

ABSTRACT

“FULL OF FRUIT, UNDER ANE FENYEIT FABILL:”

ROBERT HENRYSON AND THE AESOPIC TRADITION

by Greta Lynn Smith

A comparison of Robert Henryson's fables with Aesopic precedent shows that his many departures from the traditional genre signal that he is appropriating Aesopic authority and challenging his reader to explore the possibilities and limitations of the traditional Aesopic form. Characters who question traditional Aesopic morals, the combination of the Aesopic fable with the Reynardian beast epic, and shockingly violent ends to morally behaving characters allow Henryson to illustrate that a simplistic approach to the genre involves dangers of its own. There should be nothing easy about Aesop, Henryson suggests, for *the Morall Fabillis* do not allow the reader to forget the essential seriousness of moral behavior—they emphasize that evil behavior will ultimately be punished. Henryson asks his reader to consider a different type of fable, a fable that explores the potential pitfalls of its own genre, while also illustrating how Aesop can be utilized to great ends.

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Aesop and Beast Literature

The Aesopic tradition has roots as far back as the fifth century B.C., when the Greek historian Herodotus writes that Aesop, the supposed teller of the original fables, lived on the island of Samos in the Aegean Sea. The *Life of Aesop*, a Greek work written around the first century A.D., supplies further biographical details, explaining that Aesop was a slave for the majority of his life, was mute and physically misshapen, had a large head but was dwarfish in stature, had flat feet and was squinty-eyed. Although classical and medieval authorities treat Aesop as though he were a real man, it is highly unlikely that any true “Aesop” ever existed. He is as much a fiction as the talking animals in the fables themselves, yet he serves an important figurehead for a genre with considerable importance and influence throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Aesop’s most important role seems to be to lend a sense of unity to disparate fable collections—rather than just existing as a set of unconnected moral or proverbial tales, applying Aesop’s name to this kind of collection ties the fables together, and gives them moral authority. As Edward Wheatley points out, in his book *Mastering Aesop: medieval education, Chaucer, and his followers*, the figure of Aesop has often been rewritten to fit a particular purpose. He is hardly a static character—the Aesop of early traditions does not match the Aesop presented by later, medieval authors such as William Caxton, Marie de France, and the fifteenth-century Scotsman Robert Henryson (1430?-1506?). Each of these individual authors molds Aesop to serve their own needs, much as no doubt the classical Aesops before them had been molded. Caxton’s fables are harsh and rational, Marie’s softer and carefully descriptive, while Henryson’s appears as exalted and beautiful in appearance (in contrast to the misshapen slave of *The Life of Aesop*), yet skeptical of the worth and efficacy of his own fable form.¹

Aesop’s fables, though never a single, stable text, constitute an ancient and rich literary tradition, continuing in both Greek and Roman culture, and then experiencing a revival and

¹ Wheatley (*Mastering Aesop : medieval education, Chaucer, and his followers*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. Print, p. 30) offers further examples of the changing nature of Aesop, particularly in the classical era, as well as a discussion of how Aesop was a part of education, both classically and in the Middle Ages.

particular popularity in the Middle Ages as a text both in and outside the medieval classroom. Almost all such fables, regardless of the collection, contain some kind of supplied moral statement, explicitly defining what central lesson or significance a reader is to take away from the story. This *moralitas* can be expressed by one of the characters within the fable or can be positioned as a kind of post-script to the tale. A moral positioned within the story is sometimes referred to as an *endomythium*. A moral positioned before or after the fable proper is called a *promythium* or *epimythium*, respectively. Most fable collections contain dozens if not hundreds of fables with a huge cast of characters, mostly beasts or birds (though human appear as well). The morals taught by these fables range from encouraging altruistic behavior to more practical, cunning advice relating to avoiding punishment and outwitting competition for material gain. As Seth Lerer has emphasized, the messages articulated in Aesopic *moralitates* involve wisdom both practical as well as idealistic, offering lessons both on how “to please and fool” authorities as well as on how “to chart a moral path through temptation.”² The characters in these fables are as varied as the morals, and are almost never consistent from one fable to the next—a hare may act morally in one fable, but by the next text may become the villain. In general, there is rarely any rhyme or reason for the ordering of fables within a collection. Each fable stands on its own, with its own integrity as a text.

Today, fables are often associated with children, but as Edward Wheatley has demonstrated, fables held a much more complicated position in medieval education. In the Middle Ages, as now, although fables were often attributed to the elusive Aesop, and were rewritten by several different authors, they were in actuality universal intellectual property. Commonly used for teaching Latin, fables would often be copied by the student, and then rearranged to give a different meaning as a lesson in grammar.³ Despite their connection with children’s reading, the flexibility of the fable form was also often exploited to make social, political, and religious commentary. Because fables were used as such a fundamental part of

² In the section of his book devoted to Aesopica (“Ingenuity and Authority,” *Children's literature: a reader's history, from Aesop to Harry Potter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Print. “Ingenuity and Authority,” p. 35.) Lerer discusses the fable as a tool in children’s education—while other scholars such as Laura Gibbs and Tim Machan may argue this intentionality, the points Lerer makes about the functions of the fables certainly hold true.

³ George Gopen discusses this medieval use of the fable in the introduction to his translation of Henryson’s fable collection (“The Moral Fables of Aesop.” (1987): 232 pp. Print, p. 7). His discussion includes a quote by Quintilian who explains that with this kind of interpretation of the fables the pupil “will be capable of learning everything.”

education, they were also a way that these kinds of commentary could be made more subtly, or a means through which to disguise a revolutionary stance.⁴

In the Middle Ages, fables were increasingly used in sermons and other ecclesiastical works. For instance, a thirteenth century version of the fables was written by Odo of Cheriton, a cleric, who situates his fables in a Christian context, and partners them with allegorical sermons meant to pair religious action with the moral lesson. Using fables to convey religious morals, however, was particularly sticky, since both they and their “father,” Aesop come from a pagan tradition. There is nothing intrinsically religious about the fables, but their morals of just living and treating others fairly can easily carry over into the medieval Christian tradition. However, even with the view of the fables as free intellectual property, authors, including Odo, were still careful to respect the Aesopic tradition by nodding back to the man or character of Aesop himself. In most cases (other than Odo), this typically meant that while the fables portrayed proper behavior for religious people, they did not classify this behavior as Christian, or use their morals to promote a specifically Christian doctrine; this left the reader to make his or her own connections to their faith, which they certainly would have done.⁵

Another strain of beast literature, the Reynardian beast epic, was incredibly popular during the Middle Ages as well. Reynard makes his literary debut in *Ysengrimus*, a Latin verse epic composed in 1148-9, where the main character, Ysengrimus, is a wolf that is tortured by his cunning nephew, a fox named Reinardus. This fox then becomes Renart le Goupil in the forty tales that make up the French *Roman de Renart*, many of which showcase Reynard’s wrong-doings.⁶ While we have long known that both of these works, along with other Reynardian stories, were popular on the European continent, Kenneth Varty’s work has uncovered Reynard’s presence in English paintings and carvings indicating that his story was popular there as well. Jill Mann’s book length discussion of the fables, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in*

⁴ Wheatley (*Mastering Aesop*, p. 3), again, gives a more thorough description of the various uses of fables in the Middle Ages, and also how these uses differed from the classical uses in his work.

⁵ Again, Wheatley (*Mastering Aesop*, p. 4) offers more information about the religious uses of fables, while Laura Gibbs’s introduction to her translation of Aesop’s fables (*Aesop’s fables*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print, p. xxviii) discusses Odo of Cheriton at greater length.

⁶ Kenneth Varty’s text *Reynard, Renart, Reinaert : and other foxes in medieval England : the iconographic evidence : a study of the illustrating of fox lore and Reynard the Fox stories in England during the Middle Ages followed by a brief survey of their fortunes in post-medieval times*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999. Print.) uses iconography to make many convincing arguments about the prevalence of the Reynardian epic, as well as give a history of its development.

Medieval Britain, even argues that the use of the warning dream and the expansive length of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* makes it a part of the Reynardian epic sequence rather than a beast fable.⁷

While the beast epic shares many features, such as animal characters, with the fable tradition, it is also distinctly different. The Reynardian epics are much more lengthy than the traditional fable, and do not contain any kind of moral lesson. In fact, the Reynard stories often showcase the bad behavior of the trickster Reynard, whose cunning almost always wins out over the moral actions of his targets. As Mann argues, the Reynardian tradition is largely about appetite or hunger—it shows the fox fulfilling his hunger, both literally, and for foul behavior and sexual misconduct—but it does not condemn this behavior as the fables do.⁸ The Reynardian epic offers a platform for the reader to chuckle at Reynard's cunning, and watch him attempt to outsmart his next victim.

Robert Henryson (1430?-1506?) and the *Morall Fabillis of Esope*

Little is known about the Scottish poet Robert Henryson aside from his surviving works, including *The Testament of Crisseyde* (a sequel to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*), a retelling of the Orpheus myth, and, the focus of the present study, his *Morall Fabillis of Esope*.⁹ The only record of his life appears in a poem by William Dunbar lamenting the deaths of twenty-four Scottish and English poets. Because Henryson is included in this lament, published in 1508, we can reasonably assume that he died before or during this year. This poem mentions the important city of Dunfermline in Northern Scotland as Henryson's home, and the title-pages of some of the manuscripts of Henryson's works. These manuscripts also occasionally refer to Henryson as the "sometimes chiefe schoolmaster in Dumfermling." It is this title that leads us to

⁷ Mann's very new book offers other reasons as well for this claim as well (Oxford University Press, 2010. Print, p. 251).

⁸ Ibid., p. 224. As we will later see, this emphasis on hunger and the appetite certainly plays over into Henryson's fables as well, particularly as the most brutal of man's qualities.

⁹ Ibid., p. 262 According to Jill Mann, this title is probably not authorial, but has been conventionally associated with the text.

believe that Henryson had a Master of Arts degree, which would have qualified him for this job of schoolmaster at the prestigious Abbey school in Dumfermline. While the records of Henryson's attendance at university are uncertain, the quality of his work, and the nature of his subject matter evidence university training.¹⁰

Henryson is most commonly known as a "Scottish Chaucerian," that is, part of a group of 15th- and 16th-century Scottish poets that wrote under the influence of Geoffrey Chaucer, using his seven-line rhyme-royal stanza, continuing his satirical outlook on society, and reinterpreting some of his works. William Dunbar and King James I of Scotland are other prominent Scottish Chaucerians. This group of poets is also referred to as "makars," especially on the Scottish mainland, as "Scottish Chaucerian" indicates a debt to Chaucer, where each of these poets' work is certainly unique and notable on its own.

Robert Henryson's collection of fables differs from earlier Aesopica in a number of ways. Whereas most fable collections contain dozens or even hundreds of fables, Henryson has chosen a mere thirteen to do his moral work. Moreover, only about half of these fables come directly from the Aesopic tradition; the other six have origins in the Reynardian cycles, or are a mix of fable and beast epic elements. As Edward Wheatley has pointed out, combining these distinct genres to this extent is an innovation unique to Henryson.¹¹ Henryson's fables are also unusually long, with approximately 230 lines each, their capping *moralitates* extending on average to 43 lines or so. Critics have noted, too, that Henryson's morals are far more complex and idiosyncratic in comparison to what we see in many other traditional fable collections.¹² From the beginning, scholars have puzzled over these unusual features of the *Morall Fabillis*, and discussion concerning the significance of Henryson's departures from fable tradition continues to the present day. John Marlin's 2009 essay explores Henryson's text as an allegorical work, with intrinsic ironic tension between fable and moral that helps the reader see the interpretation of this allegory. Jill Mann includes an analysis of the *Morall Fabillis* in her 2010 book-length study of beast literature which sees Henryson's work as what she terms an "epicized fable"—that is a

¹⁰George Gopen's introduction to Henryson's works (*Moral Fables*, p. 1), discusses this reference to Henryson as the "chief schoolmaster," and also discusses Henryson's life at greater detail, showing examples of the texts that cite references to Henryson.

¹¹ *Mastering Aesop*, p 149.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1 Gopen, having authored one of the only translations of Henryson's work, is particularly interested in the unique structure of the text, and discusses all of these traits in the introduction to his collection.

highly complex work that is somewhere between fable and beast epic, a conclusion which she draws after a careful study of Henryson's rhetorical strategies.

Apart from considering how individual fables work, critics have often sought to explain the collection's larger structure or thematic unity. Early students of Henryson's work, reviving interest in his poetry in the first half of the twentieth-century, struggled to find harmony in his seemingly dissonant fables and morals, and as a result tended to interpret the *Morall Fabillis* as a set of disconnected stories, each serving its own, individual purpose. Later scholars, however, such as Denton Fox (1962), and his respondent, George Clark (1976), look to find a coherent whole in Henryson's work, arguing that this whole is so sophisticatedly developed that it produces narratives that go beyond piecemeal Aesopic moralizations. Accepting this view, other critics such as Stephan Khinoy and Arnold Henderson develop the notion that Henryson, as a schoolmaster, is using the very complexity that had seemed so inexplicable to earlier critics to teach his audience how to read this more difficult text and, even further, to teach a different perspective on life to a specific audience. George Gopen perceives a particularly pessimistic lesson in the fables' sequence, arguing for a complex and nuanced structure in the collection, which reflects the author's bleak outlook for humanity.

Emphasizing the unique and fascinating appearance of Aesop himself as a character within the *Morall Fabillis*, critics have also been interested to understand the various ways that Henryson handles issues of authorship and authority in rewriting the fable genre. Tim Machan (1990) turns the unique features of the text back on the author himself to argue that Henryson, by creating such a unique version of a popular genre, is able to explore his own position and the "figure of poet", exerting his authority as an author in a time when few do.¹³ More recently, Edward Wheatley (2000) studies the *Morall Fabillis* in the context of influential Aesopic texts and commentaries (especially the so-called "elegaic Romulus," a version of Aesop particularly important in the medieval classroom¹⁴), arguing that Henryson presents his narrator as initially

¹³ Machan's article, "Robert Henryson and Father Aesop: Authority in the Moral Fables," (*Studies in the Age of Chaucer: The Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 12 (1990): 193-214. Print, p. 194) argues that Henryson was very aware of his own position as a poet, as well as with defining this position of poet for those who would come after him.

¹⁴ The conventional title of the "elegaic Romulus" refers to its verse form (elegiac couplets) and its origin as a translation of "an earlier prose Romulus recession" of Aesop (Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop*, p. 5).

“timorous” but as progressively able to “master Aesop,” appropriating the authority of Aesopic discourse after encountering his literary father in a dream vision.¹⁵

My own work is indebted to the insights of this ongoing critical conversation but emphasizes strongly the importance of examining Henryson’s *Morall Fabillis* in the context of a wider tradition of Aesopic writings, including the texts of other vernacular fabulists such as William Caxton and Marie de France. Comparison of Henryson’s fables with Aesopic precedent, moreover, allows me to argue that his many departures from the traditional genre (length, complexity, and language, to name a few) signal that Henryson is not only appropriating Aesopic authority but in fact is also challenging his reader to explore the possibilities and limitations of the traditional Aesopic form. Through characters which question traditional Aesopic morals, through the combination of the Aesopic fable with the Reynardian beast epic, and ultimately by allowing shockingly violent ends to come to morally behaving characters, Henryson illustrates that a simplistic approach to the genre can involve dangers of its own. Often frustrating Aesopic expectations, Henryson warns against a lazy or inappropriate reading of Aesop. There should be nothing easy about Aesop, Henryson suggests, for *the Morall Fabillis* do not allow the reader to forget the essential seriousness of moral behavior—time and again they emphasize that evil behavior will be punished, even if it is only in the afterlife. Henryson is asking his reader to consider a different type of fable, then: a fable that explores the potential pitfalls of its own genre, while at the same time illustrating how Aesop can be utilized to great ends.

I begin my analysis with a close examination of Henryson’s first fable, “The Cock and the Jasp,” a tale that immediately complicates the relationships between the text’s narrative and *moralitas*. Although the cock is condemned in the *moralitas* as a fool, his complex and rather persuasive line of reasoning expressed in the fable itself makes it clear that he is no such thing. Just as the cock reasons that he would rather ingest both chaff and the wheat than pick up the jasp, which would be worthless to him as a rooster, Henryson shows his reader that they would be better suited to search for a wisdom that comes only through complex understanding than come to a simple, earthly moral, one that would only benefit a creature in this lifetime. This complexity is even more visible in the fable of “The Country Mouse and the City Mouse,” where the country mouse, occupying a conventionally secure position of rustic decency, confidently

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 150.

voices simple moral sentiments concerning the honesty of her own lifestyle. But Henryson's fable, fleshed out with ironic details that call into question the honesty of anyone's position—whether city-dweller or rural thief, challenges the reader to resist the simple interpretation of the *moralitas*, and recognize an alternative message: the “simple life without fear” is not a lifestyle preference, but a spiritual state possible only beyond this world.

