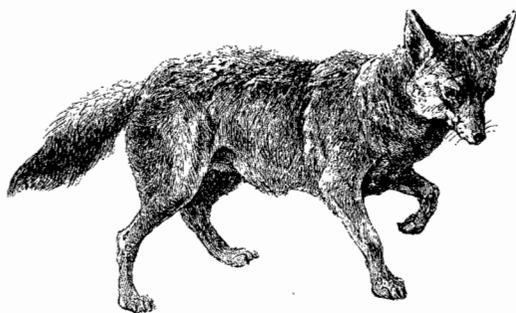


The Fox: A Medieval View, and Its Legacy in Modern Children's Literature



Joan V. Chadwick
Salmon Arm, British Columbia



In the history of Western literature, no animal except perhaps the wolf, has stirred the human imagination more than the fox. Fables and legends passed down through the ages have guaranteed the fox a place in our cultural heritage, and the words "cunning," "crafty," and "sly" have become synonymous with the name "fox." An old "fox," meaning a person with the aforementioned traits, has the same meaning today that it had at the time of Chaucer.

The fox looks weak and small when compared with the larger wolf, but his intelligence and daring have insured his survival, whereas the wolf was exterminated from most of his European range during the Middle Ages. When the great forests were felled for shipbuilding and the early smelting industry, the wolf's habitat was destroyed, while the fox, like the North American coyote, learned to live within human-modified habitats, and today can even be found within the city limits of large urban centres. Despite concerted efforts to destroy the fox, the species has shown remarkable adaptive success. The wolf was hunted for sport by the medieval nobility, and persecuted by farmers and peasants because of his threat to their cattle

and sheep. When he disappeared, the nobles turned reluctantly to fox hunting, which has culminated in the barbaric cultural ritual of the modern fox hunt. The fox also supplanted the wolf as the main object of detestation for farmers, who blamed him for the disappearance of their poultry, and pursued him as relentlessly as they had formerly chased the wolf. With the increase in sheep farming, the fox was also condemned for preying on new-born lambs. According to the biologist Erik Zimen:

As so often happens, this hatred-induced cultural ritualization became divorced from the ultimate cause for its appearance; efforts of farmers and hunters to control the fox were out of all proportion to the animal's destructive potential...a fox is a small animal seldom exceeding ten kilograms in weight. Nor is he able to kill any animal considerably larger than himself.

It is improbable that the fox poses a threat to large geese, but he presents a definite danger to smaller poultry, and competes directly with human hunters in the predation of rabbits, hares and pheasants.

An old English folk belief describes a method that foxes use to rid themselves of fleas and lice, which demonstrates the animal's intelligence and resource-



HISTORY OF IDEAS

fulness. In this account, the fox gathers a quantity of sheep's wool, and holding the wool in his mouth, carefully backs into a stream until only his nose and the wool remain above water. The theory is that the fleas and lice will leave the animal's body to escape drowning, traveling upwards to the wool. Once they have reached the wool the fox releases it and returns to the riverbank, flea and lice free. The truth of this story is somewhat in question as a fox's coat is known to be quite waterproof, and the parasites may be able to survive in the fur for a much longer period than this procedure would entail. The story, however, has withstood the test of time, and illustrates a continuing human belief in the fox's ingenuity.

Storytelling is as old as humankind itself, and the animal story is the oldest story form of all. In early societies, animals were part of everyday existence, and were included in religious ritual, story and art. Animal behaviour was compared with human behaviour in the similarity of their interests in acquiring territory and status within their group, and it was a natural development from this to seeing animals as exemplifying human characteristics which were admired, feared or disliked. With the growth of agriculture, predatory animals like the wolf, which had been admired by the gatherer-hunter for their hunting prowess, now became a threat to domesticated animal species. As wolf populations declined, the fox, as the only other natural predator, replaced the wolf as an object of persecution. The development of the animal fable began at this time, with animals becoming symbols of qualities possessed by humans. The earliest collection of fables was compiled by Aesop around 600 B.C., from stories which had been transmitted orally for centuries. Aesop may or may not have been a real person, but the development of the animal fable remains synonymous with his name. Aesop's fables were brief anecdotes which described a single incident, and whose purpose was to teach wise conduct to the listener. The animals used were endowed with particular characteristics which eventually became symbols for various types of individuals and their weaknesses. Animals presented a convenient simplification of the human world and its complex happenings, and could easily be equated with a single human quality. One of the most famous of Aesop's fables, which illustrates the fox's cunning is "The Fox and the Crow," which has been reworked in many different forms over the centuries:

