  
oureris,  
Of quhome the lyfe is half ane Purgatorie.

(ll. 2707-2709)

In the sheep's story, Henryson's mention of "tirrane men" is a bit of a puzzle. He does not specifically name the dog in the moralitas, but there are indications the dog is meant to be compared to such men. The "pure commounis" are oppressed by these men; and in the fable, the dog was the cause of the action against the sheep. Furthermore, the poet deals these men their "fate" and completes his sentence, and stanza, before moving on to state specific equivalents for the others. The "tirrane men," whose description could fit the dog, are those

quhilkis settis all thair cure  
Be fals meinis to mak ane wrang conquest,  
In hope this present lyfe suld ever lest;  
Bot all begylit, thay will in schort tyme  
end,  
And efter deith to lestand panis wend.

(ll. 1260-1264)

It is possible, however, that Henryson means to ignore the dog in the moralitas. The arbiters, for example, are given no allegorical assignations--perhaps because their action speaks for itself--and they are as prominent in the narrative



as, or more so than, the dog.

A case could certainly be made for the wolf to be considered tyrannical, but the wolf is given a specific social equivalent. Henryson likens him "to ane Schiref stout" and the raven "to ane fals Crownair." The fox and the kite have no direct counterparts in society; and the bear and the badger, as noted above, are not mentioned, their function evidently fulfilled in the narrative. The wolf, or sheriff, is one

Quhilk byis ane forfalt at the Kingis hand,  
And hes with him ane cursit Assyis about,  
And dytis all the pure men up on land.

(ll. 1266-1268)

The raven, or coroner, is an unscrupulous taker of bribes-- from either or both parties in a case. The poor man is at his mercy:

Fra [the time that] the Crownar haif laid  
on him his wand,  
Thocht he wer trew as ever wes sanct Johne,  
Slain sall he be, or with the Juge compone.

(ll. 1269-1271)

Following his mention of the traits of the antagonists, Henryson does an unusual thing, one which sets this fable apart from all the others. In the midst of the moralitas, he returns, in effect, to the narrative portion of the fable, allowing us to observe the circumstances sequential to the shearing of the sheep. Of the nature of the other characters, says Henryson,

as now I speik no moir;  
 Bot of this Scheip, and of his cairfull cry  
 I sall reheirs; for as I passit by  
 Quhair that he lay, on cais I lukit doun,  
 And hard him mak sair lamentatioun.

(ll. 1281-1285)

Here, for the first time, we are told that the events of the narrative have taken place during the winter season:

'Allace' (quod he), 'this cursit Consistorie  
 In middis of the winter now is maid,  
 Quhen Boreas with blastis bitterlie  
 And hard froistes thir fouris doun can faid;  
 On bankis bair now may I mak na baid.'  
 And with that word in to ane coif he crap,  
 Fra sair wedder, and froistis him to hap.

(ll. 1286-1292)

One might speculate on Henryson's motives for attaching this codicil. Perhaps the fate of the sheep as given in the narrative seemed insufficiently tragic. The sheep was, after all, allowed to live, unlike the unfortunate lamb. The poet may have felt the need for additional pathos to make certain the sympathies of his audience were correctly placed and sufficiently evoked. This reversion to the narrative certainly accomplishes such a goal.

There are two characteristically medieval conventions employed by Henryson here: the eavesdropping poet and the complaint against an "upside-down" world. The sheep's plaintive lamentation is described by Stearns as having with its intimacy, moral conviction, and definite trace of irritation . . . the force and flavor of a sermon by an old Scots preacher."<sup>9</sup>

Quaikand for cauld, sair murnand ay amang,  
 Kest up his Ee unto the hevinnis hicht,  
 And said, 'Lord God, quhy sleipis thow sa lang?  
 Walk, and discerne my cause, groundit on richt;  
 Se how I am, be fraud, maistrie, and slicht,  
 Peillit full bair:' and so is mony one.  
 Now in this warld, richt wonder, wo begone!

(ll. 1293-1299)

Henryson echoes the plea of the sheep with his own direct prayer to God:

Seis thow not (Lord) this warld overturnit is,  
 As quha wald change gude gold in leid or tyn;  
 The pure is peillit, the Lord [i.e., Laird]  
     may do na mis;  
 And Simonie is haldin for na syn.  
 Now is he blyith with okker maist may wyn;  
 Gentrice is slane, and pietie is ago,  
 Allace (gude Lord) quhy thoillis thow it so?

(ll. 1307-1313)

The poet's rhetorical question which followed the killing of the lamb by the wolf is applicable also to this situation and expresses the same thought as the last lines above:

"Wes not this reuth, wes not this grit pietie[?]" (l. 2705).

The poet notes that God has sent troubles of many kinds by way of telling those who abuse their positions of power to mend their ways; but the hunger, war, and pestilence have effected no change. The only alternative left to the poor people is to "pray to the, sen that we are opprest / In to this eirth, grant us in hevin gude rest" (ll. 1319-1320).

MacQueen states that this moralitas "stands somewhat apart from all the other Moralitates of the Fabillis. Henryson scarcely pretends to offer such an allegorical interpretation of the events of the Taill as is found in The Cock

and the Jewel"<sup>10</sup> The critic contends that to compare the sheep to a commoner is "to state the obvious; it is not in any recognized sense of the word allegory" to say that the raven is a coroner when he has already been described in the narrative as apparitor of the Consistory.<sup>11</sup> MacQueen sees this moralitas as an extension--rather than an interpretation--of the narrative, to include civil as well as ecclesiastical courts.

If this view is accurate, then the unique relationship here between narrative and moralitas adds further validity to the thesis under consideration: that the fables follow no single pattern of construction, but are individually conceived and executed. There is a factor that must be considered, however, before this entire fable can be taken as a double-barreled volley aimed at the two legal systems of the day. There is no doubt that Henryson sees evils in the civil courts. He specifically attacks them in the moralitas. The narrative, though, may be a "horse of a different color."