In the fables immediately following “The Country Mouse and the City Mouse,” Henryson underscores this moral complexity by introducing a series of stories that derive, not from the Aesopic tradition, but from the distinct genre of the beast epic, tales that share surface features with the fables, but have a fundamentally different moral outlook. The characters in these fables are overconfident, trivializing the moral lessons that Henryson has been teaching, and are all ultimately punished for this oversight. In a text that seems to mix aspects of both the Aesopic and Reynardian traditions, “The Sheep and the Dog,” Henryson reveals a convoluted world that cannot be negotiated through either animal cunning or impeccable moral conscience. This is achieved not so much by emphasizing the sheer cruelty of the world, but rather by redirecting the traditional application of the fable away from chastising the wicked towards an identification with the nakedness of the stripped sheep, a figure who strikingly interrupts the Aesopic discourse of conventional morality to howl against the empty heath. This figure of naked suffering is followed by an abrupt shift to a utopian scene of nature in which Henryson encounters an oddly immaculate figure of Aesop (in contrast to his traditional portrait as an unkempt and disfigured slave). Here Henryson implicitly argues that not only are their limitations to the efficacy of the Aesopic discourse, but also that the desire for such easy morals can also be an abdication of moral responsibility.

In the fable immediately following this Aesopic portrait, as the narrator is wandering through an idealized world, he appreciates the change of the seasons and the harvest from afar, commenting on how this pleases his appetite. The main character of the resulting fable, a swallow, preaches against such a hands-off approach. He urges his audience of birds to take moral action to protect themselves from the fowler's net, but they refuse to listen, and are condemned for ignoring the seriousness of the fabular moral in favor of watching the world unfurl around them, just as the narrator is indirectly chastised for his wandering slothfulness. After this lesson, the fable collection turns shockingly gruesome, as the wolf attacks and brutally maims character after character. The final fable, “The Paddock and the Mouse,” in which both

are killed for each failing to live responsibly, sheds light on this violence. Through these deaths, unusually cruel for an collection of the fables, Henryson illustrates that the consequences of ignorant living aren't to be taken lightly—the morals that the fables provide, although more complex and difficult than the reader may expect, must also be taken very seriously, else the reader's fate may extend even into the afterlife.

The Cock and the Jasp

Many versions of Aesop begin with the story of the “Cock and the Gem,” and Henryson's collection is no exception. There is little plot or conflict in this anecdotal fable: a rooster simply happens upon a lost gem and opts to discard it, preferring objects of more practical use, such as worms and grains of cereal. As a “fable about fables,” the “Cock and the Gem” conventionally serves the function of instructing readers in what is of real value in the fable genre: the cock is chastised as a fool for discarding the gem, just as is the reader who casts aside moral lessons found in the fables are to be scorned. However, Henryson's rather complicated handling of traditional Aesopic materials gives his version of this fable a special position in considering the rest of his collection. His cock, while called a fool in the *moralitas*, speaks incredibly eloquently in the fable itself, presenting the reader with a rather convincing case that he is in fact right to conclude the cock has no business gathering the gem. This, and other aspects of Henryson's revision of the fable necessarily complicate the reader's understanding of the fable's basic message, a complication which Henryson seems to intend. He does not want his readers to accept in advance the established moral lessons of fable precedent, but to engage more actively in the rather complex set of lessons implicit in his collection. Perhaps these complications of Henryson's cock are meant to show the reader that it is acceptable to dismiss or readily digest the simple morals of other fable collections—but not the lessons found here.

At the very beginning of the fable collection, Henryson comments rather blandly on the human tendency towards immoral behavior and the original purpose of beast fables: “And als the caus that thay first began/ Wes to reпреif the haill misleiving/ Off man be figure of ane uther

thing. [And all the reason that they first began was to reprove the disastrous evil-living of man by figure of another thing.]¹⁶ Presumably to clarify this purpose, Henryson begins his collection of fables with the story of the cock and the jasp, following the example set by Marie de France, Caxton, and the early Romulus works. Henryson's version of the fable begins much like the others, with the cock leaving his dunghill, his only focus on finding dinner, but while scratching through the rubbish, looking for some grain, he finds a gem that had been accidentally swept out of the house. The fable then quickly turns to somewhat of a digression on human carelessness that is unique to his version of the fables:

As Damisellis wantoun and Insolent,
That fane wald play, and on the streit be sene,
To swoping of the hous thay tak na tent;
Thay cairn a thing, swa that the flure be clene.
Jowellis ar tint, as oftymis hes bene sene,
Upon the flure and swopit furth anone-
Peradventure, sa wes the samin stone

[Since careless and insolent chambermaids love to be dallying and to be seen on the street, they pay little attention when they are sweeping out the house; they only check to see that the floor is clean. Jewels are lost, as so often happens, by being dropped on the floor and then swept out of the house. Perhaps such was the case with this very stone.]¹⁷ This early mention of human behavior seems to function to remind the reader that they are to be relating the fables to their own lives.

While, as Denton Fox points out, this stanza is often separated from the body of the fable and cited as an example of "local color," its true significance can be seen when it is placed in

¹⁶ George Gopen, *Moral Fables*, lines 5-7. Gopen translates the phrase "haill misleving" to simply evil-living, where I believe that Henryson, especially given the extreme emphasis he later places on the fallen state of humanity, means for there to be a greater emphasis on the evil-living by using the adjective, "haill," or disastrous, unhappy. Where text from Henryson's poem is quoted, I have cited it using the line numbers that Gopen assigns to the poem in the original Scottish rather than in his translations. All translations of the Scottish text are my own, all done with respect to Gopen's translations, recognizing that as Gopen says in his "Note on this Translation" he is striving to maintain the "rhythmic effects" of the poetry, as well as "make[ing] each line of the translation take about as much time to read as each line of the original, and "maintain insofar as possible Henryson's balances and proportions." (p.35) Gopen's translation is easy to read, but often makes word choices meant to create a more poetic whole rather than remain true to the original feel of Henryson's text. I have translated these passages with the aid of a Scottish Dictionary ("Dictionary of the Scots Language." Web. 16 July 2010), and have created my own translations only with the purpose of adhering to Henryson's original text as much as possible for the sake of my argument.

¹⁷ 71-77.

context with the rest of the fable. Fox claims that this stanza first establishes a tone of “barnyard realism” as it explains the commonality of the jasp’s position, locating it not just within the world of the cock as he searches through the mud, but domesticating its cast-aside state as a common household occurrence. Moreover, the “wantoun Damisellis” give the reader a clear parallel for the cock (and the reader themselves), as they too are so preoccupied with cleaning the floor, doing only what is necessary to earn the means to fill their stomachs. As Fox points out, even here, early in the fables, Henryson is establishing a commonality between humans and animals, by using links between his characters to encourage his readers to begin to link themselves to the animals in the fables. This commonality, although often implied, is rarely established in other collections of the fables—it seems that here, Henryson is illustrating the likeness between human and animal much more directly so as to question why this is glossed over in these other collections.¹⁸

Whereas in other Aesops the cock has very little to say, Henryson’s, perhaps influenced by Chaucer’s Chanticleer, seems to very well educated, giving him credibility to the reader. The fable continues as the cock then addresses the jasper directly, with rhetorical pomp rather appropriate for a rooster:

O gentill Jasp! O riche and Nobill thing!
 Thocht I the find, thow ganis not for me.
 Thow are ane Jowell for ane Lord or King.
 Pietie it were, thow suld ly in this mydding,
 Be buryit thus amang this muke on mold,
 And thow so fair, and worth sa mekill gold.

[Oh gentle Jasp! O rich and noble thing! Though I found you, you are not suitable for me. You are a jewel fit for a Lord or King. Pity it was, you should lie in this dungheap, be buried among this muck on the ground, you so fair and worth so much gold.]¹⁹ Where the roosters of the

¹⁸ “Henryson’s Fables.” *ELH* 29.4 (1962): 337-356. Print, p. 342. The quoted phrases, “local color” when talking about the wanton Damsels, and “barnyard realism” are taken from Fox’s analysis. Fox terms this “barnyard realism” because of the domestic nature of the scene that takes place—it also serves to ground the fable in a sequence of events—first the damsels are careless when sweeping the floor, then the cock also exhibits this same carelessness when rejecting the jasp.

¹⁹ 79-84. The greatest difference between my translation and Gopen’s is that he uses “of little value are you to me” to translate “thow ganis not for me”—“ganis” translates to “suitable,” which seems to indicated a more direct relationship with the jasp than “value,” a relationship which I believe Henryson is trying to establish here.

traditional fables simply exclaim that they have no use for the gem, this cock is capable of exploring and appreciating the relative value of things. He also treats the gem as if it were alive (just as the fable genre treats fowl as if they could speak): he voices pity for the Jasper, lamenting for the gem's sake that he, who would never appreciate its "grit vertew, not yit thy cullor cleir" [great virtue, nor your clear color] has found it.²⁰ He reasons, though, that he would be better served to continue searching through the mud for grain, chaff, or worms and snails rather than to find a multitude of gems, and that the gem itself would be better served by being found by someone who can fulfill its needs: "Thow ganis not for me, nor I for thee" [You are not fit for me, nor I for you]—the complex reasoning of the cock pinnacles in this concern for both the gem's welfare and his own.²¹ The rooster leaves the jasp lying on the ground and walks away.

Even in this display of strutting eloquence, the domestic, rudimentary nature of the cock shows through: "To grit Lordis thocht thow be leif and deir,/ I lufe fer better thing of les avail,/ As draf, or corne, to fill my tume Intraill." [To great Lords though you be beloved and dear,/ I love far better things of less value,/ As chaff or corn to fill my empty stomach.]²² Just as the Damsels only care for the immediate gratification of the food, rather than looking to the future by saving lost jewels, so the rooster is so concerned about his stomach that he is willing to eat not only the grains he finds on the ground, but also the chaff, which is usually cast away as waste. The cock's simple tastes here may remind us of the country mouse's rustic diet of simple grains in the fable to follow, but it also recalls a common metaphor Henryson evokes in the prologue:

The nuttes schell, thocht it be hard and teuch.
 Haldis the kirnill, and is delectabill.
 Sa lyis thair ane doctrine wyse aneuch,
 And full of fruit, under ane fenyeit Fabill.

²⁰ 86. Gopen translates this line "your great power, nor your bright color," but it seems clear that using virtue in place of power, and clear rather than bright as an adjective to describe color is much closer to the original text.

²¹ 112.

²² 89-91.

[The nut's shell, though it be hard and tough, holds the kernel and is delectable. So lies there a doctrine wise enough, and full of fruit, under a false fable.]²³ Notice that this seemingly straightforward scheme (ultimately we must discard the trivial but delightful aspects of the narrative in discerning its meaty moral core) is complicated by Henryson's characterization of the narrative shell as "hard and tough." Such subtle incongruities are characteristic of Henryson's approach to the fables and provoke us to consider the significance of the cock's desire to fill his stomach indiscriminately with "chaff or grain." As a beast, of course, the cock makes no such distinction between "substantial wisdom" and empty fabulistic calories, preferring to simply eat the metaphor itself. This inclusion of the chaff, then, serves to emphasize Henryson's view of the animalistic nature of men as rude and non-discerning—this reminds the reader of the more simple fable collections where rather than having to work for a moral lesson, it can be determined easily. Still, one wonders to what extent Henryson wishes for his reader to contemplate further this complex task of discerning moral grain from an earthly appetite for narrative thrills and whether Henryson understands this task as a possible one in a fallen world. Can the reader be expected to "get beyond his stomach" any more than this eloquent fowl?

If the clear division of "chaff and grain" holds, however, the shift from fable to *moralitas* seems to represent the moment of moving beyond empty narrative. Henryson leaves the Jasp on the ground, and the rooster on his search for food, and transitions to his *moralitas* by saying that—although he does not know who found the Jasp—he will discuss "bot of the Inward sentence and Intent/ Of this fabill (as myne Author dois write)/ I sall reheirs in rude and hamelie dite. [But of the inward sentence and intent of this fable (as my author does write) I shall rehearse in rude and homely terms]"²⁴ Henryson's oblique reference to the unnamed Aesop, it should be noted, tends to keep the issue of moral authority at the fore; such references seemingly ground Henryson's collection in Aesopic authority. In the context of Henryson's rather idiosyncratic approach to the Aesopic genre in the fables to follow, however, these references may be seen more as a kind of mocking of the reliance of the fable form on authority from the

²³ 15-8. Critics have made much of this little phrase, because Henryson is acknowledging the false nature of fable tradition, which most fable authors refuse to do, believing that it may make their collection less credible. Henryson seems to believe that being false does little to discount the fable, which I will discuss at greater length later.

²⁴ 118-9. Gopen's translation of the parenthesis to say "and following still what my author has written" does not seem as accurate, and further more, makes Henryson's relationship to the unnamed Author far more ambiguous and tentative than the "dois write" in the original.

unknown Aesop, as well as pre-determined morals. At any rate, as the *moralitas* begins, Henryson tells his readers that they are to search for lost wisdom. He uses the color quality of the Jasper to relate it to the virtue it is to represent in the fable—wisdom. Just as the Jasper is distinctive among jewels, so wisdom is more excellent than all other virtues, for it is the one virtue that is necessary for a man to become great.

Henryson concludes:

But now (allace) this Jasp is tynt and hid:

We seik it nocht, nor preis it for to find.

Haif we richis, na better lyfe we bid,

Of science thocht the Saull be bair and blind.

Of this mater to speik it, it wer bot wind.

Thairfore I ceis, and will na forther say.

Ga seik the Jasp, quha will, for thair it lay.

[But now, alas, this Jasp is lost and hidden, we seek it not, nor prize it when it is found. Have we riches, no better life we seek, of science, though the soul be bare and blind. To speak of this mater, it is but wind, therefore I cease, and will no further say. Go seek the Jasp, who will, for there it lay.]²⁵ The traditional moral for this fable is very similar to that which Gibbs prints in her compilation: “this is a story I tell for people who do not know how to appreciate me.”²⁶

However, the implication here is that the gem, or wisdom, has literally been lost because we have failed to seek it, and do not respect it when it is found, yet it must not be eternally lost, for Henryson’s last line “go seek the Jasp, you who will, for there it lay” implies that those who look long enough for wisdom will still be able to find it.

This emphasis on wisdom, along with the direct reference to the cock’s foolishness seem to bring Henryson’s moral in line with that of other fable collections, but the reader cannot shake the persuasive argument against keeping the jasp that the cock delivered in the fable itself. Arnold Henderson and John Marlin deal with the tension between the persuasive cock in the fable and his condemnation in the *moralitas* by discussing the distance that Henryson is

²⁵ 155-61.

²⁶ This is the moral that Gibbs (*Aesop’s Fables*, p. 189) has translated for the version of this fable that she includes in her compilation of Greek fables.

establishing between fable and moral, giving them each distinct literary lives of their own.²⁷ Denton Fox also takes on this issue by arguing that Henryson is trying to establish a difference between his human reader and animal character—the cock may not need the jasp, as he explains in the fable, but in the moral, the reader is to see themselves in the place of the cock—they are being chastised for not recognizing its worth.²⁸ However, Henryson’s language seems to indicate that he is more concerned with ignorant people, who “understandis nocht/ Quhilk is sa Nobill, sa precious, and sa ding,/ That it may not with eirdlie thing be bocht.” [do not understand that which is so noble, so precious, so worthy cannot be bought with earthly things]²⁹ This statement is not aimed at the cock at all—he, in fact, does realize that earthly possessions are not so important when he rejects the jasp. Perhaps, even, the cock’s decisions to leave the jasp could be seen as the kind of wisdom that Henryson is trying to teach—his ability to discern his own needs could be what Henryson is hoping his reader will model.

Khinoy combines this first fable and the words of the prologue to argue that Henryson uses this fable as an extension of the prologue as a means of teaching his readers how read his fables. He sees a four-part lesson in these two combined works:

1. An understanding of the animal aspects of human behavior—explicit in the prologue; implicit here in the first fable
2. This animal behavior as social satire
3. A moral that applies not to the animal, but to a human being when put in the same situation
4. A spiritual allegory, which “lifts us out of the general frustration and near-despair which we may experience at the other three levels.”

These four aspects are certainly evident in the fable, but Khinoy’s third point does not acknowledge that Henryson also seems to be pushing the aforementioned connection between

²⁷ Henderson, in his essay “Having Fun with the Moralities: Henryson’s *Fables* and Late-Medieval Fable Innovation” (*Studies in Scottish Literature* 32 (2001): 67-87. Print, p. 79, 81), argues that Henryson realizes these contradictions between plot and moral, and heightens and prepares for them. While this may be true, it also seems that some of the work that Henryson does in the plot, such as the rejection of the jasp, trumps what happens in the moral. John Marlin (“Robert Henryson’s ‘*Morall Fabillies*’: Irony, Allegory, and Humanism in Late-Medieval Fables,” *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2009): 133-147. Print. p. 136-7), argues that Henryson’s fables and morals have each acquired distinct literary lives of their own.