A crow sat in a tree holding in its beak a piece of meat that he had stolen. A fox which saw him, determined to get the meat. It stood under the tree and began to tell the crow what a beautiful big bird he was. He ought to be king of all the birds, the fox said; and he would undoubtedly have been made king if only he had a voice as well. The crow was so anxious to prove that he had a voice, that he dropped the meat and croaked for all he was worth. Up ran the fox, snapped up the meat, and said to him: 'If you added brains to all your other good qualifications you would make an ideal king'.

This theme of flattery and deception is seen over and over again in tales featuring the fox.

The fox represents one of the most constant and enduring animals portrayed in the anthropomorphic fable. A fifth century B.C. dish in the Vatican museum shows a fox relating to Aesop the exploits of the animals which formed the basis of his fables, implying that it was the fox who originally thought them up.

With the growth of Christianity in the Middle Ages, it was natural for the church to absorb the animal fable into its doctrine. In early Christian thought, animals, like the whole of the natural world, existed wholly for the edification of humankind. They had shared in "the Fall," but played no part in the plan for Redemption. Beryl Rowland, in her study of animals in Chaucer, *Blind Beasts*, states that their purpose was to provide moral lessons that would assist in man's moral regeneration. The Bible, too, reinforced symbolic concepts such as "the wolf in sheep's clothing," "the dog returning to its vomit," "the stupid sheep," "the innocent lamb," and "the crafty fox." It was common for early church writers to ascribe human vices to particular animals. Roger Bacon, in his *Ancrene Riwle* portrayed the seven deadly sins as animals. He referred to "the lion of pride, the serpent of envy, the unicorn of wrath, the bear of sloth, the fox of covetousness, the swine of greediness, and the scorpion of luxury."

In the medieval bestiaries, which were considered to be authorities on zoological truths, the fox was described as a fraudulent and ingenious animal. According to T.H. White's bestiary translation, *The Book of Beasts*, the fox's taxonomic name, *Vulpis*, is derived from the name of the person who winds wool, because "he is a creature... who never runs straight but

goes on his way with tortuous windings." The bestiary description goes on to describe the fox's craftiness:

When he is hungry and nothing turns up for him to devour, he rolls himself in red mud so that he looks as if he were stained with blood. Then he throws himself on the ground and holds his breath, so that he positively does not seem to breathe. The birds, seeing that he is not breathing, and that he looks as if he were covered with blood with his tongue hanging out, think that he is dead and come down to sit on him. Well, thus he grabs them and gobbles them up.

Here the fox represents the devil, catching those who live by the flesh. The fox was one of the most common animal figures seen in medieval ecclesiastical art, and there are numerous representations of him preaching to poultry in the garb of a friar or monk, or with a bishop's mitre and pastoral staff.

Out of a combination of the Aesopian fable tradition and the didacticism of the bestiaries came the sophisticated medieval beast-fable, of which the most famous example is *Renard the Fox*. *Renard* is a collection of stories, based on the unresolved quarrel between Renard the Fox and Ysengrim the wolf, which were assembled together in twelfth century France, under the title *Roman de Renard*, and eventually printed by Caxton in English in 1481. This cycle of fables, which originated from Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and Indian traditions, became satiric under medieval influences, with the fox, like the coyote of North American Indian tradition, representing a trickster figure. Like all tricksters, Renard was an anti-establishment symbol; a revolutionary, a murderer and a thief. The stories attacked the government, church, legal system and the institution of feudalism. By the middle of the thirteenth century the word "fox" was synonymous with "Renard." The character of the wolf, who represents the greedy aristocracy, is an object of ridicule in the story, thoroughly outwitted by Renard in all his schemes, and no match for the fox's unscrupulous cleverness.

