

10-1-1965

## Narrative Art in Henryson's Fables

Donald MacDonald  
*Wayne State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

MacDonald, Donald (2013) "Narrative Art in Henryson's Fables," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, 101–113.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol3/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

DONALD MACDONALD

### Narrative Art in Henryson's *Fables*

W. E. Henley's observation that Henryson "narrates with a gaiety, an ease, a rapidity, not to be surpassed in English literature between Chaucer and Burns"<sup>1</sup> is typical of the praise that Henryson's poetry, and particularly the *Moral Fables*, has been accorded by commentators, but in spite of the unanimous critical appreciation the poem has received almost no attempt has been made to describe in specific terms the qualities of narrative style and method which have given the *Fables* their deservedly high reputation. Examination of Henryson's treatment of his sources in the *Fables*,<sup>2</sup> if it is inadequate to explain all the subtlety of his art, nevertheless serves, I believe, to reveal some of the most important characteristics of the narrative practice by which Henryson was able to transform rude and often clumsy versions of traditional fable material into what have been recognized as comic masterpieces. Such examination makes clear that, while Henryson's habit throughout the *Fables* is consistently one of expansion of his sources, this expansion is by no means a simple elaboration of the incidents narrated in the original, but is instead a highly selective process in which those elements, and only those, which Henryson regards as central to the comic point of the tale are expanded in order to intensify the humorous incongruity of the fable. This process of intensification includes, in addition, the introduction by Henryson of original details, not to be found in his sources, and at the same time the elimination, compression, or modification of elements in the originals for the purpose of sharpening the narrative focus, increasing verisimilitude, or further emphasizing the humorous point. The manner in which Henryson alters his sources thus reveals many of the characteristics of the narrative skill on which Henryson's reputation in great part depends.

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Henley, "Robert Henryson," in T. H. Ward, ed., *The English Poets* (London, 1880-1918), I, 137.

<sup>2</sup> Possible sources for the *Moral Fables* are discussed in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Text Society, 1906-1914), I, xxix - xlv; *Robert Henryson, Poems*, ed. Charles Elliott (Oxford, 1963), pp. 129-30; and most fully in A. R. Diebler, *Henryson's Fabeldichtungen* (Halle, 1885), pp. 32-85.

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

To illustrate these characteristics as they appear in the thirteen tales which constitute the *Fables* is a task too extensive to be undertaken in a short space, but the principal features of Henryson's narrative method may be suggested by reference to two of the *Fables*, the *Tale of the Wolf and the Wether*, which provides a typical example of Henryson's treatment of his sources throughout the *Fables*, and the *Tale of the Cock and the Fox*, which, while illustrating the same habitual precision of narrative art, demonstrates as well that even when Henryson's principal source is not a primitive narration of a fable but a story as artfully told as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* his version remains distinctively original.

The *Tale of the Wolf and the Wether*, which derives presumably<sup>3</sup> from the version of the fable in Caxton's translation of Steinhöwel's *Aesop*, published in 1484, relates the story of a wether who, after the death of a sheep dog, proposes to the shepherd that the dog's skin be sown on him and promises in this garb to protect the now-unguarded flock. The counterfeit is for a time successful, but one day a wolf steals a lamb, the wether pursues him so vigorously that the frightened wolf befouls himself, and in the course of the chase the dog's skin is ripped from the wether by a thorny bush. Discovering the deception, the wolf turns on him and kills him. As is indicated by the fact that the protagonist is a wether (not of course a ram, but a castrated sheep, and hence presumably the meekest and least aggressive of animals), the main comic point of the tale depends on the humorous contradiction between the actual feebleness of the wether and his misguided belief that by assuming the outward appearance of the dog he also acquires the dog's strength and ferocity, a conviction which is the basis for the ludicrously inappropriate behavior that leads to his death.

In Caxton's translation the incidents most germane to the presentation of this comic incongruity, the wether's proposal to the shepherd, his initial success in frightening the wolves, and his pursuit of the wolf, are related in the following manner: "And thenne a grete wether fyres and prowde/ . . . sayd/ I shalle gyue yow good counceyll/ Shaue me/ and put on me the skynne of the dogge And whanne the wulues shalle see me/ they shalle haue grete fere of me/ And whanne the wulues came and sawe the wether clothed with the skynne of the dogge/ they beganne all to flee/ and ranne away/ It happed on a day that a wulf whiche was sore hongry/ came and toke a lambe/ and after

<sup>3</sup> See Diebler, pp. 77-79, and David A. Crowne, "A Date for Henryson's *Fables*," *JEGP*, LXI (1962), 583-90.