²⁸ For Fox (“Henryson’s Fables,” p. 344), the cock in the fable is in the right—the jasp is unnecessary for a rooster—but the moral reminds the reader that they are to be seeing themselves as the animal characters, so if they put themselves in place of the cock, they are the fools, even where the cock was not.

²⁹ 149-51.

animal and human, breaking down the traditional trope of animal representing human, so that characteristics of each are represented. Also, while Henryson certainly does waiver with his reader between hope and despair, this fable does not offer near as concrete of a spiritual allegory as we will see in following fables. The explicit explanation of these things in the prologue, followed by the enacting of them in this first fable, encourages the reader to continue to look for these patterns as they proceed through the work. In particular, as the fables become increasingly fatalistic towards the end of the collection, Henryson uses animal behavior to chastise his readers, while offering some kind of hope through a spiritual allegory that shows them the only way to escape the fate of the doomed animals is through divine intervention.

Also, Stephen Khinoy notes that in the early Romulus version of this fable it is a pearl that the cock finds, and in later versions, such as the Marie de France it is an unspecified gem. Embedded in a collection full of specifics, it is no surprise that Henryson does not leave this gem ambiguous, but he also does not choose to use the original pearl either, even with its simple linkage to wisdom (pearl of wisdom, pearl before swine).³⁰ Rather, Henryson chooses the Jasp, which could either translate to be a Jasper, as George Gopen does in his translation of the fables, or the more mysterious jacinth that John Lydgate uses in his collection. Khinoy argues for an intended jacinth based on Henryson's descriptions of the gem's qualities, but what is most important here is that Henryson chose to put the emphasis in the fable on a more mysterious gem rather than the simple pearl.³¹ Although a pearl is meant to represent simple wisdom, it seems that Henryson is advocating a more complex kind of learning. His description of the jasp discusses its complexities: part like fire (presumable red) and part like the heaven (blue), says that the stone makes its holder victorious, and keeps them from needing to dread fire or water, or all things perilous, all qualities which the wise reader would also possess. This more intricate stone seems to represent the more multifaceted kind of wisdom that Henryson is bringing his reader to. As the position of the cock clearly illustrates, the fabular wisdom that is about to follow in Henryson's collection, is much more complicated than the simple "pearl of wisdom"

³⁰ The saying "a pearl before swine" has its roots in another Romulus fable with a very similar moral as the Cock and the Jasp—the pigs will be rooting for food and will not appreciate the significance of a pearl if found—it is another fable about reading fables. It also can be found in Scripture: Matthew 7:6 counsels proper judgment, saying: "Do not give what is holy to dogs or toss your pearls before swine. They will trample them under foot, at best, and perhaps even tear you to shreds." (The New American Bible)

³¹ Khinoy (*Tale-Moral Relationships in Henryson's Moral Fables*, "Studies in Scottish Literature 17 (1982), 99-115, Print, p. 102-3) gives a very persuasive and detailed argument for the gem being a jacinth rather than a jasper—but even Gopen calls the gem a jasper in his translations!

that many fable collections contain. Even in his choice of gem, Henryson is encouraging his reader to come to a deeper understanding of how the morals that they uncover in these fables are to apply to their lives.

In all fable collections this fable in particular serves an important function by indicating how significant the following morals are to the reader, but in many of these collections the following fables are in no particular order. In Henryson's work, where the order is almost as important as what is being said in the fables themselves, this fable has even greater weight. Henryson uses the Cock and the Jasp not only to show that there is wisdom in the fables, but also that this wisdom is going to be harder to uncover than the casual reader would expect. By creating discomfort in his reader as they come to understand the cock's point-of-view and are later chastised the *moralitas* to try to use the same kind of other-worldly wisdom as the cock, Henryson shows his reader these moral lessons are not going to come easily, that they will not necessarily be the expected moral from fable tradition, and that the reader is going to have to work to find the space between the easy moral and the more complex understanding that Henryson is advocating. Even in this first fable, we can see that the complexity of Henryson's work stands in stark contrast to the simple-minded characters and singular morals of other fable collections. By creating a complex central character, and bringing in secondary characters such as the careless damsels, Henryson seems to be suggesting that a simple moral is not always enough to bring about significant change. Yet, notably, Henryson does not discount the moral lesson that the fable tradition has associated with this fable, but shows his reader that it is much more difficult and convoluted than these collections imply.

The Country Mouse and the City Mouse

Henryson's fable of the city and the country mice, where the country mouse is persuaded to visit the city, only to be frightened by the many dangers there, appears to be very similar to the versions of this fable that we find in Gibbs' Aesopic collection, or in the collections of Marie de France or Caxton. But when Henryson's two mice are given a closer look, the reader can see

that, whereas most versions of this fable present an idealized image of rural life, Henryson is at pains to undermine the apparent “honesty” of the country mouse’s lifestyle. This can be seen in Henryson’s representation of the country mouse as a kind of outlaw, in the mock pilgrimage that the city mouse makes to the country, and in the abundance of food that the country mouse seems to have in the other fable. Details such as these might be overlooked as innocent elaborations on a well-known fable, one with an established and obvious moral message, but in his revisions of the tradition Henryson in fact undermines the core message of the traditional tale, implying that, in this world, there can be no truly humble, entirely moral life—that even the humblest of lifestyles is not rewarded in a life in which even a country mouse must steal to maintain what little she has.

The story of the country and the city mouse begins much as the reader would expect—the two mice are each peacefully dwelling in their respective homes until the city mouse decides to visit her country mouse sister who dwells “soliter, quhyle under busk, quhyle under breit,/ Quhilis in the corn, and uthir mennis skaith,/ as outlawis dois.” [alone, a while under the brush, a while under the briar, a while in he corn and by other means got by, as outlaws do]³² There are a number of things here that might surprise a reader familiar with fable tradition. Henryson’s tale, for instance, is unusual in depicting the two mice as sisters. In other versions of the fable, the mice only become acquainted when the city mouse “drops in,” on the country mouse, rather than making a specific journey as the city mouse does. Henryson’s establishing of a kinship relationship between the mice encourages the reader to look for similarities in their behavior, while also laying the framework for the city mouse to make a pilgrimage to expose her country roots.

Henryson also expands on the fable by adding a description of the country landscape and the specific details of the city mouse’s involvement in her burgess, an addition which, Stephen Khinoy has argued, expands Henryson’s satirical content to include the social pretensions of these locations.³³ Not only is Henryson commenting on the actions of the country or city dweller, then, but on the very nature of these locations. This satire, however, is complicated when the reader realizes that the country is not portrayed as one would expect. While it is obvious that living in the city can foster a reliance on fine things like the city mouse experiences,

³² 166-8.

³³ Khinoy, “Tale-Moral Relationships in Henryson’s *Moral Fables*,” p. 104. This argument makes good sense, and truly highlights the satirical aspect of the work, which I do believe was part of Henryson’s intent.

country living is not shown as humbler form of living, but as a place where thieving is necessary for survival. This broadening of focus allows Henryson to include all of his readers in his text, showing each of them the immoralities in their lifestyle.

Henryson's retelling of the tale stresses the absurd pretensions of the city mouse, who sets off as a "pure pylgryme" with her "pykestaif" to visit her sister in the country.³⁴ Henryson uses this image not only to evoke the traditional religious pilgrimage in a similar fashion as Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*, but also to emphasize that the city mouse is making a journey to rediscover her roots. This differs greatly from what we find in Gibbs's collection, where the city mouse just "happened to pay a visit to the house of a country mouse," and from Marie de France's fable collection where the city mouse "went to a nearby town one day/ Wishing to find what fun she could."³⁵ Even in Caxton's collection, the city rat (the two mice are rats in this version) "wente to sporte hym in the felde and mette by the way the poure rat."³⁶ In the context of this tradition, then, the pilgrimage of Henryson's mouse might be read as a kind of "sport," as a showy performance of humility and simplicity. But Henryson's city mouse may also be attempting a kind of "journey to her humble roots," where there, in the country, she hopes to find a better way of living, a more original, authentic existence.

At first, this pilgrimage seems to be a success. Upon arrival, the city mouse don't know the exact location of her sister, so she walks through the countryside crying: "Cum furth to me, my awin sueit sister deir!/ Cry 'peip' anis!" [Come forth to me, my own sweet sister dear! Cry "peep" onces!] until her sister hears and recognizes her voice, and goes to meet her.³⁷ Henryson stages a family reunion that would move any readers heart—the sisters laugh, weep, embrace and kiss for a stanza, overjoyed to see each other again; in this moment Henryson calls his readers to empathize with both mice just as they did with the cock as he presented his arguments for leaving the jasp.³⁸ In these moments, dripping with sentiment, and emphasizing the "cuteness"

³⁴ Lines 180-1 describe the city mouse's travelling appearance more completely—she is depicted as very humble in comparison to her position in the Burgess.

³⁵ The country and city mouse are fable 9 in Harriet Spiegel's translation of Marie's fable collection (*Fables*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987. Print, p. 51). The fable is found on p. 190 in the Gibbs's *Aesop's Fables*.

³⁶ This is twelfth fable in the Caxton translations of Aesop (Lenaghan, R. T, William Caxton, and Aesop. *Caxton's Aesop*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967. Print, p. 81).

³⁷ 186-7.

³⁸ Marlin ("Robert Henryson's 'Morall Fabillies': Irony, Allegory, and Humanism in the Late-Medieval Fables, p. 139) discusses the cries of the city mouse, and this reuniting moment at length in his work; he believes that it

of his characters, Henryson seems to almost be making fun of the ways that fables work—in versions such as the Gibbs, the mice are very simple characters, and one of them is clearly “right.” By showing such moments where the reader feels for both characters, Henryson is arguably calling attention to the polarizing tendencies of the fable genre. We can empathize with both characters even as we recognize their flaws and pretensions.

If the city mouse is posturing as a pilgrim, the country mouse’s lifestyle is not exactly “honest” either. Both Marie’s version of this fable and Caxton’s simply describe the country mouse’s hole as “dark,” but Henryson’s description emphasizes the outlawish character of country mouse as he notes not only the darkness of her house, but also the furtive lack of fire or candles, saying “for commonly sic pykeris luffis not lycht” [for commonly such pilferers do not love the light].³⁹ The country mouse’s status as a skulking “pilferer” is reflected in the dinner she fixes her sister. It includes peas, cultivated fare which a mouse could not hope to produce or procure honestly. More so than many other Aesopic authors, Henryson frequently stresses the humorous incongruity of describing animals engaged in human activities (a mouse riding a horse, a unicorn sounding its own horn), so it may be that the reader is meant to view these peas—superficially an honest, simple food of the country from the human perspective—as paradoxically dishonest from a mouse’s point of view. At the conclusion of the fable, Henryson describes the country mouse’s diet after returning from the city. Her den is well supplied, with beans, peas, rye, and wheat, foods clearly pillaged from human stores, quite unlike the humble meal of acorns found in, for example, Gibbs’ collection.⁴⁰ John Marlin has described this “homely stock” as “charming and relaxed,” but the mice are hardly relaxed when “throw rankest gers and corne,/ And under buskis prevelie couth thay creip.” [through thickest grass and corn and under bushes secretly they crept.]⁴¹ The acquisition of this grain, Henryson seems to stress, would be a harrowing affair.

But if Henryson at times undercuts the received Aesopic moral of the inherent honesty of country life, the country mouse herself is confident of the righteousness of her position. When the city mouse complains about the food, the country mouse responds by saying:

serves to bring about a realism and humanity to the fable, further encouraging the readers to align themselves with the animal characters.

³⁹ 203.

⁴⁰ Marie and Caxton only indicate that food of some kind was shared.

⁴¹ 253-4. Marlin’s discussions of the mice is part of an argument for a lighthearted beginning to the fable collection (“Robert Henryson’s “Morall Fabillies.” p.139)

“Madam” (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 keip the rate and custome off my dame,
And off my syre, levand in povertie
For landis have we nane in propertie.”

[“Madame,” (said she), “you are the more to blame; my mother said, sister, when we were born, that you and I laid both in one womb. I keep the rate and custom of my mother, and of my father, living in poverty, for land we have none in property.”]⁴² The country mouse reminds her sister that they were raised together, and that the city mouse grew up in just as much poverty as she did. In this very eloquent speech, the country mouse claims not only that she comes by her outlawish ways honestly, but further, she elevates these ways by establishing them as a legacy from her parents, and faults the city mouse for stepping outside of her family’s place in society. Henryson’s stress on the dishonest lifestyle of the country mouse nevertheless tends to call into question the value of keeping the “custome off my dame,” when that custom is the life of a sneakthief.

In contrast to many earlier Aesops, then, Henryson’s country mouse is self-conscious of her own claim on a superior life. When the two mice have a rhetorical battle as to whether to stay in the country or go to the city, each mouse seems to be equally eloquent in her speech. The reader would expect a defense of her “lifestyle” from the city mouse, but coming from the country mouse seems a bit strange. This moment of persuasion gives the country mouse a bit more agency—neither Gibbs, Marie, or the Caxton allow the country mouse to persuade the city mouse to stay; only the city mouse is giving agency to tempt the country mouse with the delicacies of the city. Tempting, when only done by the city mouse as in the other versions of this fable, makes her seem wily and dishonest, and the country mouse is simple and easily deceived, but allowing both mice a chance to manipulate again reminds the reader that the country mouse can be just as artful as her sister.⁴³

⁴² 212-7. While Gopen’s translation captures most of this speech, he combines the mention of the father and mother to say “I follow the fashion and traditions of my mother and my father.” The separating of the mention of the mice’s parents, I believe, serves to further emphasize their common upbringing, and therefore the city mouse’s straying from this upbringing.

⁴³ It is in stanzas 33-5 that the two mice verbally spar—the phrases I have chosen can be found there.

The country mouse remains vocal in her skepticism during her journey to the city. When they arrive at the city mouse's place they sit down to a vast meal "with all courses that Cukis culd devyne,/ Muttoun and beif, striking in tailyeis greit." [with all the courses that cooks could dream, mutton and beef cut into great strips.].⁴⁴ The city mouse turns to her sister and asks if she notices the difference between this and her lowly house and feast, to which the country mouse response "Ye, dame...bot how lang will this lest?" [Yes, dame, but how long will this last], to which the city mouse response "For evermair, I wait, and langer, too." [for evermore, I believe, and longer too].⁴⁵ Once again, in Henryson's version, the country mouse is given a unique agency to question the meal, where in other versions, she is simply a naïve participant. The country mouse knows—perhaps from her own life as a pillager, that something is going to go wrong, but begins to enjoy the feast nonetheless. After they had both eaten their fill, and were rejoicing in their meal, Henryson takes a moment to repeat with Aesopic authority the moral lesson voiced by the country mouse above: "Yit efter joy oftymes cummis cair,/ And troubill efter grit prosperitie.." [Yet after joy oftentimes comes care, and trouble after great prosperity]. Seemingly, Henryson's statement is calculated to confirm the country mouse's wisdom, yet it is striking to note that the country mouse ignored her own words in continuing with the feast.

Her inability to heed her own moral advice is soon punished when a steward enters the room and both mice have to scatter, leaving the remains of their feast behind. The city mouse ducks into her hold, but the country mouse has no place to hide, and is so overcome with fear that she falls into a swoon, almost dead. But the steward is just passing through, so they are left unharmed. The city mouse emerges from her hole to find her sister lying flat on the ground, scared nearly to death. In the versions offered in Gibbs's edition, as well as those of Marie, and of Caxton, this horrifying scene is enough to send the country mouse running back for her humble hole, but Henryson's outlawish mouse does not appear to be sufficiently impressed—her sister's pleas are able to convince her to sit back down at the table. Just as they begin to take a drink, however, they are interrupted by "Gib hunter, our Jolie Cat" who:

Fra fute to fute he kest hir to and ffra,
Quhyllis up, quhyllis down, als cant as ony kid;

⁴⁴ 269-70. Interestingly, here Henryson notes that they had all of the fixings of a feast of lords, but that they drank water instead of wine—but he is quick to note that they enjoyed themselves, even so. Why specify this one lacking?

⁴⁵ 278-9.

Quhylis wald he lat hir rin under the stra,
Quhylis wald he wink, and play with hir buk heid.

[from foot to foot he tossed her to and fro, sometimes up, sometimes down, as playful as any kid, sometimes he would let her run under the straw, sometimes he would wink and hit her blindly on the head.]⁴⁶ Eventually the country mouse is able to see a hole between the baseboard and the wall, and she slips in there, hanging by her claws so that the cat cannot catch her. After the terror of this experience, the country mouse, fed up with the uncertainty of city life, quickly heads back to her rural home, telling her sister: “Thy mangerie is mingit all with cair; Thy guse is gude, thy gansell sour as gall. [Your meal is mingled all with care; your goose is good, but your garlic sauce is bitter as gall]”⁴⁷. No other version of the fable involves this second threat of the cat, but the episode is a fitting one given the country mouse’s relationship to her own moralizing. Just as Gib the Hunter plays with her food, so too does the country mouse treat her own insights as mere playthings—tossed about and proudly touted but never fully put into practice.