It is problematic whether very much specific intent can be assumed from Henryson's narratives. Time and again, the poet turns the tables on the reader; when we expect him to make a logical equivalent in the moralitas of a certain

<sup>10</sup>P. 130.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

fable, he will make a comparison with something completely different and unforeseen. The cock who finds the jewel, it will be recalled, is not practical at all, as we might naturally expect from his actions in the story. He is, we are told in the moralitas, ignorant. If we know little else about Henryson, we know that he is unpredictable. If the poet's target in "The Sheep and the Dog" is the civil court, he was obliged to place his narrative in some sort of corresponding situation or setting. Is the fact that he has chosen to make his animals officers in a consistory court any more an indication of an attack on those courts than the likelihood that, in "The Fox and the Wolf," his dressing the wolf in the garb of a friar constitutes an attack on friars? There would seem to be room for doubt. If the poet is not "attacking" the consistory, but merely using it as a base for launching a foray on the civil, then there is more "allegory" to the moralitas than MacQueen allows.

His argument--and thereby the contention that the fables are individualized--has critical support, however. Stearns states that in this fable, "Henryson criticizes adversely both the civil and the ecclesiastical courts."<sup>12</sup> And Wood cites an eighteenth-century critic who writes "'It is remarkable that the whole satire of the fable is aimed at the ecclesiastical judge, whereas the application is to the civil.

<sup>12</sup>p. 29.

Henryson [sic] probably stood more in awe of the court spiritual than of the temporal."<sup>13</sup> There is some agreement, then, that the poet is being critical of the church court as well as the civil. Henryson's mention of simony in the moralitas may be a further indication.

Abuses of the civil legal system also form a part of the ills bemoaned in the allegory of "The Wolf and the Lamb." We have already seen that the lamb signifies poor people, such as tenant farmers, merchants, and laborers. There is no one-to-one relationship with the wolf, though. He be-tokens, says the poet,

fals extortioneris  
 And oppressouris of pure men, as we se,  
 Be violence, or craft in facultie.

Thre kynd of Wolfis in this world now  
 Rings:  
 The first ar fals perverteris of the Lawis,  
 Quhilk under Poete termis falset mingis,  
 Lettand that all wer Gospell that he  
 schawis;  
 Bot for ane bud the pure man he over-  
 thrawis,  
 Smoirand the richt, garrand the wrang  
 proceed:  
 Of sic Wolfis hellis fyre sall be thair  
 meid.

(ll. 2711-2720)

Changes of tone are not uncommon in Henryson's moralitates, and one exists within this one. Following the explanation of the first kind of "wolf," Henryson addresses himself directly to such individuals:

<sup>13</sup>p. 241, citing Lord Hailes, Ancient Scottish Poems, 1770.

O man of Law! let be thy subteltie,  
 With nice gimpis, and fraudis Intricait,  
 And think that God in his Divinitie  
 The wrang, the richt, of all thy werkis  
     wait:  
 For prayer, price, for hie nor law estait,  
 Of fals querrellis se thow mak na defence;  
 Hald with the richt, hurt not thy con-  
     science.

(ll. 2721-2727)

The last three lines may be contrasted to the poet's description of the pedantic arbiters in "The Sheep and the Dog." "For prayer, or price, trow ye that thay wald fald?" (l. 1220), the poet asks rhetorically. The trouble with the arbiters' action was that they adhered too closely to the letter of the law when the action being brought was unjust to start with. As the poet tells the man of law here, the time to display unimpeachable honesty is when tempted to embrace "fals querrellis."

It will be recalled that the knowledgeable lamb presented three arguments against the wolf. The last was an appeal to civil law. Correspondingly, the perverters of the civil law are the first to fall under Henryson's disapprobation. MacQueen contends that "thereafter, however, the Moralitas moves almost completely away from the action of the Taill and concerns itself entirely with unjust dealings between landlord and tenant farmer."<sup>14</sup> But, on the contrary, an examination of the nature of the wrongs deplored in the moralitas shows them to be closely related to the

<sup>14</sup>P. 134

other pleas of the lamb, treated in reverse order. The second type of "wolf" abuses the moral law to which the lamb appealed secondly:

Ane uther kynd of Wolfis Ravenous,  
 Ar mychtie men, haifand full grit plentie,  
 Quhilkis ar sa gredie and sa covetous,  
 Thay will not thoill the pure in pece  
           to be;  
 Suppois he and his houshald baith suld de  
 For falt of fude, thairof thay gif na rak,  
 Bot over his heid his mailling will thay  
           tak.

(11. 2728-2734)

It is morally wrong, when one has a sufficiency of worldly goods, to take from the poor man and cause him to become a beggar. In another change of tone, Henryson addresses a stanza to these mighty men, pointing out the wrong:

Thow hes aneuch; the pure husband richt  
           nocht  
 Bot croip and caff upon ane clout of land.  
 For Goddis aw, how durst thow tak on hand,  
 And thow in Barn and Byre sa bene, and big,  
 To put him fra his tak and gar him thig?

(11. 2737-2741)

The poet does not specifically state, as MacQueen assumes, that this mighty man is a landlord. The assumption could be based on an interpretation of "tak" as "holding," with the specific meaning of a leased holding of land, rather than-- in the broader sense--that which belongs to the poor man by right, in general.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of whether the second type of wolf is a landlord, a creditor, or some other kind of oppressor, the point is that what he does to the common man

<sup>15</sup>The OED notes a later usage of the term in the sense of something earned as a payment or proceeds of a business, XI, 49.



is morally wrong. This matches the lamb's second argument.

The third type of "wolf" is definitely a laird. His abuse has to do directly with the relationship between tenant and owner. He takes rent for a certain period of time from the farmer,

Syne vexis him, or half his terme be gane,  
With pykit querrellis for to mak him fane  
To flit, or pay his Gressome new agane.

(ll. 2746-2748)

Henryson calls to mind the natural hierarchy of the world by mentioning that the land which these lairds "own" is in reality theirs only "be Goddis lane." And for the misdeeds against the poor tenants, "Thow suld dreid for rychteous Goddis blame" (l. 2760). Considering the medieval view of the world as a naturally ordered place, any artificial interference by man--such as the laird's unjust action in wrongfully disrupting a tenant farmer's contract--would be a violation of nature.