The well-known story of "Chauntecleer and the Fox," first made its appearance in *Renard*. This story of a rooster, first tricked and almost eaten by a flattering fox and then escaping by his own guile, was immortalized by Chaucer in "The Nun's Priest's Tale."

Here Renard becomes "Daun Russel the Colfox," who is described in great detail by Chauntecleer, who first meets the fox in a dream:

His colour was betwixte yellow and reed;
And tipped was his tail, and both his eres,
With blak, unlyke the remnant of his heres;
His snowte smal, with glowinge eyen tweye.
Yet of his look for fere almost I deye;

Chaucer's poem satirizes the tensions within feudal society by using animal characters with whom his listeners cannot directly identify. As Francis Klingender states in *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages*:

the wily stratagems of the fox, part hero, part villain, appealed to all classes of society. The Renard stories became one of the most powerful vehicles for satire in the late Middle Ages. As a symbol of falsehood, the fox could be used to castigate political and ecclesiastical abuses with a vigour which might have been dangerous to express in more direct terms.

In both *Renard the Fox* and "The Nun's Priest's Tale," the animals retain their animal characteristics and natures, while satirizing the foibles of humankind. On one level we see a barnyard story of a rooster, a hen, and a hungry fox, while on another, a complacent husband, a practical wife, and a fraudulent flatterer.

The fox was an enormously popular symbol in medieval literature and art, but he received little respect in reality. Admired for his cunning and guile on one hand, and relentlessly persecuted for the same traits on the other, Renard has proved himself to be a survivor against incredible odds. Remarkably, his reputation hasn't changed a bit during five centuries. An examination of some contemporary children's literature reveals a figure almost unchanged from the one Aesop and Chaucer described. Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck*, first published in 1908, describes a fox directly reminiscent of Chaucer's "Russel the Colfox." When Jemima first meets the fox, he is sitting on a tree stump reading a newspaper, elegantly dressed in breeches and a frock-coat. As Potter describes him, "He had black prick ears and sandy coloured whiskers." Jemima is a naive and

gullible duck from a nearby farm, who is looking for a private place to lay her eggs, so that she can secretly hatch them herself instead of the farmer taking them away to give to a hen to hatch. The "sandy-whiskered gentleman" most kindly offers to help Jemima, with the sole intention of eating both the duck and her newly laid eggs. Fortunately for Jemima, and unfortunately for the fox, his "wicked" plans are arrested when the farm collie and two fox-hounds come to the rescue, and the book ends with the implication that the dogs have either killed the fox or severely injured him, as one of the last illustrations shows a fox's brush and legs running out of the picture on the right, while the dogs snap at his heels. The accompanying text tells us that

...there were most awful noises—barking, baying, growls and howls, squealing and groans. And nothing more was ever seen of that foxy-whiskered gentleman.

Evidently the fox had put up a fight, because Kep the collie "had a bite on his ear, and both the puppies were limping."

In the modern fairy-tales of William Steig, the fox is stereotypically portrayed as a cunning villain who will go to any lengths for the sake of a delicious meal. In these stories, the fox is always outwitted, either by his intended victim, or some other character who comes to the victim's aid. The cover of *The Amazing Bone* shows a particularly wicked looking fox, elegantly dressed, with a sprig of lilac in his lapel, and carrying a cane, eyeing a young female pig from behind a tree. In this story, the fox is transformed, by a magic talking bone, into a mouse-sized replica of himself, just as he is preparing to dispatch his intended victim. In *Roland the Minstrel Pig*, the hero is rescued from his fate as the fox's dinner by a passing king, a lion, who is entranced by Roland's singing, and the fox is thrown into a dungeon "where he was to live the rest of his years on nothing but stale bread with sour grapes and water." In *Doctor de Soto*, another elegantly attired fox is outwitted by a mouse dentist and his wife, who, realizing that their foxy patient intends to eat them after his dental treatment is completed, devise a clever method for preventing the fox from carrying out his plan. An almost medieval devil image is implied in the tale when Doctor de Soto complains to his wife that they were foolish to trust a fox because "they're wicked, wicked creatures." The image of the fox in Steig's books