At fable’s end, Henryson delivers the conclusion that his reader would expect—he emphasizes country living just as previous versions of this fable do, and encourages his reader to be honest and humble. The country mouse, we learn, lives out the rest of her days, in the country and never again returned to visit her sister. The fable ends: “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.” [Whenever she wanted, she had enough to eat, in quiet and without any fear, but she never returned to her sister’s feast.]⁴⁸ As noted above, though, the implication of her outlaw lifestyle is repeated again even here, as her diet is described in terms of pilfered “beinis and nuttis, peis, ry, and quheit” (beans and nuts, peas, rye and wheat).⁴⁹

In the *moralitas* to follow, Henryson seems to confirm the standard interpretation of this fable: “Blessed be the simple life without fear.” However, it could be easy to miss that Henryson prefaces his moral with a challenge to the reader: “Friends, if you take heed you will find in this fable a good morality.” Unlike the country mouse, who gives voice lightly to moral

⁴⁶ 330-333. The original Middle Scottish text shows more clearly the terror of the poor country mouse—the repeating of “Quhylis” seems to prolong the tossing of the mouse, and wearies the reader just as it would the mouse.

⁴⁷ 344-5.

⁴⁸ 362-4.

⁴⁹ 361.

pronouncements—only to ignore their implications and suffer feline torments—Henryson suggests a careful reader will heed the implications of the fable itself. And one implication surely is that country life is not without fear or trouble, despite the conventional happy ending tacked on at tale’s end. In fact, this ending explicitly contradicts the dire portrait of country life given earlier in the text. We are told, for instance, “This rurall mous in to the winter tyde/ Had hunger cauld, and tholit grit distress” [This country mouse in the winter-time had hunger, cold, and was affected with great distress]⁵⁰. This description oddly contradicts the fable’s conclusion that the country mouse lived happily ever after “as warm as woll”.⁵¹ Confidence in a continued secure, comfortably “wooly” existence for creatures who simply mind their own business is to be exposed as naive in later fables, such as one in which a sheep is unjustly stripped naked against the winter cold (see my discussion of “The Sheep and the Dog” below). At any rate, for most of the fable country life appears quite insecure and dangerous, as when the two mice must creep ““throw rankest gers and corne,/ And under buskis prevelie couth thay creip.”⁵² Such contradictions seem to demand a reader willing to interpret the fable on its own terms, without a slavish adherence to the *moralitas*.

Nor is it possible to dismiss aspects of the fable narrative which seem so at odds with the conclusion, as some critics have advised. As Stephen Khinoy points out, “We may feel tempted to indulge in strained re-readings of the tale in order to force it into harmony with the moral.” Or, we may simply define inconsistencies as chaff to be discarded, as John Marlin advocates, insisting upon the “relative unimportance of the tale’s humane details in determining its moral judgment: they are vulgar ‘vetches’ rather than ‘noble seed.’” But there is nothing vulgar in Henryson’s challenge of the reader to reconsider received ideas about his revision of the “two mice” tradition. In fact, Henryson seems to offer strange hints that the pat ending tacked on to the fable proper is not to be taken at face value, framing it as something he is unsure of: “I cannot tell how well she managed thereafter,” he slyly notes, “But I have heard tell” of her living “in quiet and ease, without any fear.” Surely Henryson does not wish us to take this at face value,

⁵⁰ 169-70. Gopen translates the sufferings of the country mouse to be “hunger, cold, and great distress,” but Henryson’s using “tholit” or “affected” before the “great distress” seems to indicate that he is emphasizing this.

⁵¹ 359.

⁵² 253-4. Translated earlier as “through thickest grass and corn, and under bushes, secretly they crept.

or dismiss these contradictions as “vetches.” Rather, we must think through the implications of both fable and *moralitas*, and their relationship.

And the implications of Henryson’s *moralitates* are notoriously difficult to untangle, not only because of their unusual length in comparison with earlier Aesops, but also because of their tendency towards complex and disconnected conclusions. For example, Jill Mann has pointed out how formally involved is the moral of the “Two Mice” fable, with its heightened and elaborate rhetoric and shift in stanza length (seven lines to eight lines). Mann speaks of the “rhetoricization” of the *moralitas* and argues that “the expansion of the *moralitas* makes room for a powerfully emotionalized reaction of the kind that the classic fable shuns.”⁵³ It also makes room, indeed challenges, the reader to reconsider an easy, standard reading based upon previous knowledge of the fable tradition. In fact, one curious contradiction within the first two stanzas of the *moralitas* involves a detail that is seemingly quite straightforward. First, Henryson pronounces that “so intermingled is adversity with earthly joy, so that no estate is free without trouble and some vexation.” This directly contradicts the happy fate of the mouse in the fable who lives ever after “in quiet and ease, without any fear.” This aspect of the moral also contradicts what we read in the next stanza: “Blessed be the simple life without fear.” This statement tempts the reader to seize upon the received, standard conclusion, so often capping the two mice fable in the Aesopica, that a rural life is somehow purer or more authentic. Henryson’s fable has certainly called that assumption into question. Perhaps, then, we should not assume that this “simple life without fear” is to be located within this world or is something to be achieved through simple living or by means of easy Aesopic chestnuts.

Confessions of the Fox

At this point in the collection, Henryson transitions from Aesopic fables to fables derived from the Reynardian beast epic. This shift, and indeed the inclusion of these non-Aesopic texts seems designed again emphasize the complexity of the fabulistic form by suggesting that other tales can also be used for moralistic learning. Henryson is exploring how moralizing works by

⁵³ Much of Jill Mann’s discussion on Henryson (“Henryson: the Epicized Fable” in *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 297.) is focused on the discussion of rhetoric and how it functions in Henryson’s fables.

finding different applications for his complex moral lessons. The third fable is also clearly influenced by Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, which Henryson certainly had read, and seems placed to caution readers against dismissing moral behavior as trivial. The fox (whom Henryson always calls Lawrence), hungry, goes into a particular widow's henhouse late at night, pretending to be friendly, tells Chanticleere that he had been a great friend of the rooster's father, and asks if he can do the same trick—close his eyes, crow, and spin around three times. The rooster, full of pride, does, and is, of course, snatched by the fox. As he is carried away, the hens begin to mourn for their lost lover, but in a moment that is certainly meant to satire some widowed women, they then begin to rejoice, believing that they can easily find a better lover. The widowed woman herself is also mourning the loss of Chanticleere, and sends her dogs after the fox to bring him back. Lawrence panics when he sees the dogs, and Chanticleere, sensing his fear, advises him to turn around and tell the dogs that the fox and rooster are good friends, and they need not harm him. When Lawrence opens his mouth, Chanticleere is freed, and flies to a high branch. Lawrence tries to talk him into coming down again, saying that they could be friends, but this time Chanticleere sees through his lies and returns to the henhouse. Both characters, and their human counterparts are equally chastised in the moral, Chanticleere for his pride, and Lawrence for his false words. Henryson concludes by saying that both vanity and false flattery are equally dangerous, and both should be avoided—neither character behaved morally, and both were punished equally for this dismissal of the fable's lessons.

The fourth fable, "The Taill how this foirsaid Tod maid his Confessioun to Freir Wolf Waitskaith" [The Tale how this Same Fox made his Confession to Friar Wolf Troublemaker] delivers a very similar moral lesson. A reader familiar with fable tradition could immediately recognize both of the main characters, the fox and the wolf, as sly and conniving, and Henryson plays off this understanding as he uses the wolf to depict a clergyman. While the fox's death without a proper confession may seem to be the ultimate point of the story, Henryson also uses the character of the wolf to show that honesty cannot be found even in the church. The wolf makes some feeble attempts to force the fox into a more proper confession, but the fox ultimately persuades him to compromise, freeing himself from any real remorse. Just as Henryson shows that even the country mouse is forced to be dishonest, here he illustrates that the same is true of clergymen—in order to function within this world they too must be sly and conniving, dismissive of moral truth.

This fable appears to have two main aims—Henryson illustrates for his reader that even clergymen, who are suppose to behave extremely morally, have compromised their behavior, while also illustrating that the dismissive behavior of the fox, particularly towards moral lessons, is to be ultimately punished. In the beginning of the fable, Lawrence looks up at the night sky, and begins to observe the movings of the Zodiac, a discussion that seems to be influenced by the moving of the Zodiac found in the prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.⁵⁴ This similarity is likely to be noticed by the reader, particularly after the previous Chaucerian fable, and the connection between the two works seems to be meant to remind the reader that part of Henryson’s aim is indeed satire. Although Henryson’s work has other aims, the subtle connections between the two authors (the mouse’s pilgrimage, the fable, and again here) are enough to remind the reader that they are also to be comparing the animal characters to their own lives, looking for Henryson to illustrate their shortcomings through the movements and actions of the characters.⁵⁵

This moving of the Zodiac signs tells Lawrence that “with mischief myngit is my mortall fait/ My misleving the soner bot I mend; Deid is reward off sin and schamefull end.” [with mischief is my mortal fate mingled, my misliving I must soon ment, for death is the reward of sin and shameful end].⁵⁶ If set by itself, this lengthy discussion of the Zodiac would seem out of place for a work that advocates good living, with a focus on Christian redemption in heaven. But this explanation comes through Lawrence, who we have already seen to be a disreputable character through his actions in the previous fable. This, combined with the sly tricks he is about to pull, make this description of the Zodiac, and his supposed great knowledge—so great that Henryson refers to him as an authority as he is relaying the Zodiac movements—questionable at best. It would seem that here, Henryson is pulling out another character type to satire: Lawrence represents a man who only repents his wrong deeds when he feels that something bad is about to

⁵⁴ The lines (5-8) from the prologue are as follows: whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth/ Inspired hath in every holt and heeth/ Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne/ Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne. The mention of the moving sun, in particular, is echoed here, as Lawrence takes this to be a sign of his impending death (Geoffrey Chaucer, Larry Dean Benson, and F. N. (Fred Norris) Robinson. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987. Print, p. 23)

⁵⁵ Henryson’s descriptions of the Zodiac is actually quite poetic, particularly in the Old Scottish—the language moves fluidly from line to line, just as the various members of the Zodiac he is describing move into each other. Perhaps Henryson is giving an example of the smooth-talking fox, but more likely, he is showing off his excellent rhetorical skills. This description can be read in much greater detail in stanzas 89-92.

⁵⁶ 651-3.

happen to him—a man who makes a death-bed confession after living a terrible life, and certainly a man who has not listened to the morals of the fables.

Henryson then moves directly into the body of the fable, so as to illustrate the ways that moral behavior can be easily sloughed off for worldly pleasure. Lawrence, upon coming to this realization about his fate, decides he had best find a confessor to rid him of his sins. He happens upon “an worthie Doctour of Divinitie, Freir Wolff Waitskaith,” who Henryson calls a clever scholastic, fresh from the cloister—the world is clever, but in no way is he wise—he is just as wiley as the fox; his recent moving from the cloister can be read to mean that Henryson is going to comment on a newer class of clergy. Lawrence prostrates himself before the wolf, bowing and cringing repeatedly. The wolf asks why he is putting on such airs, and the fox says that he has reason for such behavior. He begins to flatter the wolf as a great ecclesiastic:

Ye ar Mirrour, Lanterne, and sicker way,
Suld gyde sic sempill fold as me to grace.
Your bair feit and your Russet Coull off gray,
Your lene cheik, your pail and pietious face,
Schawis to me your perfite halines.

[You are Mirror, Lantern, and the sure way, should guide such simple folk as me to grace. Your bare feet and your russet cowl of grey, your lean cheek, you pale and piteous face, show to me your perfect holiness.]⁵⁷ Calling the friar not just the mirror and lantern, which clergymen are to be so as to reflect the almighty or light the way to him, but the sure way, comes very close to heresy. But the flattery seems to work on the “clever” wolf, who does not deny any of these thing, nor chastise the fox for placing him equal to Christ, but simply laughs and says “It plesis me that ye are penitent.” The fox says that because of his life of robbery and theft he has much to repent, and the wolf asks him to kneel and beings the “Benedicite.”

The friar begins by asking if the fox is “contrite and sorie,” but Lawrence, disregarding any kind of moralistic learning about honesty, is not afraid for his future and admits that he is not:

Me think that henis ar sa honie sweit,
And Lambes flesche that new ar letting bluid,
For to repend my mynd can not conclud

⁵⁷ 677-80.

Bot off this thing, that I haif slane sa few.

[I think that hens are so honey sweet, as is lamb's flesh that is new letting blood, for to repent my mind cannot conclude, but of this thing, that I have slain so few.]⁵⁸ To this lack of penitence the wolf replies "Weill...in faith thow art ane schrew" [well...in faith you are a shrew], but he accepts the excuse, and asks the fox if he could at least abstain from these things in the future to mend his ways.⁵⁹ Lawrence is incapable, even of that, and asks the wolf how then he would live, as "Neid causis me to steill quhair evir I wend./ I eschame to thig, I can not wirk, ye wait,/ Yit wald I fane pretend to gentill stait." [Need causes me to steal wherever I go, I am ashamed to beg, and I cannot work as you know, yet I pretend a gentle state.]⁶⁰ Henryson aligns the friar wolf with the fox by the assumed familiarity as Lawrence says "as you well know" when referring to his inability to work—although the reason for this isn't mentioned, the reader is to assume he is not hireable because of his lying nature, and that the wolf, even in the position of clergyman, shares this nature, and can therefore understand Lawrence's trouble. And just as this implies, the wolf empathizes with his inability to turn from his thieving ways, and says "thow wantis pointis twa/ Belangand to perfyte Confessioun./ To the third part off penitence let us ga." [thou want two points belonging to perfect confession, to the third part of penitence let us go.]⁶¹ The wolf is very willing to overlook these parts of confession, and simply moves on to the third part, asking if he is willing to suffer pains for his transgressions. The fox, again, has some kind of excuse: "consider my Complexioun./ Selie and waik, and off my Nature tender;/ Lo, will ye se, I am baith lene and sklender." [consider my complexion, fragile and weak, and of my nature tender, lo, will you see, I am both lean and slender.]⁶² Realizing he may have to compromise, the fox then agrees to some penance, which the wolf determines as a forbearance from eating meat until Easter to "tame this Corps."

But even this cannot satisfy the negotiating fox—he says he can abstain, but only if he would be allowed to eat some sausages or lap up a bit of blood, or eat a head or a foot, in case he has no other meat in his diet. And the wolf, once again, agrees, saying that this would be permissible twice a week, for "neid may haif na Law." The wolf, for all of his compromising,

⁵⁸ 700-3.

⁵⁹ 704.

⁶⁰ 709-11.

⁶¹ 712-4.

⁶² 716-8.

has not instituted much of a punishment at all—he seems willing to bend the rules for a character that is very like him. Through this, Henryson has presented a clear satire of the clergy, and of friars in particular, as very liberal, willing to work with the confessee to come to some kind of compromise, rather than adhering to the law of the church. Perhaps influenced by Chaucer’s satirical presentations of clergymen, especially the overweight, self-indulgent friar, Henryson shows that the church in Scotland is just as corrupt.

But the fox cannot retain even this small moral message. The wolf then leaves, and Lawrence is left to try to find some fish, as this is all he is permitted to eat. But he does not want to fight the rapids, and he reasons that he has neither boat nor bait to try to make a catch, so when he sees a nearby goat herd he quickly decides to steal a kid instead. Then, in an effort to redeem himself, he “baptizes” the kid, saying “’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.” [‘Go down, Sir Kid; come up again Sir Salmon!’ He continued until the Kid was dead; then he dragged him to land, and of that newly-created Salmon he ate his fill.]⁶³ Trivializing all of the lessons fable collection may teach about caution, the fox then heads to an area where he can warm himself, and sprawls out, belly up in the sun. Foreshadowing what was about to happen, Lawrence comments how vulnerable he is, and how easily an arrow could pierce his stomach. Of course, the keeper of the goats sees Lawrence sunning himself, and promptly shoots him with an arrow, pinning him to the ground, and killing him. In revenge for what he had done to the kid, the keeper skins Lawrence, and the fable ends.

Here, it is interesting to note that this fable actually has roots in two different stories. The story of the fox making hysterical confessions can be found in the *Roman de Renart*, but this epic does not contain the story of the capturing and baptizing of the kid. There are many versions of an epic that tell of Reynard dubbing a lamb or a kid a “salmon” to make him suitable for eating during lent, but this is the first and only version where the kid is actually baptized to become a salmon. Denton Fox argues that Henryson has come to this synthesis of stories, and includes the discussion of the baptizing of the kid so that he could discuss two sacraments through one work.⁶⁴ Through the wily character of the fox, Henryson shows that even something

⁶³ 751-3.