The first argument of the lamb in the narrative was couched in terms of natural law. The wolf had accused him of defiling the brook, even though the lamb's drinking position was downstream. Water cannot run uphill, so the wolf's argument was a corruption of natural law. A further abuse cited by Henryson in the moralitas affirms that the landlord is similarly guilty of upsetting the natural order of things. Speaking of the commoner, the poet states: "his Hors, his Meir, he man len to the Laird, / To drug and draw in Court

or in Carriage" (ll. 2749-2750). The poor man's animal, whose purpose in life is more naturally to work in the field, is wrested from his rightful place and impressed into service in a foreign environment. Such an anomaly verifies Henryson's complaint in the moralitas of "The Sheep and the Dog" that "this world overturnit is." The wolf, in the narrative, faults the lamb for trying to impose reason "quhair wrang and reif suld dwell in propertie." He assumes a complete reversal of the way things actually should be. As has been noted, the wolf is a natural predator to the lamb; so in actuality, he is right. It is anomalous for a lamb to appeal to a wolf not to perform his natural function: eating the lamb. Animals are not like man. They have no faculty for higher reason. Since man does, when he acts like an animal, the world is overturned. In such a situation, it is fitting for the poet to come forward to point out the wrong. Henryson is in keeping with the purpose outlined in the prologue to

Put in exempill, and in similitude,  
How mony men in operatioun,  
Ar like to beistis in condition.

(ll. 47-49)

Henryson ends the moralitas of "The Wolf and the Lamb" with a prayer which reflects his own faith in natural law and order:

God keip the lamb, quhilk is the innocent,  
 From Wolfis byit and fell exortioneris;  
 God grant that wrangous men of fals Intent  
 Be manifestit, and punischit as effeiris.  
 And God, as thow all rychteous prayer  
     heiris,  
 Mot saif our King, and gif him hart and  
     hand  
 All sic Wolfis to banes out of the land.

(11. 2770-2776)

British history tells us there was a traditional bond between the king and the commoners especially apparent when the nobles began to exceed their authority either upward or downward in the social order. And it is only natural, when some part of the order malfunctions, to appeal to someone higher in the chain of command to rectify things-- in this case, God, and his deputy, the king.

Chapter IV  
Moral 'Misleving'

There are occasions in the Fables when Henryson exhibits in his art the same kind of balance and harmony which, in his more serious fables especially, he seeks so intensely in the world. His skillful blending of his own talent for comic invention, the humor inherent in the hypothesis of the beast fable, the medieval penchant for sincere homily, and a strong sympathy for mankind, can result in literary achievement significant for any era--scholastic or humanist, humorless or light of heart. Several of the fables display such a proportioned tendering of the poet's qualities and talents, with the result being an accomplishment which probably surpasses in total effect either his primarily comic or predominantly solemn poems.

If one were to pick a single general theme in Henryson's fables, it could well be order in the world. This applies, first, not only to the poems in which he makes an overt call for a remedy to some specific disorder in the social system, but also to other kinds of his fables. In his comic works, the incongruity of the situation will usually also have its basis in some distortion of the harmony of nature--a fox, for instance, who thinks he can change a kid into a salmon, as we have seen. And, in a third basic approach the poet takes in the fables, he will point out the wisdom of an

"internal adjustment" of some sort which will make life go more smoothly for a given character. (Or, conversely, he may dramatize the folly of "bucking the system.") At the basis of each approach is a profound respect for harmony in God's world.

"The Tail of the Wolf and the Wedder" is one fable which is directed at correction of a wrong which exists commonly within the moral makeup of an individual--potentially the reader. Therefore, it exemplifies the third approach, outlined above, toward the goal of natural order: rectifying one phase of man's moral "misleving." At the same time, it represents the type of fable in which Henryson's artistic effort attains an equilibrium. It is neither all tragedy nor all comedy. We have several of the traits which mark Henryson's most mature genius.

He opens the fable with a description of the effectiveness of the efforts of a dog which guards a shepherd's flock:

Full war he wes to walk his fauld but weir,  
 That nouter wolff, nor wild cat durst  
     appeir,  
 Nor foxe or feild nor yit no uther beist--  
 Bot he thame slew or chaissit at the leist.

(ll. 2458-2460)

The dog's sudden death in the second stanza thickens the plot. Without protection for his fold, the shepherd laments his bleak prospect:

'For now to beg my breid I may be boun,  
 With pyikstaff and with scrip to fair off  
     toun,

For all the beistis befoir bandonit bene  
Will schute upon my beistis with ire and  
tene!'

(ll. 2473-2475)

Lest Henryson be accused of allowing the shepherd to overemote, the poet deftly inserts two lines which tend to make the shepherd's words acceptable and at the same time involve the reader more closely in his problem: "It wald have maid ane mannis hart sair to se / The selie sheiphirdis lamentatioun" (ll. 2469-2470).

The scene is set for the wether of the title to come to the rescue. This ingenious animal suggests that the shepherd flay the skin from the dead dog, and "'Syne sew it on me--and luke that it be meit, / Baith heid and crag, bodie, taill and feit,'" (ll. 2481-2482). Disguised in the dog's skin, the wether will then guard the fold and pursue the wolf if the latter should dare to intrude. The shepherd is taken with the idea. His reaction constitutes one of the frequent instances in Henryson's work which demonstrate the poet's keen feeling for the warmth and piquancy of human character:

'This come of ane gude wit;  
Thy counsall is baith sicker, leill and  
trew;  
Quha sayis ane sheip is daft, thay lieit  
of it.'

(ll. 2490-2492)

The wether does an effective job in his dog disguise until a starving wolf steals a lamb in desperation. As the wolf runs away, the wether gives chase. The wolf,

fearing now for his life, discards the lamb "to mak him lycht," but the wether continues his pursuit, scaring the wolf so badly that "the wolff for fleidnes fylit the feild" (l. 2540).