is one of a treacherous, crafty, unscrupulous rogue who will stop at nothing to get what he desires, but who inevitably ends up paying for his evil intentions.

In *The Fox Book*, G. E. Lessing provides a twist on Aesop's fable of "The Fox and the Crow," with his "The Raven and the Fox," in which the fox, tricking the raven into dropping the piece of meat he has found, dies because the meat had been poisoned by a farmer who had put the meat out hoping that "the greedy fox," who had been stealing his chickens, "would gulp down the meat and meet a well-deserved death." The moral of the story is "the little lies of the flatterer may poison the flatterer too." The same book contains a poem by Christian Morgenstern, "The Fox and the Chickens," which ends, "Beware, O hens and cocks, and never trust a fox."

Does children's literature have anything good to say about the fox? *The Fox Book* contains several naturalistic and sympathetic poems, one of which, "Four Little Foxes," by Lew Sarett, tells of the author's experience of finding four new-born fox cubs, orphaned after their mother has been caught in a trap. Another, "The Wild Silver Fox," by Joan Hutton, tells a story of a child who goes out at dawn to meet a fox and travel with him to his secret haunts. *A Fox Story*, by Allan Sollers, originally published in 1963 and now sadly out of print, is a remarkable true story of how a fox outwitted a band of hunters and their hounds, in rural Maryland in the 1950s. The author, then a boy, watched with his friends while the fox first substituted himself for his exhausted, hunted mate, to get the hounds off her track, and then hid from his pursuers by immersing himself in a river among the branches of a submerged tree, with only his nose showing above water. The watching boys were suitably filled with admiration for the fox's ingenuity, and made a pact never to tell their fathers (the hunters) about how the fox had outwitted them. The story contains no stereotypical references, and the animal is totally unanthropomorphized. Unfortunately the book is not widely available.

The paradox of humankind's relationship with the fox is still alive and well at the end of the twentieth century. Fox hunting, although condemned for over two hundred years as a barbaric ritual, is still practised, and perhaps has an even stronger following in North America than in Europe, where it originated. Stories about wicked sly foxes still provide children with a false view of the animal, while on the Canadian prairies, concern for the species' survival has resulted in the initiation of a programme to re-introduce the charming

cat-sized Swift Fox into habitats from which it was brought to the brink of extinction earlier in the century. The recent interest in preserving biodiversity, and the protection of endangered animal species, as well as a renewed sense of human need to connect with the natural world, will perhaps result in a change of attitude towards carnivorous animal species. The medieval mind saw humans as masters of the natural world, while animals were created solely for the use of humans. The fox, which seemed to serve no "useful" purpose, was treated as vermin, but also admired for his cleverness. Western society now stands on the brink of a change of attitude towards nature. The fox has survived centuries of abuse. Perhaps a chance still remains for recognition to be given to his unique attributes and the part he plays in the interconnectedness of life.



four

a pocket of air
lodged in my cheeks
sends my jaw clamping down
to suppress it.

how four
paws color in me

I sneeze
or squint
or flutter my eyes,
or other excuses
why bother

they are welling up.

soon everyone will see—maybe it's
something
about my jaw clamping down
they don't ask about.
they see themselves in those eyes
their body,
their substance,
their reflection,
their answers,
their voice
from their mouth in those eyes.

how four
paws color in me

they are welling up.

I want to make *them* chew things
they do not want to chew
they see themselves in those eyes
I wash them away

David Del Principe