⁶⁴ Fox makes this connection in his edition of Henryson’s fables, and it does seem to be a very logical conclusion for why Henryson would chose to unite these particular stories. *The poems of Robert Henryson*. Oxford: Clarendon Press ;, 1981. Print, p. 223.

as sacred as the sacraments can be easily twisted to become just another tool in deception. The use of the sacraments fits well within Henryson's work, particularly following the two mice, where each mouse uses rhetoric to persuade the other, and the tale of Chanticleere, where words and speech are what gets each character into trouble—a sacrament is nothing but words, yet this language is suppose to bring about a real change. In the case of Lawrence, Henryson shows that these words can be misappropriated to bring about negative change just as easily as they can be used positively. Jill Mann too discusses the types of rhetoric used in the text—up until the end of the fable, the fox's rhetoric is sly and effective. He is able to prevent himself from having to do any kind of true repentance simply through a complicated set of verbal arguments. Yet, just as with the two mice, all of this rhetoric means nothing in the end—where the mice each just return to their way of life, the fox is not able to talk himself out of his sudden death, nor is he able to talk his way into a last minute confession. Mann argues that these instances are only just the beginning of misplaced rhetoric in the fables—Henryson allows this to happen again and again to demonstrate to his reader that immoral action always trumps words.⁶⁵

Henryson's *moralitas* is short for this fable—just as the reader expects, the fox's death is an example for such men to sincerely repent, for although they may think their lives are too “sweit” to abandon, they may reach an untimely death, and thereby live a terrible afterlife. But, just as with the previous fable, Henryson does not mention all of the intended morals in his *moralitas*. Just as the feuding hens are not mentioned, neither is the wolf, the incompetent, compromising clergyman mentioned. Again, Henryson is counting on his reader to have understood, after the careful moralizing of the first two fables, that they must read carefully beyond his explanations, into the fables themselves, to see all of what he means to comment on—yet another way that he illustrates the complex nature of fable morals. Even the wolf gives an example of the fatalistic lessons that Henryson is teaching his readers through the bodies of fables—even men within the clergy are forced to behave immorally.

John Marlin even suggests that this leaving out of the wolf was intentional—Henryson undermines his audience's expectations consciously as a feature of his work. He argues that Henryson presents himself as an arbiter of significance who can define significance where he deems it necessary, or refuse to declare it as well. He defines the parts of the fables that he

⁶⁵ This too is a part of Mann's argument about the function of rhetoric within Henryson's fable collection (*From Reynard to Aesop*, p. 282)

deems necessary for his purposes, and meaningfully leaves the other parts undefined.⁶⁶ Where the morals attempt to encourage proper living, the unmentioned trajectory of the fables teaches a different lesson—even living according to these morals may not help while on this earth. Henryson is consciously aware of this leaving out of meaning, so he makes sure to provide enough details within the narrative of the story for the correct meaning to be determined by a careful reader as they begin to realize the trajectory of Henryson's fables. What Marlin does not mention is that the details that Henryson leaves unexplained are often the ones that differ from fable tradition, so they are the ones that his reader would have paid close attention to, and they will quickly realize that Henryson is intending them to understand that moral living is not easily defined, and furthermore, may not be rewarded on this earth in the straightforward way the fables depict.

So the man who could only be prompted to make repentance when he sees a terrible fate in the stars still dies, unexpectedly, without a true confession, and without completing the necessary steps for absolution. This illustrates for Henryson's readers the eternal consequences of trivializing the lessons of the fables. In the fox's actions, deceitful all throughout the fable, Henryson shows that this kind of man could easily meet his end in an unexpected way, without having a last minute "change of heart." Henryson uses the lengthy description of the Zodiac in the beginning of the fable, combined with the actions of the fox, to show that a man, as "learned" as he may claim to be in earthly things, still must live morally to avoid a gruesome end.

The Sheep and the Dog

The fifth fable, "The Trial of the Fox" follows in much the same vein, showing various animals punished for making wrong choices, but in the sixth fable, Henryson shifts focus entirely to drive home the infertility of moral behavior through punishing an innocent character. The sheep has done nothing wrong, yet she is prosecuted by an unfair and arbitrary court, and

⁶⁶ Marlin ("Robert Henryson's "Morall Fabillies," p. 140), draws attention to Henryson's conscious role as arbiter in his leaving out of moral significance, but I think that this can also be seen in the way that he does develop moral significance within the fables for the things that he sees as important—but not important to develop later.

condemned to pay back a debt she never owed to the dog. The sheep appeals this charge both honestly and skillfully, expertly challenging the legality of the dog's case, but neither moral rectitude or honest intelligence is rewarded in this instance—in the end she is forced to shear her fleece and sell it to pay back the debt, and is left shivering to weather the winter. The world Henryson presents here is one in which wickedness is rewarded—those who try to live by the law rather than manipulating it are only punished for a lack of shrewdness. More than this, though, is a growing sense of the challenging of the Aesopic outlook itself. If Lerer is right that Aesop traditionally offers lessons both on how “to please and fool” authorities as well as on how “to chart a moral path through temptation,” this fable has more in common with the amoral Reynardian world of the beast epic (though the fox plays only a cameo role in the tale).⁶⁷ In fact, the sheep behaves exactly as fable tradition would teach her to behave—she is both honest and knowledgeable in legal matters—yet Henryson implies that these strengths are not of much value in a world of such hopeless corruption.

The fable begins with a dog, who, in a scheme to gain money, brought a sheep before a court accusing him of stealing a loaf of bread. A raven (Sir Corbie), who “pykit had ffull mony Scheipis Ee” [who had pecked out many a dead sheep's eye] was chosen Summoner, and the sheep, frightened by the appearance of the raven, hurries to court.⁶⁸ The inclusion of a summoner is unique to Henryson's fable, and he is named from the Reynardian tradition—it seems that he may have added this extra member of the court system to show that all aspects of the legal system are corrupt, and also for his moral where he directly compares the raven to a false coroner. When the sheep arrives at court, he finds that the fox is the clerk and notary, and the kite and the vulture stood at the bar—any reader of Aesop would recognize these animals not only as predators and scavengers that would enjoy feasting on the sheep, but also as untrustworthy animals; if there was any doubt Henryson establishes that “thocht it wes fals, thay had na conscience.” [Though it (the charge) was false, they showed no conscience.]⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Again, this is a part of Lerer's discussion on how fables work when read as children's literature. Even if some argue that this was not the original or intended function of the fables, it remains that it is certainly the modern function, and was likely a medieval function as well. (*Children's Literature*, p. 60)

⁶⁸ 1161.

⁶⁹ 1180. Gopen translates this “though the charge was false, they showed not a sign of conscience,” but the original does not mention the charge, so I find it better in parenthesis, and the second part of the line “thay had na conscience,” can translate more neatly into “they had no conscience”—saying that they had no conscience also illustrates more clearly to the reader that the fox, kite, and vulture had no moral conscience at all, not just in this particular instance.

The Fox clerk calls the sheep, and delivers the charge: “Ane certaine breid, worth five schilling of mair,/ Thow aw the Doig, off quhilk the terme is gone.” [A certain loaf of break, worth five shillings or more, you owe the Dog, for which the term has expired].⁷⁰ The sheep, realizing the situation is stacked against him, objects to the judge, the time, and the place of the trial, saying that the members of the court are mortal enemies of his kind, the place is too distant, and the time not within the term of the court, and also too late in the evening:

The Law sayis it is richt perilous
Till enter in pley befor an Juge suspect;
And ye, Schir Wolff, hes bene richy odious
To me, for with your Tuskis ravenous
Hes slane full mony kinnismen off mine;
Thairfoir, as Juge suspect, I yow decline.
And schortlie, of this Court ye memberis all,
Baith Assessouris, Clerk, and Advocate,
To me and myne are enemies mortall,
And ay he bene, as mony Scheipheird wate.
The place is fer, the tyme is feriate,
Quhairfoir na juge suld sit in Consistory
Sa lait at evin, I yow accuse ffor thy.

[The law says it is right perilous to enter in plea before a suspect judge, and you, Sir Wolf, have been very odious to me, for with your ravenous teeth you have slain many kinsman of mine; therefore, as Judge suspect, I you decline. And shortly, of this court, you members all, both Advisors, Clerk, and Advocate, are mortal enemies to me and mine, and have been, as many shepherds agree. The place is far, the time is late, wherefore no judge should sit in wisdom so late in the evening, I accuse your for these reasons]⁷¹ In this very eloquent plea he appeals to the law, offers the Shepherd as a witness, and gives clear examples for all of his complaints. Henryson has set up the sheep as a logical and wise character, juxtaposing his rationality against the brash, harsh characters of the Wolf and the other members of the court.

⁷⁰ 1183-5.

⁷¹ 1191-1201.

As Jill Mann emphasizes, the sheep has presented an elaborate rhetorical argument, both in the fable to try to illustrate that the court was unfair, and later in the moral as she appeals to God. But all of her efforts are ignored by the outcome of the fable—she cannot talk her way into justice on this earth as the mice were able to convince each other, or even as Chanticleere was able to deceive the fox. The entire legal system is hopelessly impenetrable in its convolutions of corruption.⁷² Mann’s analysis of the sheep’s artful rhetoric only shows further the helplessness of the innocent, precisely because the victim constructs her defense with such unimpeachable skill. Had this speech been deceptive and manipulating like the dog’s, the sheep may have escaped punishment—but not Aesopic censure. Had it been bumbling and inept, the practical moral would also be clear.

To address the sheep’s concerns, the judge (the wolf) orders that two arbitrators be assigned to the case to determine if the sheep should submit to trial; the bear and the badger are assigned the role. After combing through “the Codis and Digestis new and ald,” [The Code and Digests, new and old,] and examining the arguments “*Contra et pro*,” [for and against] the bear and badger determine that the trial is fair and the sheep must come before the wolf and his court. Henryson is careful to root this stanza in legal terminology—the bear and badger look through official legal books before making their decision, and Henryson does tell his reader that they kept close to the text of these as “trew Jugis,; I beschrew thame ay that leis.” [true Judges, I curse them that lie.]⁷³ But he never determines for his reader if the choice of arbitrators or their decision is fair as he does with the members of the court; he simply says “On Clerkis I do it, gif this sentence wes leill.” [I put it on the scholars to determine if this sentence was trustworthy] so that it is up to the reader to make the moral decision in this situation.⁷⁴ By putting such an emphasis on the use of legal documents, and saying that the Bear and the Badger acted as true judges (rather than, say, “fair” judges), Henryson shifts emphasis from their individual culpability to the unfairness of the system (to which the Bear and Badger remain “true”).

⁷² This is not the first fable Mann (*From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 279) cites that has this same useless rhetoric—she also previously discusses the Paddock and the Mouse, as well as the Preaching of the Sparrow as other examples of ineffective rhetoric on the part of the animals.

⁷³ 1222.

⁷⁴ 1229. The word “leill,” which cannot be easily translated by the modern reader, is a shortened version of “leal steek,” which means secure, firm, and trustworthy. The phrase “I do it” in the original implies more of a moral obligation on the part of the scholar to determine right from wrong, rather than simply leaving it to them as something of an afterthought, that the scholar is welcome to negotiate with if they desire.

When the day and time comes, the sheep appears before the court without an attorney or any legal advice (Henryson is careful to tell his reader this), and is accused of taking the bread. The sheep contests the charge, but the court, run by the fox (who Henryson again calls Lawrence), hurries the case to an end and the court condemns the sheep to either return the loaf of bread or repay the silver owed the dog. The sheep, afraid of further persecution, hurries to the town and sells the fleece off her back to purchase the bread with which to repay the dog, and returns to his fields with no fleece to keep warm. In the *moralitas*, in the midst of his carefully explicating the allegorical significance of each ravaging member of the legal bureaucracy, Henryson will return to the figure of this naked sheep and its heavy lamentation. It is worth noting, though, that Henryson's fable with all its injustice does not end on quite as violent a note as others in the tradition. In Marie de France's fable, for instance, the sheep suffers a worse fate than even Henryson's—she freezes to death without her fleece, and is ripped to bits by the hungry dog, kite, and wolf.

Although rooted in tradition, then, Henryson's fable and *moralitas* arguably represent a striking departure from Aesopic expectations, and not only because of the sheep's survival. For the most part, in fact, Henryson's fable of the Sheep and the Dog has plenty of Aesopic precedent: in its essential plot points, the version of this fable in Gibbs's collection tells the same tale. It is not so much the fable's narrative, then, that distinguishes it from earlier Aesops (though it is considerably more fleshed out in Henryson's version). Rather, it is the perspective on the fable Henryson presents that is striking. Frequently in the Aesopica, various fables are defined as directed at particular kinds of people and situations. In the version found in Gibbs, the fable of the Sheep and the Dog is defined as "for someone who treacherously persecutes and destroys innocent people."⁷⁵ The fable is explicitly "aimed," then, at certain people and certain behaviors—at least in its rhetoric. Simply put, such fables discourage wicked attitudes and actions by showing just how harmful they can be. Henryson's version, by contrast, is not "for the wicked," nor is it directed at persuading bureaucratic villains such as the allegorized raven, dog, and bear to reform their corrupted court. Such figures as "Sir Corbie," the corrupt Summoner are simply inevitable features of a fallen world. This fable is not "for" them, for in this allegorized state they are simply representative of a certain kind of fallen reality.

⁷⁵ This fable is number 175 in Gibbs's *Aesop's Fables* (p. 90).

Rather, the fable is “for” the sheep, but it is unclear what practical Aesopic advice might be offered. As Henryson is at pains to stress, the Sheep “gave answer in the cace” [responded to the circumstance] and her case is both just and legally sound.⁷⁶ Her only fault, if it can be called a fault, is to proceed “but Advocate, allone” [without counsel, alone]. At two points in the tale does Henryson stress this decision, once when first formally charged and once again at the hearing in which sentence is passed. Henryson clearly wants us to understand the sheep as a figure who, unwilling to play by the corrupted professional rules of the court, is destroyed by it. But this does not mean that the sheep *should* have hired a corrupted official to represent her. Such a decision, presumably, would only position her as one more allegorical figure in a rogues’ gallery of the court system.

Parsing this allegory is the focus of the first half of Henryson’s *moralitas* of the fable. For the first several stanzas, he itemizes the characters in the fable, giving them each a direct relationship to a human member of Scottish culture. The sheep he likens to the commoners, who are daily oppressed

Be Tirrane men, 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.

[By tyrannous men, who direct all their energy towards gaining possessions by unjust means, trusting that this present life will last forever; but, completely deceived, their life will soon end and go after death to everlasting pains.]⁷⁷ The wolf he likens to a sheriff, who buys the right to collect fines in the name of the king, and the raven to a false coroner, who has a life of offenders to bring to judgment “bot luke gif he be of trew Intent,/ To scaip out Johne, and wryte in Will or Wat,/ And swa ane bud at boith the parties skat. [But judge for yourself if he be of true mind, to scratch out John and write in Will or Walt, and take a bribe from both the parties involved.]⁷⁸

⁷⁶ 1186.

⁷⁷ 1260-4.

⁷⁸ 1276-8.

Henryson mentions the fox and the kite, but only to say that he has mentioned them before, and will say no more here.⁷⁹

Henryson uses these characters to offer a different kind of satire—a commentary on the entire legal system and its flaws. However, focusing on this specific collection of characters seems a bit odd—the fox, kite, and vulture have just as big of a role to play, and it is the bear and badger that ultimately determine that the trial is to continue, where the raven actually plays a very small part in deciding the sheep’s fate. Whereas in the previous Trial of the Fox, Henryson is careful to moralize all of the main characters for the reader—both good and bad, here he is perhaps now allowing them to make their own moral judgments on some characters, much as he inserts small moral lessons in many of the other fables without bringing them up in the *moralitas*. Or perhaps it is not so much a matter of leaving some allegorical interpretations up to the reader as a sense of the profound limitations of such analysis, for Henryson’s careful explication of the allegory in the *moralitas* is not so much incomplete as *interrupted* by something of apparently greater importance.

This interruption must be counted as one of the most interesting moments in Henryson’s Aesop. In the fourth stanza of the *moralitas*, Henryson suddenly breaks from his droning allegorical exegesis and presents himself as a character in his own text, telling his reader that as he was walking one day, he happened to pass by the sheep and hear his lament. Such a move has very little, if any, Aesopic precedent: while the *moralitas* may be embedded within the fable proper (as a so-called “endomythium”), the fable narrative is not normally allowed to encroach upon the author’s position of detached moralizing. Here, Henryson jarringly shifts his position from Aesopic authority to sympathetic observer: “for as I passit by/ Quhair that he lay, on cais I lukit down,/ And hard him mak sair lamentation.” [for as I passed by where he lay, by change I looked down, and heard him make this lamentation].⁸⁰ It is now the middle of the winter, and the sheep, shivering from the cold, lifts his eyes toward the heavens, and cries:

‘Lord God, quhy sleipis thow sa lang?