As the two run through the woods, a briar bush chances to snag the dog-skin and tears it from the wether's back. The wolf realizes he has been fooled. Delivering another of Henryson's colorful lines, he swears revenge:

'Na,' quod he, 'is this ye that is sa neir?  
Right now ane hound and now quhyte as ane  
freir;  
I fled over-fer and I had kennit the cais:  
To God I vow that ye sall rew this rais!'

(ll. 2549-2552)

Confronting the defrocked wether, the wolf demands an explanation for what the sheep has done, to which the wether replies, "'Maister,' quod he, 'bot to have playit with yow; / I yow requyre that ye nane uther trow,'" (ll. 2558-2559). The wolf recounts what has happened and asks the wether:

'Quhether call ye this fair play or nocht--  
To set your maister in sa fell effray  
Quhill he for feiritnes hes fylit up the  
way?'

(ll. 2564-2566)

In reply, the wether minimizes his offense and asks for mercy:

'My mynd wes never to do your persoun ill;  
Ane flear gettis ane follower commounly,  
In play or ernist--preif quhasaever will.  
. . . . .  
Ane full gude servand will crab his maister  
anis.'

(ll. 2575-2580)

The wolf, unimpressed by the wether's proverbs and still angry, ends the fable by wringing the wether's neck: "Than be crag-bane he him tuke / Or ever he ceissit, and it in-schunder schuke" (ll. 2586-2587).

The moralitas is short, only twenty-eight lines in length; but it is long enough to demonstrate the usual Henrysonian twist. We are told that the wether was, himself, responsible for his own sad end and that the wolf has served, not in any blameworthy capacity, but merely to administer the just due of the former:

Heir may thow se that riches of array  
 Will cause pure men presumptuous for to be;  
 Thay think thay hald of nane, be thay als gay,  
 Bot counterfute ane lord in all degre.  
 Out of thair cais in pryde thay clym sa hie  
 That thay forbeir thair better in na steid--  
 Quhill sum man tit thair heillis over thair  
 heid.

(ll. 2595-2601)

Can this be right? The wether has certainly gained a measure of reader sympathy. One cannot help but admire his inventiveness at conceiving the idea of donning the dog skin. His timeliness in coming to the rescue of the distraught shepherd and his bravery in taking it upon himself to guard the flock from beasts also help earn for him our respect. And one must gleefully applaud when he scares the marauding wolf to the point of defiling the path.

It may appear that Henryson is being merely perverse in causing a certain response in the narrative and then apparently contradicting that response in the moral epilog.



We are hard pressed to condemn the valiant wether and it is hard to accept the assertion that we may have made an incorrect character judgment. However, a closer look at certain parts of the narrative reveals that Henryson was indeed leading to just such a conclusion as that of the moralitas: namely, that the wether was guilty of being too proud and of overstepping his natural capacity.

Viewed in retrospect, the words of the sheep, when he first proposes that he guard the fold, do seem a bit presumptuous:

'All haill the cure I tak it upon me  
 Your scheip to keip at midday, lait and air.  
 And he [the wolf] persew, be God, I sall  
           not spair  
 To follow him as fast as did your doig.'

(ll. 2485-2488)

The point at which the dog's skin is sewn in place marks the actual ascent of the wether beyond his station. He proudly announces, "'Now off the wolff,' quod he, 'I have na dreid'" (l. 2495). His mention of the wolf, who has not appeared at this point, foreshadows his demise at the hands of that animal.

Though he now looks like a dog, the wether is not a dog; and Henryson does not let his reader forget this fact. The poet's choice of words shows this. In describing the wether's actions, he says that in all things the animal "counterfait" the dog. And in relating the wether's effectiveness in fending off assorted wild beasts, Henryson says, "For he wes

mekill and semit to be stout" (l. 2508). The key word is "semit." The poet does not say that the wether actually was stout.

And a few stanzas later, Henryson employs a kind of dramatic irony to remind us once again that the wether is pretending to be something he is not. He is in the act of pursuing the wolf, who flees, fearing for his life: "Thair-foir he spairit nowther busk nor boig, / For weill he kennit the kenenes off the doig" (ll. 2530-2531). The wolf is afraid of the dog, but how different his feeling, and his actions, would be if he, like the reader, only knew that his pursuer was not a dog at all, but a mere sheep!

As the wolf discards the stolen lamb, Henryson gives us yet another indication of fatal pride from the lips of the wether:

'Na,' quod the wedder, 'in faith, we part  
not swa:  
It is not the lamb bot the that I desyre;  
I sall cum neir, for now I se the tyre.'

(ll. 2534-2536)

The wether has forgotten that the reason he took over the dog's job in the first place was to guard the flock. Enspirited by his new "identity," he allows his very nature to change and almost seems to believe that he actually is a dog. What he would have done had he caught the tiring wolf doesn't seem to occur to him.

The direction in which Henryson is attempting to steer the narrative becomes clear. He must have had the moralitas

in mind when he wrote the first part of the fable. Fox's contention--that the theme of the moralitas, contrary to first impression, is not a reversal of the fable but a very logical extension of it--gains support, at least in this poem.<sup>1</sup> Henryson's intention is apparent. The question is, does he succeed?

To arrive at an answer, one must evaluate the total effect of "The Taill of the Wolf and the Wedder" and disregard variations in method which the poet uses in other of the fables. It is difficult to dispute the lesson of the moralitas on the surface. Pride and presumptuousness can indeed be serious faults when they cause one of "low station" to venture a precarious climb out of his element, especially in the severely stratified medieval society. From the point of view of the church, pride was the basic sin. We can appreciate Henryson's warning against it.

But there is a problem here for the modern reader. In the story, the only real contrasting character to the wether is the wolf; and he is by far more easily labeled as "evil," or at least blameworthy. The modern reader, with instinctive compassion for the under"dog," has trouble accepting the poet's effort to wrench sympathy away from the wether--even after we are made aware of his flaws and misdeeds--because he still "looks good" compared to the wolf. By comparison, the cock in "The Taill of the Cok, and the Jasp"

<sup>1</sup>Fox, 356.

does not come close to the wether in arresting our sentiment in his misfortune. The worst thing that befalls the cock is that he misses out on some personal gain--which he really didn't deserve in the first place--because he is too "stupid" to realize the value of the precious stone. The wether, on the other hand, is slaughtered where he stands, and the pathos of his death nearly overshadows the tragic shortcoming of his nature which brings it about. He tends to remain, in our "memory," a valiant and basically good-hearted protector of right who wreaks vengeance on a thief which few would not take pleasure in doing themselves if given the chance.

Henryson, the expert narrative artist, knew it was extremely "good theater" to have the wether scare the wolf to the point of defiling the path. One can almost hear his medieval readers laughing aloud at this point of the story. It is a better-inspired device than anything Henryson offers to prove it wrong, and no doubt many would say that it would be worth getting one's neck wrung for the satisfaction of scaring the defecation out of the wolf. The poet is hard put to it to live it down.

He attempts to neutralize the effect by running the point into the ground. After the first mention that the "wolff for fleidnes fylit the feild," Henryson reminds us of this same fact no fewer than four times in the last twenty-two lines of the narrative. The wolf asks the wether:

'Quether call ye this fair play or nocht--  
 To set your maister in sa fell effray  
 Quhill he for feiritnes hes fylit up the  
           way?

'Thryis, be my saull, ye gart me schute  
           behind--  
 Upon my hoichis the senyeis may be sene;  
 For feiritness full oft I fylit the wind.'

(ll. 2564-2569)

And he reminds the wether again, before wringing his neck,  
 "'I schot behind quhen thow overtake me ever'" (l. 2584).  
 Henryson seems to be hoping that the fact will wear thin  
 with the reader, that the repetitions of the incident will  
 get a little bit tiresome and not seem so funny. The poet  
 almost evokes some pity for the wolf--which is not exactly  
 his goal here--but any feelings for the discomfort of the  
 predator must dissolve when he subsequently murders the  
 wether.

The fact that Henryson was consciously swinging the  
 pendulum of attention from the wether to the wolf can also  
 be noted in the fact that there is a dividing point in the  
 story. After the wether begins his pursuit of the wolf,  
 (l. 2517), the poet focuses the narrative fully on the  
 wolf--his flight, his discovery of the wether as an imposter,  
 and his lengthy confrontation speech. The point of view, in  
 the first half of the fable, centers on the shepherd and  
 the wether; but the last half belongs to the wolf. It is  
 intruded upon only by the wether's seven-line rationalization  
 and plea for mercy.

The reason for the poet's "abandonment" of the wether

during the time of the latter's misfortune could possibly be attributed to artistic necessity. Had Henryson dwelt at length on the anguish or agonies of the wether's final moments, it is conceivable that the sheep might have become the object of more sympathy than the poet would have desired--even among a medieval audience. The readers of Henryson's time were no doubt more aware to begin with that it is foolish for one to overreach his born social stratum. By taking care not to let us get too close to the wether, Henryson makes it easier for us to understand how the foolish animal was at fault.

In spite of the uniqueness of the wether's idea of impersonating a dog--or perhaps because of it--the sheep must be condemned for upsetting the ordered "chain of being." By artificially becoming the one who frightens the wolf, instead of vice versa as it should be, the wether oversteps his bounds. He is as guilty of upsetting natural law as is the wolf in "The Wolf and the Lamb" who would have us believe that a river could run uphill. Both do their small part in contributing to an "upside-down world."

While in the latter fable, the unreasonable wolf was the perverter of natural law, the wolf in the fable under discussion is but a vehicle for conveying the poet's theme of order. He is a victim, in a sense, of the distortion effected by the wether--just as the innocent lamb was a victim of the ravenous wolf in the other story. In that moralitas,

Henryson's targets, it will be recalled, were the three kinds of "wolves." In the wether's story, the wolf comes in for no such criticism. The poet is interested this time in pointing out the moral wrong perpetrated by the individual of lesser stature rather than deploring a social abuse inflicted upon him. Thus, the overall approach is different:

Thairfoir I counsell men of everilk stait  
 To know thame self, and quhome thay suld  
     forbeir,  
 And fall not with thair better in debait;  
 Suppois thay be als galland in thair geir,  
 It settis na servand for to uphald weir,  
 Nor clym so hie, quhill he fall of the  
     ledder;  
 Bot think upon the Wolf, and on the wedder!

(ll. 2609-2615)

The specific audience at which the object lesson is aimed is different this time; but the theme is the same--the harmony and order of the world. The nobility or the lairds come in for no castigation here. The target is the individual of lower stature, whom Henryson sees as also a potential threat to the proper hierarchy.

"The Taill of the Uponlandis Mous, and the Burges Mous" is of a kind with the wether's story. Two mice are sisters, "Of quham the eldest dwelt in ane Borous toun, / The uther wynnit uponland weill neir" (ll. 164-165). The town mouse, who has a relatively plenteous and free life, one day thinks upon her sister, whose existence in the country is accompanied by hunger, cold, and other distress, "And langit for to heir of hir weilfair" (l. 178). The

former makes her way into the country to visit her kinswoman. Their meeting is described in Henryson's best tender realism:

The hartlie joy, God! geve ye had sene,  
 Beis kith quhen that thir Sisteris met;  
 And grit kyndnes wes schawin thame be-  
     twene,  
 For quhylis thay leuch, and quhylis for  
     joy thay gret,  
 Quhyle(s) kissit sweit, quhylis in armis  
     plet.

(ll. 190-194)

Following their greeting, the two repair to the country sister's dwelling, which consists merely of "ane sillie scheill under ane steidfast stane" (l. 199). The younger sister, who is hostess, goes to her pantry and brings forth some refreshments. The Burges mouse is aghast at the poor quality of the food, and when assured that it is the usual fare for her sister, denounces it as contemptible. The country sister is righteously indignant:

'Madame' (quod scho), 'ye be the mair to  
     blame;  
 My mother sayd, sister, quhen we wer borne,  
 That I and ye lay baith within ane wame.  
 I keep the rate and custome off my dame,  
 And off my leving into povertie,  
 For landis have we nane in propertie.'