Walk, and discerne my cause, groundit on richt;

⁷⁹ Henryson’s reader certainly does not need to hear any more about the character of the fox to be convinced of his wickedness after reading the sequence of stories that come before this fable, but the Kite does not seem to be mentioned anywhere else previously. Perhaps the character of the Kite, who, after all, feeds on other animals dying flesh, was well enough known that Henryson didn’t feel it necessary to define this for his readers?

⁸⁰ 1283-5.

Se how I am, be fraud, maistrie, and slicht,

Peillit full bair'; and so is mony one

Now in this world, richt wonder, wo begone!

[‘Lord God, why do you sleep so long? Awake and discern my case, grounded on right; see how I am, by fraud, corruption, and slight, stripped full bare,’ and so are many now in this world, overcome with woe]⁸¹ The sheep’s cry, as Stephen Khinoy stresses, breaks the narrative frame to harshly remind the reader that there is no justice from the church or the crown, and God has mysteriously allowed all of this to happen.⁸² This lament explains why Henryson could not have simply allowed the sheep to be murdered as she was in Marie de France’s fable—even if such a fate may have driven home the cruelty of the system more clearly. The sheep’s naked reappearance in the moral shifts the focus to naked animal suffering rather than the absurdities of the court. In this context, allegorizing the petty corruptions of the legal system is a futile exercise—one which Henryson strikingly interrupts with an image of a beast stripped bare to the force of “Boreas with his blasts.”

Henryson follows this snapshot with a lament of his own, which highlights the sin of covetous (which we are to assume the dog is guilty of) for doing away “lufe, lawtie, and Law” [love, loyalty, and Law], and the lack of justice to determine the truth without prejudice.⁸³ He then, just as the sheep laments directly to God, asking if He does not see the chaos the world is in, with the poor man being stripped of all he has, plagued by war and disease, while the great man continues to profit. He ends his lament, and the *moralitas* by giving his reader a shred of hope: “We pure pepill as now may do no moir/ Bot pray to the, sen that we ar opprest/ In to this eirth, grant us in hevin gude rest. [we poor people, as of now, may do no more, but pray to thee, since we are oppressed on this earth, in heaven grant us rest. As I have argued in relation to the *moralitas* of the fable of the two mice, “the simple life without fear” is not to be found in this world.

⁸¹ 1295-9.

⁸² “Tale-Moral Relationships in Henryson’s *Moral Fables*” p. 107. The sheep certainly does, as Khinoy suggests, break the narrative frame, but this does far more than simple make the audience uncomfortable as he suggests—it gives a place for an outlook of the world that may have been ignored had it been the part of the body of a fable.

⁸³ The mention of loyalty, love, and law is in 1301

The Lion and the Mouse

The next story, the Lion and the Mouse, is the central fable in the collection and unique for a number of reasons. The actual fable itself, the story of the Lion and the Mouse, where the lion preserves the mouse's life, and in return she nibbles free his bonds when he is later trapped by hunters, is the only fable in the collection that ends happily for both characters, and where there is no "villain" per se. This fable, Aesopic in origin, is one of the most utopian of all fables in Henryson's work—it shows what could happen in a perfect world, where everyone acts morally and humbly. The stated aim of this fable in most collections is to illustrate what would happen if everyone followed the morals of the fables perfectly so that, as Gibbs' moral indicated, "no one dares to harm even the smallest among us."⁸⁴ However, in Henryson's collection, surrounded by fables meant to indicate that following the morals of the fables can be much more complex than the reader may have anticipated, this fable takes on an ironic and satirical tone, showing that these moral teachings may not be so easily defined here on earth.

There are many possible reasons why Henryson would have chosen to represent Aesop in his fables, particularly at this point. George Clark suggests that he does so to discuss the master/pupil relationship, which indeed seems plausible, as Henryson was likely a schoolmaster himself. Here Henryson becomes the pupil, submitting to the authority of the ultimate teacher of fables, Aesop himself.⁸⁵ Jill Mann suggests that Henryson is using Aesop to show that all rhetoric—even the rhetoric of preaching, as Aesop suggests to the narrator, has become ineffective.⁸⁶ Tim Machan has argued that Henryson uses this narrative device to draw attention to himself as a writer—he questions the authority of Aesop and the Aesopic tradition by bringing him into the fables, and then showing that the fable he tells is ineffective. Henryson asserts dominance over Aesop by silencing his protests, and forcing him to tell a fable, while also marking his own responsibility for the ethical and moral utterances of his characters, and

⁸⁴ The fable of the Lion and the Mouse is number 70 in the Gibbs. (*Aesop's Fables*, p. 37)

⁸⁵ Clark ("Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transformed." *ELH* 43.1 (1976): 1-18. Print, p. 3), also believes that Henryson includes Aesop in order to make the separation between himself as the narrator of his own fable collection and Aesop as the writer of the original fables absolute—the fables that are told by the narrator then become his alone, and only this central fable belongs to Aesop.

⁸⁶ Mann (*From Aesop to Reynard* p. 304), again uses a rhetorical approach to argue that Henryson is deliberately differing from tradition.

establishing himself as a moral authority.⁸⁷ To push these points further, it seems that in this central fable, through drawing in the master/student relationship with Aesop, Henryson is calling into question the fable tradition, and then illustrating the ways in which his own set of fables differs from this tradition by demanding a fable of Father Aesop himself, which forces him to admit the ineffectiveness of the fables. The utopian tale that Aesop tells only further illustrates that the kind of moral living that the fable tradition encourages may only be effective within a space where it is rewarded and reciprocated.

Henryson frames the “Lion and Mouse” fable with his narrator encountering in a dream vision no less a figure than “Maister Esope, Poet Lawriate.” This dream is dreamt in a setting of lush and idealized nature—it is mid-June, the sun has dried the dew, the flowers, “quhyte and reid” smell beautiful, the birds were “richt delitious,” and the morning was mild. Henryson even goes so far to say of the birdsong: “To heir it wes ane poynt off Paradise” [To hear it was a hint of Paradise].⁸⁸ This detail may also be a small hint to his reader that a place this perfect, where animals (and people) can live in this kind peaceful bliss can only be found in the afterlife—in actual Paradise. In other words, Henryson’s idyllic setting may perhaps strike the reader as a little too perfect and is perhaps best read as deliberately naive in the immediate wake of the bitter ending of “The Sheep and the Dog,” which fable it follows.

The Aesop that Henryson encounters is a little too perfect as well. In the dream, the narrator sees “The fairest man that ever befor I saw.”⁸⁹ He goes on to describe this fair man, saying that his gown was white as milk, his robe purple silk, his hood scarlet, and his beard white, his eyes grey. He describes the man as having a roll of paper in his hand, a quill behind his ear, and an impressive and immaculate physical presence. This description is somewhat unexpected, given traditional accounts of Aesop’s appearance. The *Life of Aesop*, which was often traditionally paired with the Aesopic fables (as it is, for example, in Caxton’s edition), describes Aesop as being “amonge other dyfformed and euylle shapen...corbe backed

⁸⁷In Machan’s essay, “Robert Henryson and Father Aesop: Authority in the *Moral Fables*,” (p. 203) he splits this usurpation of the authorial voice into three parts—the questioning of Aesop’s authority, the silencing of Aesop’s objections, and Henryson taking over from Aesop—the student from the teacher.

⁸⁸ 1337. Stanzas 189-91 describe this beautiful spring day, putting especial emphasis on the birds and the beauty of the flowers.

⁸⁹ 1348.

[hunchbacked]...and yet that whiche was werse he was dombe and coude not speke.”⁹⁰ The beautiful man that Henryson sees, who in the next stanza begins to speak, fits none of the distinguishing characteristics of this description. Mann suggests that this may be Henryson’s idea of a joke, but the humorous incongruity may also resonate in other ways.⁹¹ For instance, Henryson’s earlier allusion to Paradise raises in the reader’s mind the difference between fallen earthly existence and the hereafter. Henryson’s implicit argument that good can only come in the afterlife—that the Aesopic dream of charting a simultaneously prosperous and moral course of life on earth is nothing more than that (a dream)—is now emphasized and illustrated ironically through the image of an improbably idealized Aesop. The reader is given a vivid image of Paradise to propel them through the rough moral lessons that Henryson is going to continue to deliver—as they realize that there is no rescue from persecution in this life, at least they are able to see that even Aesop’s deformities have been corrected in heaven. And yet this figure is Aesop the man, not Aesop the text. When this “Poet Lawriate” opens his mouth—a title that surely puns on “Lawrience,” the name Henryson has chosen elsewhere to call his Reynardian fox—we learn that even Aesop has come to doubt the value of Aesopic discourse.

After Aesop introduces himself to the narrator, Henryson asks Aesop: “ar ye not he that all thir Fabillis wrate,/ Quhilk in effect, suppois thay fenyeit be,/ Ar full off prudence and moralitie?” [Are you not he that all the fables wrote, which in effect, though they be false, are full of prudence and morality.]⁹² Aesop confirms that he did, but then says “God wait gif that my hert wes merie than.” [God knows that my heart was merry then].⁹³ In this brief interchange, Henryson draws his reader’s attention to the fictional nature and limited value of the fable form. Although they are “full of prudence and morality” they are at the same time in some sense false (“fenyeit”), as he mentioned so poignantly in the prologue. On the one hand, of course, the false nature of the fables is simply their status as impossible fictions. However, Henryson’s beautified yet pessimistic Aesop suggests too that the belief that these morals can persuade may also be false: “For quhat is it worth to tell ane fenyeit taill,/ Quhen haly preching may na thing avail?” [For what is it worth to tell one false tale, when holy preaching may nothing avail?]. Even the

⁹⁰ Caxton (*Caxton’s Aesop* p. 27) also describes Aesop as having “a grete hede/ large visage/ longe lowes/ sharp eyen/ a short necke/ corbe backed (or hunchbacked)/ grete bely/ grete legges/ and large feet.

⁹¹ Mann’s discussion of Aesop’s appearance (*From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 303) also suggests that Henryson may be trying to describe his own appearance—figuring himself forth as both the narrator and Aesop himself.

⁹² 1379-81.

⁹³ 1383.

master himself is not convinced in the power of fables.⁹⁴ Aesop gives voice to a point that seems to be emerging from Henryson's fable collection—there is no hope left for the world—humanity is fallen, and a collection of false stories have no power to change that. After giving his answer to Henryson, Aesop even continues for another stanza detailing the state of the world—"the eir is deif, the hart is hard as stane, /Now oppin sin without correctioun," which makes even fables an impossible means through which moral lessons are taught.⁹⁵

And yet, surprisingly perhaps, the narrator persists in his request to be told a fable, in the hope that "Quha wait nor I may leir and beir away/ Sum thing thairby heireafter may avail?" [Who know but that I may learn from it and take away with me something that may be of use hereafter?]⁹⁶ Who knows? Aesop, we have seen, certainly knows that "Sa roustie is the world with canker blak/ That now my taillis may lytill succour mak." [So corrupted is the world with a black disease that now my tales may afford but little aid].⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Aesop agrees reluctantly to tell a fable, and thus begins the fable of the Lion and the Mouse. As in previous versions of the fable, Aesop relates how there was once a lion sleeping in a field who lay so still that a group of mice were not afraid of him, so they "dansand in ane gyis,/ And over the Lyoun lansit twyis or thryis." [danced in a form, and leapt over the lion twice or thrice]⁹⁸ The lion then awakes, and grabs the leader of the mice in his paw, and asks if he is aware that "I wes baith Lord and King/ Off beistis all?"⁹⁹ The poor mouse, left alone with the Lion as all of his friends hid in the bushes, has nothing to do but plead with the Lion for forgiveness. Where Gibbs fable 70 only mentions that the mouse "begged for mercy," and Caxton's rat (substituted for mouse again as in the fable of the two mice) only reasons "My lord pardonne me/ For of my deth nought ye shalle wyne," Henryson's mouse begins a long line of reasoning with the lion.¹⁰⁰ The mouse asks the lion to

Consider first my simple povertie,

⁹⁴ 1390.

⁹⁵ 1393-4.

⁹⁶ 1402-3.

⁹⁷ 1396-7.

⁹⁸ 1410-1 Gopen translates "gyis" as being in a round, but a more accurate translation seems to be after a fashion or form, meaning that the mice were dancing after a certain, but undefined manner.

⁹⁹ 1430-1

¹⁰⁰ It is in instances such as these, where the Gibbs (p. 37) uses only four words, where Henryson uses pages, that the complex nature of Henryson's text is the most evident. The Lion and the Mouse is fable 18 in the Caxton edition (*Caxton's Aesop* p. 86)—it seems that Caxton always replaces "mouse" with "rat" in his text. Marie de France also has a version of the Lion and the Mouse, which proceeds much as the Gibbs with the mouse simply pleading her cause (*Fables*, p. 71).

And syne thy mychtie hie Magnyfycence;
Se als how thingis done off Neglygence,
Nouthur off malice nor of ProdiSSIoun
Erer suld have grace and Remissioun.

[Consider first my simple poverty, and then your mighty, high magnificent, see also how things done in negligence neither of malice, nor of treason, ever should have grace and remission].¹⁰¹

The mouse then explains that he and his friends were so full from a great feast that they were provoked to dance, and that the lion lay so still and close to the earth that they thought he had died, otherwise they would not have danced upon him.

The lion, however, cannot be fooled, even by the mouse's appeal to his compassion. He calls the plea "thy fals excuse," and reminds the mouse that even if he had been dead, they ought to have revered his body simply because of his greatness. He tells the mouse that there is no defense for his sin, and sentences him "unto the Gallous harlit be the feit." [unto the Gallows to be drug by the feet.]¹⁰² This actual condemnation of the mouse is unique to Henryson's version of the fables—other collections simply tell that the lion "decided that to kill such a tiny creature would be a cause for reproach rather than glory."¹⁰³ Even in this most utopian of Henryson's fables, he cannot resist showing his audience that even with great persuasion, it is difficult for rulers to humble themselves to pardon those under them—this lion is so prideful that he believes the mice should have revered even his carcass. In order to obtain pardon, the mouse then begins to appeal to the methods that the Gibbs' pardon suggests—he tells the lion that he is too small of a victim, and that the Lion had little to gain from killing and eating "ane thowsand Myis." He also appeals to the compassion of the Lion, asking him to grant mercy:

Without mercie Justice is crueltie,
As said is in the Lawis spirituall;
Quhen Rigour sittis in the Tribunall.
The equitie of Law quha may sustene
Richt few or nane, but mercie gang between.

¹⁰¹ 1435-8.

¹⁰² 1460.

¹⁰³ Gibbs, *Aesop's Fables*, p. 37.

[Without mercy, justice is cruelty is said in the spiritual law, when rigor sits in the tribunal, the equity of law who may sustain right few or none, but that mercy goes between.]¹⁰⁴ This particular appeal shows the way the law ought to work, opposing the fable of the Sheep and the Dog, where the law was ignored. The mouse reminds the lion that even justice, when delivered without mercy, is cruelty, and that few could be pardoned from the law without mercy—this mercy was not shown to the sheep because of the corrupt court system in the previous fable, but here, the call for mercy has an effect on the lion. Reviving a theme from the first two fables, the mouse also appeals to the lion’s stomach. He pleads that “your Celsitude” is accustomed to delicious and tender meats, and he would not want to defile his teeth with one lowly mouse, and besides, he would not be pleasing to the lion’s stomach. This plea recalls the city mouse’s reasons for leaving the country, the cock’s rejection of the jasp for something edible, and even the sidetracked Lawrence’s stop to catch the lamb in the “Trial of the Fox,” to illustrate that perhaps it is man’s insatiable appetite that is part of what has put the earth in such an irredeemable state.

After the mouse’s plea, the lion “thocht according to ressoun,” and determines that he should indeed show mercy to the mouse. The mouse falls on her knees, and raises her hands to the heavens, just as Henryson and the sheep did in the previous fable, pardoned where they were not, and cries “Almichty God mot yow fforyeild!” [Almighty God might requite you]¹⁰⁵ In the repetition of this act across all three characters, Henryson is certainly trying to illustrate the positive effects that reason and mercy can have not just on earthly relationships, but also in man’s view of the divine.

But even the merciful Lion is not portrayed as kind—the next stanza tells that he then went off on the hunt, “and slew baith tayme and wyld, as he wes wont,/ And in the cuntrie maid ane grit deray;” [and slew both tame and wild animals, as he want, and in the country made great disturbance]¹⁰⁶ Again, just as with the thieving country mouse, Henryson implies that even the most honest or noble of creatures are forced to behave violently, simply because of the fallen state of humanity. The lion, even though he has just pardoned the mouse, is not able to pardon all animals; he must kill some to survive. Again, Henryson is deviating from tradition here—in

¹⁰⁴ 1470-4.

¹⁰⁵ 1509.

¹⁰⁶ 1513-4.

Gibbs the lion simply pardons the mouse, and then falls into the trap—there is no reason given for the trap, nor is the lion ever shown to be anything of a villain.