(ll. 212-217)

Despite this, the town mouse, noting that she is used to "meitis tender," declines the simple fare: "'Thir wydderit peis, and nuttis, or thay be bord, / Wil brek my teith, and mak my wame fful sklender'" (ll. 222-223). Her sister, advising that there are better things than "ffeistis deli-



cate"--such as nobility of heart and contentment--invites her to stay there with her. The city sister, though, will have it the other way around. Her comparison of their respective standards of living has its share of Henryson's vigorous humor:

'Lat be this hole and cum into my place;  
I sall to you schaw be experience  
My gude friday is better nor your pace;  
My dische likingis is worth your hail  
expenche.

(11. 246-249)

The country mouse agrees, and they return to the city.

The array of delicacies in the larder where the Burges mouse makes her home is indeed bounteous:

Baith Cheis and Butter upon thair skelfis  
hie,  
And flesche and fische aneuch, baith fresche  
and salt,  
And sekkis full off meill and eik off malt.

(11. 264-266)

The enjoy mutton and beef, cut in great portions, and all the foods which a lord might be served; "except ane thing, thay drank the watter cleir / In steid off wyne, bot yit thay maid gude cheir" (11. 271-272). Henryson's skill as a narrative artist is evident in the passage. By injecting this one exception, he casts a tone of believability over the entire scene. The device may also serve another purpose--that of bringing the sumptuous and lavish mood of the feast "back to earth" just a bit, in anticipation of the abrupt end to which it comes shortly thereafter. The spenser arrives with his keys and, opening the door, finds them at dinner.

In a masterly ironic understatement, Henryson describes the retreat of the mice: "Thay taryit not to wesche, as I suppose" (l. 295).

The Burges mouse scampers to her hole, but the country mouse has no place to hide and falls down in a swoon for fright. The spenser leaves, having more important things to do than chase mice; and the town mouse comes forth to see how her country sister has fared. Her distinctive call is characteristically Henrysonian: "'How fair ye, sister? cry peip, quhair ever ye be,'" (l. 308). The rural mouse is in a fever and trembling for dread. When invited to resume the feast, she tells her sister:

'I may not eit, sa sair I am agast;  
I had lever thir fourty dayis fast,  
With watter caill, and to gnaw benis  
or peis,  
Than all your feist in this dreid and  
diseis.'

(ll. 319-322)

At the further urging of her sister, the terrified mouse does consent to return to the table. But "scantlie had thay drunkin anis or twyse, / Quhen in come Gib hunter, our Jolie Cat' (ll. 325-326). Again the town mouse makes it to her hole, but the hapless country mouse is caught up by the back. The cat tosses her back and forth, plays "blindman's buff" with her, and does her great pain. It is only by luck that she manages to creep between a board and the wall, climb out of the cat's reach, and hang there until he leaves.

Leaping down from her hiding place, she calls to her sister in no uncertain terms:

'Fairweill, sister, thy feist heir I defy!  
Thy mangerie is mingit all with cair,  
Thy guse is gude, thy gansell sour as gall.'

(11. 343-345)

The country mouse returns posthaste to her natural rural habitat. Henryson describes her den:

Als warme as woll, suppose it wes not greit,  
Full beinly stuffit, baith but and ben,  
Off Beinis, and Nuttis, peis, Ry, and Quheit.  
Quhen ever scho list, scho had aneuch to eit.  
In quyet and eis withoutin ony dreid;  
Bot to hir sisteris feist na mair scho yeid.

(11. 359-364)

The moralitas to this tale is unique, for Henryson, in that it is predictable: contentment and happiness with few worldly goods are preferable to a richer style of living which might be accompanied by uncertainty or danger. The moralitas is four stanzas long, and each stanza repeats this same message in a slightly different way. All end with the same phrase, "with small possessioun;" and the poet links it, respectively, with "content," "sickernes," and (twice) "blyithnes in hart."

In the first stanza, Henryson states that adversity is so "interminglit . . . with eirdlie joy," that no estate is without some trouble and vexation. In the second, he makes the point that whoever has enough has no need of more:

Blissed be sempill lyfe withoutin dreid;  
Blissed be sober feist in quietie;

. . . . .

Grit aboundance and blind prosperitie  
Oftymes makes ane evill conclusioun.

(ll. 373-378)

With a change of tone in the third stanza, Henryson warns the "wanton man" who makes his belly a god, that the "Cat cummis, and to the Mous hes Ee" (l. 384). In a question which reflects the ubi sunt formula prevalent in the Middle Ages, the poet asks: "Quhat vaillis than thy feist and royaltie, / With dreidfull hart, and tribulatioun?" (ll. 385-386). He ends with a reference to a similar warning, attributed to "Solomon."<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that the sentiments expressed in the moralitas were borne in mind by the poet while composing the narrative. The repeated message bears a close resemblance to the reply of the "Uponlandis Mous" to the complaints of her sister about the poor quality of the former's food:

'Quhat plesure is in the ffeistis delicate,  
The Quhilkis ar gevin with ane glowmand  
brow?  
Ane gentill hart is better recreate  
With blyith curage, than seith to him ane  
Kow.'

(ll. 232-235)

The "sentence" is not so much a lesson which the country mouse learns during the course of the narrative as it is an affirmation of what she has suspected all along. When confronted with the prodigality of her city sister's feast,

<sup>2</sup>Solomon, as an authority of great wisdom, was frequently quoted apocryphally in medieval times. Biblically, the sentiment is most closely related to some verses in Proverbs, says Elliott, 134.

the former shows her conservatism and doubt about the security the latter supposedly enjoys:

'Ye, dame' (quod scho), 'how lang will  
this lest?'  
'For evermair, I wait, and langer to.'  
'Giff it be swa, ye ar at eis' (quod scho).