Henryson's lion, however, is purposefully ensnared by the people who have fallen victim to his inevitable "thieving." The people fashion a trap from ropes, and then send a pack of hunting dogs after the "cruell Lyoun." The lion, attempting to flee, falls into the net, and is entangled. The version of the fable in Gibbs represents the lion as roaring in its rage, but Henryson's lion more calmly reflects philosophically on its previous glory:

O lamit Lyoun, liggand heir sa law,
Quhair is the mycht off thy Magnyfycence,
Off quhome all brutall beist in eird stude aw,
And dred to luke upon thy Excellence?.

[O lame lion, lying here so low, where is the might of your magnificence, of whom all brutal beasts on the earth stand in awe, and dread to look upon the excellence?]¹⁰⁷ The lion comes to self-realization—here, when he is trapped, his great status cannot save him. The lion, representative, of course, of a great ruler, begins to realize that there is no one who can help him when he has not been kind to anyone—he comes to the moral realization that now he must face the consequences for his actions. Luckily, however, the one creature that he had treated kindly does hear him, and comes quickly to help him, calling all of her fellow mice to do the same. Even the mice realize that the lion has not been kind to anyone else, and therefore there is no one else to help him: "bot we him help, off succour wait he nane." [But we help him, he can expect no other aid]¹⁰⁸ The mice begin to chew through the chords that bind the lion, and he is freed.

With this, the character Aesop ends the fable, and the narrator prompts him to begin the moral, which he does. Just as with the previous few fables, the *moralitas* is an itemized social allegory. The lion, as indicated by his villainous nature in the fable, is said to represent a ruler who takes no pains to maintain justice, "but lyis still in lustis, sleuth, and sleip."¹⁰⁹ This relationship differs greatly from the traditional Gibbs' moral, which simply reminds the reader to treat even the smallest among us kindly. Even though the lion pardons the mouse, in portraying him as lazy, seeking his own pleasures, Henryson implies that this pardon may have been more

¹⁰⁷ 1531-4.

¹⁰⁸ 1556.

¹⁰⁹ 1581.

to protect his own stomach from the tough meat of the mouse than because of his own inclination towards mercy.

The allegory extends to the forest itself, with its beautiful flowers and soft wind, which are meant to represent the world. But Henryson then reminds that these flowers wither and the rains come, so that the world has “fals plesance myngit with cair repleit.” [false pleasures mingle with care.], and so even this is not as beautiful as it may seem.¹¹⁰ The mice represent the common man, “wantoun, unwise, without correctioun,” and who make rebellion and disobey because they do not fear their sovereigns. So just as the lion is a lazy, slothful ruler, so the mice, likely conditioned by his ruling, are allowed to do as they please, so they too have become corrupt. The next two stanzas make it clear that Henryson believes this corruption has come from the poor ruling of the lion—he reminds rulers that they must act out of pity for their people, and that lords who “rolland in warldle lust” are easily overcome by other false men, and that country men are always waiting to avenge themselves. Aesop then concludes the fable by telling Henryson to persuade the churchmen to pray that “tressoun of this cuntrie be exyld” and that justice reigns, and then, with these words, he vanishes, the narrator awakes, and the fable concludes.¹¹¹

This fable and its surrounding framework seem to have two functions within Henryson’s fable sequence. The encounter with a now-beautiful Aesop, the Paradise like setting, and the utopian outcome of the fable (that is all of the animals survive, and they mutually benefit each other) serve to emphasize the intended outcome of the fable tradition. Reason is used properly, each animal spares the other, and each comes to a significant moral realization.

But the unprecedented villainization of the lion, and the mouse’s appeal to the lion’s stomach imply that Henryson still wants his reader to realize that this scenario cannot play itself out anywhere but on the level of a schematized allegory. On this earth, rulers, even if they pardon some, are largely corrupt, governed by their own greed, and this corruption only breeds unrest and rebellious citizens, that will overthrow their ruler as soon as they catch him “lying down” as the lion was. The mice acknowledging that they are the only ones who will help the lion show that it is nothing short of a miracle that the lion has in fact behaved morally one time, and he is going to be rewarded for it—but only one time. Aesop presents Henryson with an

¹¹⁰ 1583.

¹¹¹ The reference to the lion rolling in world lust—a particularly apt one, as we first see the lion laying belly up—in on line 1603. The plea to the churchmen in on 1617.

optimistic fable and moral interpretation, yes, but the fable's internal contradictions and especially the context of its telling underlines the possible pitfalls of the Aesopic model.

It would be easy, indeed, to forget that context, but when Aesop explicates the moral and allegorical significance of the fable, Henryson-the-dreamer's own position in the world is implicated: "The fair Forest with levis lowne and le,/ With foulis sang and flouris ferlie sweit,/ Is bot the warld and his prosperitie,/ As fals plesance myngit with cair repleit." [The lovely forest, with leaves sheltered from the wind, with the song of birds and the flowers wonderfully sweet, is but the World and its prosperity, where false pleasures are mixed with pervading sorrow.]¹¹² This exegesis is directed explicitly at the mice and their antics in the "pleasant forest" of the fable. However, in its specific details this explication more precisely recalls Henryson's own idyllic ramble in the woodland landscape where he falls asleep to the pleasant sounds of birds and scents of flowers. Given this clear connection, is it reasonable to question further just what the "false pleasures" are which Aesop condemns? Surely those false pleasures must be related to the indulgent enjoyment of Aesopic fictions—tales which Aesop himself is reluctant to relate. In other words, Aesop's *moralitas* might be applied as much to Henryson-the-dreamer's desire for cheap Aesopic thrills as to the callow antics of the thoughtless mice.

The relationship between the mouse and the lion within the fable seems to mimic that between Henryson and Aesop—both seem to be pairs in the master/student mode which George Clark advocates. The Lion has the same kind of proverbial authority that Aesop has, but both the mouse and Henryson show that they have a kind of practical wisdom that allows them to manipulate or bend the more traditional knowledge of their master. Following the implications of this basic parallel, the mouse dancing on the "dead" body of the lion is tantalizingly suggestive of a frivolous approach to fabulistic discourse. Henryson certainly challenges and reconsiders the efficacy of the Aesopic moral in this fable, but in this moment, where the mouse is punished for his disrespect, reminds the reader that they must stop short of this kind of insolence toward such a well-respected body of work. Again, he is advocating a middle-ground, where simple fabular morals are questioned and exposed for their shortcomings, but not dismissed as trivial, or "dead" as the lion was.

¹¹² 1580-2.

The Preaching of the Swallow

The next fable, the Preaching of the Swallow, has been commented on extensively by both Denton Fox, and then later by George Clark, responding to Fox's work. Fox sees the work as a tragedy contained within a larger comedy. The tragedy—the birds, trapped by nets and killed, is prefaced by a statement about the divine order of the world, and then followed by an assurance of eternal joy.¹¹³ Clark builds off of this, emphasizing the element of time in the fable as an instrument of pessimistic realism. As the seasons progress, the birds are condemned, because ultimately the world, as the narrator describes it, includes evil. Clark finds, that as this fable follows the central fable by Aesop, it emphasizes the difference between Henryson's and Aesop's outlooks on the world, particularly as the story ends in the winter, and emphasizes death. He emphasizes that in other versions of the fable (such as the Gibbs) the birds are condemned simply because they fail to listen to the swallow, but in the Henryson version, the birds die because this is their state in life, because we all must die; time passes as a symbolization of this fate, and the ending in winter is an emphasis on the evil in the world.¹¹⁴ While the emphasis on the passage of time that Clark notes is indeed unique to Henryson's fables, it does seem that the birds are also punished for their failure to listen. The swallow attempts to pass on a kind of Aesopic wisdom, asking the birds to be active participants in their own future, but they refuse, preferring to sit back and allow fate to play out. In the end, Henryson emphasizes that the swallow's advice was indeed wise, and would have saved the other birds, had they heeded. Just as in the earlier Reynardian fables, Henryson seems to again be cautioning his reader of the essential seriousness of the fabular morals, even as he examines their limitations.

¹¹³ This view of the text appears to be true, but it also forces the reader to really consider if the fable really is a comedy—the lesson, even for the swallow, it quite rough—and there doesn't seem to be eternal joy for the birds—in fact their bodies and souls are sent to the “worm's kitchen”—that is hell—in the *moralitas*. “Henryson's Fables,” p. 354.

¹¹⁴ Clark's discussion (“Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transformed,” p. 11) of time in particular is likely one of the most accurate ways of looking at this fable—it is the elapse of time that reveals that the birds' ignorance has been to their own condemnation, and time that reveals that the swallow's preachings were indeed true.

As a transition from the exclamations of natural beauty in the beginning of the previous fable, this work too begins with a prologue of sorts discussing God's infinite power, and reminding man that he cannot dare to comprehend this power. It reminds of the many perfect parts of nature, and then describes the seasons, beginning with Summer, and ending with Winter before moving into the spring, when the fable begins. The narrator wanders through nature, admiring its beauty, until at last he sees some laborers, building a dike and guiding the plow. The narrator seems to be trying to avoid this kind of industry himself, and says: "it we grit Joy to him that luifit corne/ To se thame labour, baith at evin and morne." [it was great joy to him that loves corn, to see them labor both at evening and in the morn.]¹¹⁵ The narrator now is thinking of his own stomach, much as the earlier characters in the "Cock and the Jasp" and "The Country mouse and the City mouse," and even the lion that the reader has just seen spare the mouse because of her tastelessness. The narrator sits under a tree, and rather than observing all of nature that he has just described, he focuses on this one scene—that of industry.

In this wandering, hands-off attitude towards labor, and the focus on earthly reward, the narrator is taking Henryson's cautions that moral behavior may not be rewarded on this earth to an extreme. Rather than living morally, or even actively participating in earthly affairs, the narrator is now detached, thinking only of his needs, and removing himself from the daily work of the world. The narrator is dismissing the ways of living that are taught in the collection, and has decided to focus only on how his own stomach may be filled. Henryson seems to be wary that his readers, disappointed in the complexity will simply remove themselves from the world, or trivialize the necessity of earlier Aesops. He uses the following fable—"The Preaching of the Swallow" to shift the focus of the fables from the previous complex moral lesson, to showing that the moral lessons that the fabular tradition has taught are not to be taken lightly, even if he has revealed them and their resulting rewards as more complex.

But the narrator is startled away from his reflection on what the next meal may bring by a swallow, whom he overhears telling the other birds that the farmer has planted hemp, and that from this he will make nets to capture them. The swallow pleads with the other birds that they must go into the field and eat the seeds before they become victims of the nets, but the birds refuse to listen to the sparrow's insight, caring only for their immediate gratification, and they do not eat the seed. The swallow again pleads later in the summer, and again in the fall that the

¹¹⁵ 1725-6.

birds eat the seed, but again they do not listen, and when winter comes the birds were weak from lack of food. They take up residence among the harvested seeds in a barn, and the farmer, just as the swallow predicted, fashioned nets, and laid out chaff on top of them. Again, thinking only of their stomachs, the birds are so hungry they believe the chaff is grain, they begin to eat, and are trapped in the nets. This usage of the chaff is reminiscent of the cock in the first fable, who takes the chaff with the grain, preferring even the empty calories of the waste to the jasp, which he realizes is useless to him. These birds have also taken this empty chaff, but there is no grain mixed in—they, unlike the cock, do not have the wisdom to take only what they need. These birds are brutally punished for their lack of wisdom—Henryson describes their brutal death, saying the butcher “beit thay birdis down,” striking some on the head and some on the neck. The wise swallow escapes, and says that this often happens to those that don’t take advice, but she too has suffered, since she has lost all her friends.

In the *moralitas*, Henryson likens the farmer to a fiend, who goes about day and night, sowing poison in the soul of man. The birds that are caught in the trap he compares to wretched people who are interested only in the goods of this life, which are just like the chaff that was used to trap them—without substance. The swallow, who escaped from the fiend, is likened to a Preacher who warns people about the chaff, even if they do not listen—very reminiscent of the preaching that Aesop mentions as being ignored in the previous fable. Henryson then turns to lament, just as he did in the fable of the Sheep and the Dog, before the interjection of Aesop. This time he looks not to heaven, but to hell—“quhat cair, quhat weiping is and wo,/ Quehn Saull and bodie departit ar in twane!/ The bodie to the wormis Keitching go,/ The Saull to Frye” [what care, what weeping there is, and whoa, when the soul and body are parted in two. The body goes to the worms’ kitchen (the ground), and the soul to the fire]¹¹⁶ He reminds the reader that the chaff—earthly possessions that the unwise birds could not leave behind—are of no help in Hell, for they are of this world rather than eternal. He then ends the fable chiding the reader to pray for four things: to be “fra sin remufe,” to “seis all weir and stryfe,” to maintain “perfitte cheritie and lufe,” and lastly that in the end of our lives we may “in blis with Angellis to be fallow.”¹¹⁷ These prayers reflect the same kind of wisdom that Henryson has been advocating from the start—a kind of complex wisdom, but one that is very worth noting. Henryson’s brutal

¹¹⁶ 1930-3.

¹¹⁷ Henryson’s four requests—four wishes for his readers, are in stanza 278, lines 1945-9.

description of the eternal end for the birds emphasizes this—the casting off of moral lessons is not only unwise on earth, but brings about eternal damnation.

The Wolf and the Lamb

The next three fables in the collection serve to further emphasize the moral lesson that Henryson teaches in the *Preaching of the Swallow*: the moral lessons found in fable literature—including his own, complicated morals—must be taken very seriously. Even if this moral behavior may not benefit you in this fallen world, Henryson continues to believe that it will be rewarded in the afterlife. Both the ninth fable, “The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger”, and the tenth, “The Fox, the Wolf, and the Farmer” do this through the Reynardian tradition, an inclusion that again, much like in earlier Reynardian works, serves to emphasize the complexity of moral lessons, and illustrate the various places that these lessons can be found. In both fables the fox, again Lawrence, is the more cunning of the two characters, and he convinces the other character, a Wolf to act immorally; it is the wolf, ultimately, who is punished for Lawrence’s ideas. Lawrence himself remains unscathed in the fables—very different than the Lawrence that is punished for trivializing moral lessons and challenging an archer to hit him in the “Confessions of the Fox.” Henryson seems to be using this incarnation of Lawrence as a devil figure, who is able to move around causing others to fall without suffering himself, because he has already fallen. The moral lesson in these two fables seems very similar to that of the earlier Reynardian inclusions, as well as the previous “*Preaching of the Swallow*,” the wolf, but keeping bad company, is ignoring a basic Aesopic principle, and is punished for this mockery. The eleventh fable, “The Wolf and the Wether,” is Aesopic in origin, and operates very similarly—the wether dresses up in a dog’s skin, and is able to run off the wolf, until the skin shifts and the wolf realizes that the “dog” is in fact a sheep. The wether is then eaten by the wolf. This wether is not tempted as the wolf is, but he is disregarding another basic Aesopic lesson—he attempts to deceive. This lack of wisdom, too, is punished.

In the twelfth fable, Henryson begins to shift his moral focus slightly, so as to remind his readers of the examination of the complexity of moral lessons, and the emphasis on true wisdom that he argues for in the first half of the fables. This story, the Wolf and the Lamb, where the lamb is murdered simply for drinking in the same stream as the wolf, has a very similar feel to the earlier “Sheep and the Dog,” and again features the lamb as an innocent creature whose moral behavior cannot save them. This shift back to the lesson of the first half of the fables comes right before the end of the fables, as Henryson begins to sum up his work. This seems to mark that although the second lesson, emphasis of the seriousness of morality, is important, it is the original reworkings of fables so as to question the limitations of the fable form that Henryson wants his readers to take away with them. By returning to his earlier theme in these last two fables, Henryson ties his morals together—it becomes clear that he wants to emphasize the essential seriousness of the lessons learned in the fables, but all the while calling into question the various pitfalls of the fable form in conveying these morals a simple truths rather than complex wisdom.

In the very first stanza of this fable, the reader can see that Henryson has shifted his focus, for rather a deceptive character, and an even more evil villain, there are two contrasting animals. A “cruell Wolff” goes to a stream to drink, and is soon accompanied by an “selie Lamb” [spotless lamb], who cannot see the wolf, but has come to get a drink as well. Beyond just these descriptive adjectives, Henryson emphasizes the difference in these characters again in the next stanza. “Thus drank thay baith, but not of ane Intent;/ The Wolfis thocht wes all on wickitnes;/ The selie Lamb wes meik and Innocent” [Thus drank they both, but not of one intent; the wolf’s though was all on wickedness; the spotless Lamb was meek and innocent.]¹¹⁸ Again, the set up of this fable is very much like the earlier Sheep and the Dog rather than like the fables that directly precede it, with an innocent victim and an evil villain. Henryson then precedes to illustrate that, regardless of the protests of the lamb, the wolf, the “cruell” villain, will ultimately triumph over. The wolf approaches the lamb, accusing him: “How durst thow be sa bald to fyle this bruke/ Quhar I suld drink with thy foull slaving?” [How dare you be so bold as to defile this brook, where I should drink, with your foul slobbering]¹¹⁹ The wolf even tells the lamb that it would charitable to hang him for such a deed. The lamb, much like the earlier sheep, cannot

¹¹⁸ 2623-5.