(ll. 278-280)

The country sister, as we have seen, realizes that her sparse style of living is in keeping with her poor heritage. Her "mistake" might be pinpointed at the time she accepts her sister's invitation to visit, but a look at the "Burges Mous's" words shows that the latter tells somewhat of a lie about the security of her luxury: "'Off Cat, nor fall trap, I have na dreid,'" (l. 251). Both mice did make the mistake of sitting down to their feast without saying grace: "Withowtin grace thay wesche and went to meit" (l. 268). But this is the only occasion on which recklessness overcomes the common sense of the country mouse. Fittingly, since she, unlike the wether in the previous fable, has come to a realization of the particular folly under discussion, the country mouse escapes with her life.

The message of this moralitas is essentially the same as in "The Wolf and the Wether": know the humility of your station, stay in it, and everything will be for the best. The "villains" in each case, the wolf in the former tale, the cat in this one, merely act according to their natures-- in each case, a place a bit higher up in the natural order than the protagonist. The "Burges Mous" comes in for no

punishment, it is true, in spite of her ignorance of the truth apparent to her sister. In fact, she seems to get off "scot-free," but her environment is different from that of the country mouse. She learns no "lesson," but in maintaining her lush standards, must abide the ever-present perils. It is up to the reader to judge which mouse has the better life, and Henryson makes his own position crystal clear on that.

Both fables, then, serve to exemplify the third approach taken by the poet in pointing out the virtues of preserving the natural order of the universe. They both call for a limiting of personal ambitions. Contentment with "small possessioun" is a virtue that the poor man can achieve when "sickernes" accompanies it. In this case it is up to the individual. Contrast to this the complaint against the social "misleving" of the "wolves" of the tale of the wolf and lamb moralitas who would compromise the poor man's "sickernes."

Both these fables of moral "misleving" also show a balanced execution in total: a liberal portion of interesting and picturesque narrative detail and dialogue, insight into man's problems, and sound practical advice on remedying these particular forms of "misleving." Henryson's messages are apparent but are not such prime concerns that they overpower the enjoyment of the narrative for the reader. The overall literary method, in reflection of the theme, shows balance.

Chapter V  
Conclusion

Further evidence of the diversity of Henryson's thirteen fables can be seen in a brief examination of the nature of the poet's allegorical interpretations of the several narratives and characters. Closely related to this is the definition of the poet's overall purpose, which he outlines himself in the prologue. Explicitly, the raison d'etre of the fables is to "repreif the haill misleving / Off man be figure of ane uther thing" (ll. 6-7). Any interpretation of Henryson's motives beyond this and his stated intention to mix in some "merie sport" is on thin ice.

Fox sees "at the very basis" of the Fables the idea stated by Hugh of St. Victor that the visible world is but a representation of God's reality.<sup>1</sup> However, this reality, as explained via moralitas by Henryson, is inconsistent if the Fables are viewed as a unit. The stories are full of character types, and the same characters appear repeatedly in the various narratives to act in a familiar and expected manner. But only very seldom does Henryson show similarity

<sup>1</sup>"For this whole visible world is as a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by a divine power; and individual creatures are as figures therein not devised by human will but instituted by divine authority to show forth the wisdom of the invisible things of God." [PL 176, col. 814. Quoted by Chas. S. Singleton in Dante Studies I (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), p. 25.], cited by Fox, 347.

in his allegorical equations from fable to fable. The fox, for example, is probably the most familiar and recognizable character, constantly functioning in the narratives as a crafty "confidence man," and known for his sly trickery. But in the moralitas of different of the fables, the fox is equated variously by Henryson to: false flatterers ("The Taill of Schir Chantecleir and the Foxe"), temptation ("The Taill of the Sone and Air of the foirsaid Foxe, callit Father Wer, etc."), "his own nature" ("The Taill of the Scheip and the Doig"), the world ("The Taill of the Wolf that gat the Nek-hering throw the wrinkis of the Foxe that begylit the Cadgear"), and the Fiend ("The Taill of the Foxe that begylit the Wolf in the schadow of the Mone"). In one fable the fox is not given a direct allegorical equivalent.

If a steady type character such as Reynard (or Lawrence) the Fox can have such a great number of allegorical significances, it is difficult to see a constancy between one fable and the next in Henryson's interpretations of life "be figure of ane uther thing." Again, considering the fables individually, the allegories work fine, but it cannot be said that the Fables as a whole offer a unified interpretation of earthly phenomena.

The idea that Henryson's allegories attempt to disclose any divine significance at all is open to question. Aside from occasional reference to "The Fiend," matters of God and the true church teachings are scarcely visible on any



"vertical" allegorical level (with the exception of "The Taill of the Paddock & the Mous" which is in the pattern of the familiar medieval debate between body and soul). There is little, if any, anagoge, and Henryson spells out the tropology for us in each individual instance. With the moral applications of his literal narratives being given, the possibility of an allegorical interpretation at the time of reading ceases technically to exist. One cannot determine through introspection or imagination something that is specifically spelled out.

One critic,<sup>2</sup> generalizing from a portion of Stearns's view, sees the Fables as an expression of what Henryson "considered to be the great weakness of the age arising from [economic] changes, and that was the displacement of medieval values by rank materialism"<sup>3</sup> and finds in them outcries against abuses in five institutional areas: the merchant class, landlords, the king (James III), the church, and the law courts. To label the Fables as social protest, however, is to ignore the majority which are directed at the personal, moral improvement of the life of the individual man. Stearns does see some possible symbolic references in some of the fables to specific individuals prominent in Henry-

<sup>2</sup>Mary Rowlands, "The Fables of Robert Henryson," Dalhousie Review, XXXIX, No. 4, (Winter 1960), 491-501.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 492.

son's time,<sup>4</sup> but Elliott contends that "there is no unequivocal 'historical' allusion in [Henryson's] poetry."<sup>5</sup>

If we deal, then, with the narratives and allegories on an individual basis, we are dealing with tangible reality. In so doing, we can see that Henryson sometimes directed his allegorical interpretation toward abuses of the social order inflicted on the common man, as with the landlord wolves who would devour the poor tenant-farmer lambs or the corrupt courts who would wrongly judge against the innocent sheep, and sometimes against moral abuses of nature which occur within, for example, the foolish wether who would gain dominance over his natural better. And we see that, at times, the lesson to be learned becomes secondary or insignificant when placed beside such a fruitful and vivid narrative as that of the outlandish fox who would transform a kid into a salmon.

We see also that Henryson puts his emphasis in various places at various times: on the narrative, as in the story of Chantecleir and the fox; on the moralitas, as in the story of the hapless lamb who is eaten by the wolf; or on both elements to an equal degree, as in the story of the overzealous wether or the two mice.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., the lion in "The Taill of the Lyoun & the Mous" may be James III; the paddock in "The Taill of the Paddock & the Mous" may be the Duke of Albany, James's brother; etc. See Stearns, 16-25.

In overview, probably the most appealing aspect of Henryson as a poetic artist, especially for the modern reader, is his tremendous insight into the human situation. This is extremely well-reflected in the fables. Says one editor: "as an animal allegorist, Henryson has no superior: by no fabulist is the human in the animal better realised, while the special animal characteristics are admirably preserved and indicated."<sup>6</sup> And, states another, "no author of his age, and few since, have so submerged the teller's egoism in the tale and given the reader such a perfect sense of acquaintanceship with the creatures of his art."<sup>7</sup>

On the whole, Henryson's works, especially his fables, have suffered comparative neglect by critics except in a generalized way. But when the poet is given closer scrutiny, critical commentators will do well to focus more attention on the individual poems and examine his animal stories as distinct and separate entities--each with its own unique interpretation--for this is what they are. We should speak less of Henryson's Fables and more of his "fables."

## Glossary

aganis; against.

all haill; entirely.

alswa; also.

ane; a, an.

anewch; enough.

anis; once.

awin; own.

(ay) amang; 'every now and then' (Elliott).

bandonit; subdued.

banes; banish.

beis kith; 'is shown' (Elliott).

bene; well-off.

beschrew; curse.

blyith; content.

bord; pierced.

Boreas; north wind.

boun; obliged, destined.

brok; badger.

bruke; have use of.

bud; gift, bribe.

busk; bush.

but; without.

but and ben; 'outside and in.'

byde; await.

caff; chaff.  
 cairfull; sorrowful.  
 cais; station.  
 (on) cais; by chance.  
 can; did.  
 cative; wretched.  
 clout; clod, small piece of land.  
 coif; hollow.  
 compeir; appear.  
 compone; 'come to terms.'  
 consuetude; custom.  
 contrait, prostrait; 'pro and con' (MS error:  
     Elliott).  
 couth; could, did.  
 crab; provoke.  
 crag; neck.  
 Crakraip; lit., 'Crack-rope,' nickname for  
     hanged or condemned man.  
 crap; crept.  
 crownair; coroner.  
 cure; effort.  
  
 dampnit; subdued.  
 drewch; drew.  
 dytis; indicts.  
  
 effeiris; befits.  
 effray; fright.

eik; also.

experience; fact.

fald; swerve from truth.

fall; come by.

falset; falsehood.

fleidnes; fright.

frawart; perverse.

fyle; defile.

gang; go.

ganis; is of use.

gansell; sauce.

gar; make.

gentrice; kindness.

gif; if.

gimpis; subtleties.

gled; kite.

glose; legal gloss.

glowmand; frowning.

gorrit; gored.

gostlie; spiritual.

graip; vulture.

gressome; a certain rent-contract fee.

haill; whole.

hald of; bow to.

hals; neck.

hap; protect.

hyre; reward.

ilk; each.

instant gyis; 'procedure that now holds' (Elliott).

intermell; meddle.

kennit; knew.

lane; loan.

leill; loyal, just.

leme; ray.

lemman; lover.

lestand; lasting.

let; allow, hinder.

list; chose.

lowrand; skulking.

maill men; lit., 'rent men,' tenant farmers.

maistrie; evil power.

man; must.

mangerie; feast.

meid; bribe, reward.

meit; fitting.

mekill; big, much.

mischevis; hurts.

mony; many.

now on dayis; nowadays.

okker; usury.

or; ere.

outher; either.

pace; Easter.

paynchis; paunches.

peillit; plundered.

perfyte; accomplished, perfect.

plycht; blame.

point; detail.

preif; taste.

pure; poor.

quhilk; which, who.

quhylis . . . quhylis; now . . . now.

rak; reck, heed.

rate; manner.

reheirs; relate.

remord; have remorse for, examine.

repreif; reprove.

ressoun; declaration, discretion, reason.

rings; reigns.

ryte; habit.

schute; pounce, defecate.

scrip; food-pouch.

seith him to ane kow; 'than if a whole ox were  
to be cooked for him' (Elliott).



selie; foolish, poor.  
 sen (that); since.  
 sentence; lesson, opinion.  
 senyeis; marks, evidence.  
 sic; such.  
 sicker; sure, steadfast, certain.  
 sickernes; security.  
 slicht; deception.  
 smoirand; suppressing.  
 suppois; although.  
 syne; then, since.  
  
 tak; holding, possession.  
 tane; taken.  
 tene; fierceness.  
 thig; beg.  
 thir; the, these.  
 thoil; permit, allow.  
 till; for, at, to.  
 tirrane; cruel.  
 tit; tips (v).  
 tume; empty.  
  
 unprovysit; unforeseen.  
 unsuspect; honest.  
  
 vincust; vanquished, overcome.

wait; know.

walk; wake.

wame; belly.

war; worse, careful.

waryit; cursed.

watter cail; thin broth.

weir; fear, conflict.

wer; worse, ('father wer' = 'worse than his father').

widdinek; lit., 'willow-neck,' nickname for hanged or condemned man.

wrangous; wrongful, illegal.

wrokkin; revenged.

wynnit; dwelt.

yeid; went.

'yit pleyis thow agane?'; 'are you still quibbling?'

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