¹¹⁹ 2632-3.

see what he has done wrong, but falls to his knees regardless, exclaiming that he has done nothing to cause the wolf any grief, and even further, he is drinking downstream from the wolf.

The Gibbs version of this fable contains a verbal sparring of sorts between the lamb and the wolf, where the lamb contradicts each of the accusations of the wolf, until the wolf tires of arguing and simply eats the lamb. In the next part of the fable, Henryson follows in this tradition, but uses only the argument against the lamb's father that the Caxton edition includes. This appeal directly to the heredity of the lamb illustrates that, just as in the early fable of the two mice, humble roots do not necessarily determine innocence. As the lamb argues for his purity, the wolf, exasperated, tells him that he has inherited this legalistic language from his father, who had offended the wolf previously. Although the poor lamb quotes scripture passages to prove that he should not be punished for his father's misdeeds, the wolf will not be persuaded.

In a move unique to this version of the fables, the lamb then tries to appeal to the court system, so that Henryson has the opportunity to once again show that there is no morality, even here. The reader of the collection will know from the *Sheep and the Dog* that this system is just as likely to condemn the lamb as the wolf alone is, but still the lamb attempts to convince the wolf that the lion, who serves as judge, could institute justice. But Henryson, having already shown this corruption allows the wolf to dismiss even the idea of a fair trial as ridiculous in the current legal system: "thow wald Intruse ressoun/ Quhair wrang and reif suld dwell in propertie." [You would insert reason where wrong and villainy should rightly rule]¹²⁰

Then, to emphasize that there is no escape from the villainy, the lamb, just as the sheep, is punished even though he has proved his innocence to the reader. This time, driving his view home, Henryson doesn't spare his reader—the lamb is gruesomely beheaded, the wolf drinks his blood, and then tears his flesh and eats it. Henryson ends the fable with a question, forcing his reader reflect on the lamb's innocence, and broaden the lesson to their own world: "Of his murther quhat sall we say, allace?/ Wes not this reuth, we not this grit pietie,/ To gar this selie Lamb but gilt thus de?" [Of his murder what shall we say, alace? Was not this a shame, was not this a great pity, that this spotless lamb should thus die]¹²¹ This cruelty isn't shown in many other versions of the fable—Henryson seems to be trying to an exceptionally strong point here. Following the precedent from the "*Sheep and the Dog*," it appears that the efficacy of moral

¹²⁰ 2693-4.

¹²¹ 2704-6.

behavior is being questioned. The sheep struggles vainly to prove her innocence, but her reward, also, can only come in the afterlife.

The *moralitas* begins much as the previous morals, by itemizing each character and ascribing them a meaning. Henryson begins by relating the lamb to the innocent people, and then wolf to oppressors of the poor, a reading that can hardly seem shocking to his readers. But, importantly, after using the previous three fables to showing how men can be easily persuaded to become villainous, Henryson finally defines specifically which types of men he is referring to. He determines three types of wolves which he claims now reign in this world: the false preventer of the laws, the mighty men who have plenty but are still greedy, and a man of inheritance who leases his land unfairly. This first type of wolf, Henryson has clearly illustrated in this fable—he implies that he knows right from wrong, but in fact his version of the law is a “fraudis Intricait.” This type of wolf, Henryson rewards with the fires of hell. The second type of wolf, who represents greed, reminds the reader of the fable of “The Fox, Wolf, and the Cadger,” where Lawrence incited the Wolf’s greed by tempting him with the “Nekherring,” the greatest of the Herrings, when they already had plenty. The third wolf, the reader may find a bit unfamiliar—Henryson gives us no examples of dishonest landowners in the fables, yet nonetheless he has found this to be an apt moment to warn his reader against them. This separation of the villain into a tripartite warning shows the importance of understanding the complexity of moral behavior—a clear-cut lesson between right and wrong will not suffice (just as it did not for the sheep) because there are many different types of wrong in the world that must be negotiated. This particular fable doesn’t have an attached moral in the Gibbs collection, making this complex moral even more notable, as it tries to address the suffering “lambs” that are represented in the fable.

The last stanza summarizes Henryson’s lament, and offers a prayer of hope for his readers, all the while serving as a kind of benediction for the fable collection. Henryson prays:

God keip the Lamb, quhilk is the Innocent,
From Wolfis byit and fell extortioneris;
God grant that wrangous men of fals Intent
Be manifest, an punischit as effeiris;
And God, as thow all rychteous prayer heiris,
Mot saif our King, and gif him hart and hand

All six Wolfis to banes of the land.

[God keep the Lamb, who is the Innocent, from the wolf's bite and false extortioners; God grant that evil men of false intent. Be manifest, and punished as suitable; and God, as you hear all righteous prayers, please save our king, and give him heart and hand to banish all such Wolves from the land]¹²² This prayer is very different from the lament at the end of the Sheep and the Dog—as a conclusion to the second half of the fables, Henryson offers a reason for his readers to live morally, even if this moral living is complex. Even as their world is ruled by “wolves,” perhaps God—and even more promising, a future just king, would someday rescue them from the torture that is depicted in the preceding fable.

This fable, just as the Sheep and the Dog, marks the end of a section of the collection. But this fable, even though it is grimmer than the Sheep and the Dog, through its moral seems to be meant to offer same kind of encouragement for the moral living that Henryson promises after the middle fable. The fable gives a kind of ending lesson for the reader—it depicts almost everything that Henryson hopes to accomplish in his collection. The reader is reminded that they are forced to live in an immoral world where living morally is complex and cannot always fall according to simple Aesopic morals, while they are at the same time encouraged that their own moral behavior will pay off, and even more than this, may be eventually rewarded, perhaps even in their own lifetime.

The Paddock and the Mouse

The last fable in the collection, “The Paddock and the Mouse,” where a mouse relies on an untrustworthy toad to help cross a stream, only to both carried away and eaten by a Kite, is packed with moral lessons for Henryson's reader that are not found anywhere else in the collection. Henryson uses this fable as a conclusion—almost as an afterward, just as the Cock and the Jasp is a kind of preface to the collection, to teach his readers one last lesson about the complexity of moral living, lest they were dejected by the previous fable. In the fable Henryson

¹²² 2770-6.

separates the body and the soul, and shows how when the body is tempted, the soul is as well. Using this as his final fable, rather than early in the collection, as is the case in both the Marie de France and Caxton collections, allows Henryson to solidify for his reader that they cannot trivialize moral behavior on earth and expect to find their way to heaven in the afterlife. This moral emphasizes the earlier Confessions of the Fox, and of course most of the second part of the fables, which showed that man cannot do as he pleases and then expect a chance to repent before his death so as to earn his way to Paradise.

In the Aesopic tradition, the fable's moral, "for people who do harm to others and destroy themselves in the bargain" implies that the fable is intended as lesson for the immoral, illustrating that their behavior will be punished. Henryson's fable, however, takes a spiritual slant by using the mouse as an allegory for the soul and the paddock as an allegory for the body. The mouse seems to have forgotten wisdom in negotiating moral living that is taught in the collection, instead being influenced by the paddock's smooth talk to trust him. The reader empathizes with the mouse, who is only trying to reach better food, but can easily see that this cute creature, standing on the bank of the river "peeping" for help, is being deceived. This last fable shows a main character that is very much the opposite of the original, rational cock—the mouse uses the same kind of logical reasoning to argue that the paddock is an evil character, but is then easily talked out of his own logic. This trickster figure is far more careful than Lawrence—he knows that the mouse is judging his character based on appearance, and he appeals to the moral teaching that discourages this. Through this, Henryson is able to show that yet another simple fabular moral has far more complex implications than the reader originally may have thought. The mouse has not learned to negotiate this world of complex morality, and instead applies the black-and-white learning that fable tradition encourages to his demise.

In order to teach this lesson, the fable begins with this adorable mouse coming to a river that was so deep that she could not cross. The mouse cries out for help, "peeping" as the city mouse does to find her country sister, and is answered by a nearby paddock; the mouse explains to the paddock that she desired to cross the water because of the better food on the other side. The paddock offers to help her, but the mouse, after looking the animal over is skeptical: "Giff I can ony skill of Phisnomy,/ Thow hes sumpart off falset and Invy." [If I have any skill of

Physiognomy, you have some part of falseness and animosity]¹²³ Very interestingly, the mouse then goes on to explain the physiognomies that she has learned—“For Clerkis sayis the Inclinatioun/ Of mannis thocht proceidis commounly/ Efter the Corporall complexioun” [For scholars say, the inclination of man’s though proceeds commonly after his corporal complexion], or, in short, that a man acts how he looks.¹²⁴ Henryson uses the mouse to illustrate that, sometimes, the outward appearance of a man can in fact be a reflection of their character, contrary to the simple moral lesson that many may have learned from more traditional Aesops. The mouse questions the toad’s appearance, which had previously been described as wrinkled and sagging, with a hoarse voice, believing that the appearance can in fact define the man, but the Paddock quickly replies that this proverb is not true, and chides the mouse for believing such silly things, discussing for many stanzas that many people may be “full flurischand” but be “full of desait.” This critique of judging by appearance rather than character is a common one—it is even one that is emphasized at times in the original Aesop—to never “judge a book by its cover.” But Henryson, in effect, by including the mouse’s discussion on physiognomy rather than just having her express the skepticism as she does in the Gibbs and Caxton editions, illustrates that a man of questionable appearance may in fact be of questionable character, showing again there are pitfalls to the Aesopic morals.

But the Paddock’s speech almost convinces the mouse—until the Paddock proposes tying them together with a “twynit threid.” The mouse revolts at this thought, saying “suld I be bund and fast quhar I am fre” [should I be bound and fast where I am free.]¹²⁵ This protest shifts the focus to another concern—in most fable collections, as Arnold Henderson points out, the binding of the two animals together seems to be the natural way to help the mouse across the water, but for Henryson’s mouse, this binding signifies a removal of her freedom.¹²⁶ When viewed in light of Henryson’s eventual body/soul moral, this moment seems to signify the tying of the free, spiritual soul to the earthly body. The mouse’s protest then is equivalent to the soul (perhaps here seen as the moral self) crying out at being “tied” to an immoral body—the soul longs to do right while the body does evil.

¹²³ 2824-5.

¹²⁴ 2826-8.

¹²⁵ 2861.

¹²⁶ Henderson (“Having Fun with the Moralities: Henryson’s *Fables* and Late-Medieval Fable Innovation.” P. 81) also discusses Odo’s version of the fables, saying that he saw this as a moment to teach about churchmen who lead their congregation astray by binding them to false teachings.

After the Paddock swears an oath that he means well, the mouse trusts him, and the two are yoked together. But, just as the mouse suspected, the Paddock meant to drown her, and begins to struggle as this becomes clear. A kite, perched nearby, sees the struggle, and captures them both. The fable, and Henryson's work, ends as the Kite murders both the Paddock and the mouse, in the most hopeless scene of the collection:

Syne bowell thame, that Boucheour with his bill,
 And belliflaucht full fettillie thame flaid;
 Bot all thair flesche wald scant be half ane fill
 And guttis als, unto that gredie gled.

[For a long time he disemboweled them, that Butcher with his bill,/ and fully, deftly flayed them but all their flesh would scarcely half fill, even guts and all, that greedy kite.]¹²⁷ So both the Paddock and the Mouse are killed, but their death seems to have been in vain, as they, combined, don't even provide a full meal for the Kite.

In a move that Stephen Khinoy calls chilling for its complexity, the *moralitas* begins with the two morals that Henryson has already emphasized in the fables, even in the previous "Wolf and the Lamb"—to be careful of wicked appearances, and not to keep false company.¹²⁸ He then emphasizes the mouse's reluctance to give up her freedom by saying "it is grit nekligence/ To bind the fast quhair thow wes frank and fre;/ Fra thow be bund, thow may make na defence." [it is great negligence to bind fast where you were open and free, from the moment you bound you make no defence.]¹²⁹ Clearly, Henryson's reader isn't going to be physically bound as the mouse was, but he seems to emphasize that making a bad association can be just as condemning as this literal tying—it removes one's freedom. This emphasis on binding could be meant to symbolize a metaphorical binding to the simplistic morals of the traditional fables—Henryson uses the image to show the ridiculousness of attaching oneself so unwaveringly to this kind of single-minded interpretation of moral truth.

¹²⁷ 2903-6. This passage has a few interesting word choices on Henryson's part—belliflaucht and fettillie seem to both be a bit of an error, and versions of the same word—Henryson perhaps intended "fetesly" meaning eloquently, which I translated, as Gopen did, to "deftly"—I believe Henryson meant to imply a thorough, well-done flaying!

¹²⁸ This is termed this as such because the reader is incited to a bit of panic, wondering why all of the characters are so brutally dead, but Henryson does not allow them to immediately determine the precise moral—Henryson is teasing with these earlier morals before revealing his actual point. "Tale-Moral Relationships in Henryson's *Moral Fables*," p. 111.

¹²⁹ 2926-9.

As previously mentioned, Henryson then explains that the mouse is to represent the soul and the paddock the body, which are inseparable until “cruell deith cum brek of lyfe the threid.” Henryson relates the water to the world, in which the body and soul are traveling together, and the kite to death, as she has appeared suddenly. With these metaphors in place, Henryson then takes one last moment to encourage his reader to “make the ane strange Castell/ Of gude deidis” [Make a strong castle of good deeds], so that they are not caught unaware as the mouse was.¹³⁰ Henryson seems to be spiritually concerned about the souls of his reader—he urges them to moral behavior through a parsing of the body and soul that illustrates eternal doom for the wicked, or even those who listen to wicked counsel.

Henryson ends his fable collection with a bit of a second benediction, leaving the rest of the fable to the Friars for further interpretation, and asking Christ to bless the readers, but the warning about an untimely death seems to be the end that he wants the reader to remember. After showing how complex moral behavior on this earth is, the carnage of this final fable gruesomely puts an end to a simple interpretation of the fable genre. Had the mouse acted wisely and discerningly as the cock in the first fable, or the mouse in the central fable, he would have been able to apply the complex moralities that Henryson shows, but her simple-mindedness allows her to be easily swayed by the paddock’s rhetoric, and ultimately ends in her destruction. Her simple acceptance of the paddock’s moral teaching can represent a simple acceptance of the fabular morals—both are destroyed in the end of the fable, replaced with a complex understanding of moral behavior as requiring shrewdness and reason.

The Moral

And so the moral of Henryson’s work seems to be very different from that of the traditional Aesopic fable. Through the use of complex moral lessons, multifaceted characters, and convoluted behaviors, Henryson illustrates that the simplistic moral lessons that are typically associated with Aesop may not be applicable in actually earthly practice. He illustrates time and

¹³⁰ 2965-6.

again that the reward for this kind of behavior is not immediate as many collections imply, but to be found in a promise of eternal happiness.

But as a schoolmaster, the aim of Henryson's fables does not seem to be further moral lessons—he realizes that this is no answer to an already complicated moral situation. Henryson simply teaches a different understanding of the fabular tradition, his fables, and indeed other beast literature as well, through his inclusion of the beast epic. He asks his reader to realize that there are limitations to the Aesopic form, but to accept these limitations, and negotiate the lessons in these fables so that they are more practical. Henryson's work does not seem to offer a complete translation of, nor a replacement for the traditional fable collections—it merely uses some of these works to show how they can be complicated to better understand their functions within society.

But although Henryson metaphorically jumps on the dead body of Aesop through the mouse's jumping on the lion, and slays simplistic understandings of fables through a slew of brutal slayings in the end of the collection, he does not seem to advocate an erasure of Aesopic learning. These moments can be seen as ironic and poignant, forcing the reader to realize that they are to take an active part in fable interpretation rather than allowing moral lessons to be spoon-fed. In fact, just as the fox who laughs at the possibility of his own murder by exposing his "breist and bellie" to the archer's arrow is punished by the same fate that he invites, dying without forgiveness, the man who does not realize the essential seriousness of the fabular form and the morals therein is certainly sentenced to an eternal damnations.

Robert Henryson's *Morall Fabillis of Esope* are anything but traditional. They are exhaustingly long, shockingly specific, and highly spiritual. His characters do not function as typical fable characters, and his morals reflect his specific worldview. But he illustrates that these "fentyeit Fabills" are much less false than many other similar works. For those that can "to gude purpos quha culd it weill apply" [to good purpose can it well apply], Henryson's collection offers a set of directions for negotiating between the fabulist world and this one, for understanding the complexities and pitfalls of simple fables, and for extending beyond these complexities to reason and wisdom. If this lesson is learned, the reader, following the example of the cock, should be able to pick out their personal "chaff and grain," and leave the jaspers behind, equipped with the knowledge of what exactly will benefit them long beyond their lifetime.

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