# NARRATIVE ART IN HENRYSON'S FABLES

ran away therewith/ And thenne the sayd wether ranne after hym. . . ."<sup>4</sup> It is not to malign the Caxton-Steinhöwel version to say that if it relates the incidents of the tale in their correct order, as a narrative it does little more, and in fact by its introduction of the wether as "grete . . . fyers and prowde" it threatens to obscure the comic point of the story. The few lines in which these incidents are described in Caxton are expanded by Henryson to seven stanzas of *rime royal*, but the importance of this expansion lies less in its quantitative measure than in its demonstration of Henryson's recognition of, and concentration upon, the essential incongruity of the tale. For, in contrast to Caxton's, Henryson's treatment clearly shows his appreciation of the fact that the greater the degree of self-delusion the wether displays—the more ferocious, even bloodthirsty, this feeble eunuch of a sheep shows himself to be, the more circumstantially exact is his emulation of the dog's behavior, in short, the closer is the wether's misguided identification with the dog—the more effective the comedy will be, and it is toward the presentation of these narrative points that Henryson's elaboration is directed.

Thus while Caxton's description of the wether's proposal to the shepherd serves simply to advance the story, Henryson's expansion of the incident immediately establishes the wether's airy, if misplaced, confidence in his ability to replace the dog and his crazy eagerness to assume his new role. The loss of the dog, as far as he is concerned, is of no importance: "Maister," he says sententiously to the shepherd, "mak merie and be blyith;/ To brek your hart ffor baill it is na bute;/ For ane deid Dogge ye na cair on yow kyith,"<sup>5</sup> and he continues with a vaunting speech, full of ferocious vows, that even as early as this point in the narrative reveals the ludicrous belligerence that is the essence of the comedy:

Than will the Wolff trow that I am he;  
For I sall follow him fast quhar ever he fair.  
All haill, the cure I tak it upon me,  
Your scheip to keip at midday, lait and air.  
And he persew, be God, I sall not spair  
To follow him as fast as did your Doig,  
Swa that, I warrand, ye sall not want ane hoig.

vv. 2483-89

With the same purpose of magnifying the comic incongruity, and with the same precision of documentation, Henryson expands the

<sup>4</sup> *The Fables of Aesop*, ed. J. Jacobs (London, 1889), II, 180-81.

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from Henryson are from *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson*, ed. H. Harvey Wood, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh and London, 1958).

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

element of the tale that follows, the fact that the wether is successful in frightening the predators. In Caxton's version of this motif, it will be observed, the wether plays an apparently passive role: the wolves "sawe the wether . . . and ranne away." Thus it appears that it is the success of the wether's disguise that is responsible for keeping the wolves at a distance, and their flight seems to be caused as much by prudence as by fear. The emphasis in Henryson's version, however, is much less on the wether's appearance than on his belligerent, and therefore comic, actions. Henryson's wether is far from satisfied to keep the marauders at bay by simply showing himself dressed in the dog's skin; he undertakes to guard the flock with a mad diligence that includes sleepless vigils and wild pursuits which cause the beasts not only to stay at a respectful distance (as is the impression in Caxton) but to cower in terror of their lives, and the extent of the wether's domination over the predators is emphasized by the fact that it is not only the wolves, as in Caxton, but all the "bailfull beistis" from wildcat to fox that are terrorized:

In all thingis he counterfait the Dog;  
For all the nycht he stude, and tuke na sleip,  
Swa that weill lang thair wantit not ane Hog.  
Swa war he wes and walkryfe thame to keip,  
That Lowrence durst not luke upon ane scheip;  
For and he did, he followit him sa fast,  
That off his lyfe he maid him all agast.

Was nowther Wolff, Wildcat, nor yit Tod  
Durst cum within thay boundis all about,  
Bot he wald chase thame baith throw rouch and snod.  
Thay bailfull beistis had of thair lyvis sic dout,  
For he wes mekill and semit to be stout,  
That everilk beist thay dred him as the deid,  
Within that woid, that nane durst hald thair heid.

vv. 2497-2510

Similarly, the wether's pursuit of the wolf, an element which receives no emphasis in Caxton, becomes in Henryson an important part of the tale, for Henryson recognizes that there is a direct correlation between the ferocity of the wether's pursuit and the degree of comic incongruity. That is to say, if the chase were to be described as feeble, listless, or short, much of the comic point would be lost; if, as in Caxton, the wether simply "ranne after hym," there is some improvement, though it is minimal; but if the wether's pursuit is characterized by fury and determination, if it is conducted with a speed and relentlessness not exceeded by a hunting dog's pursuit of his prey, if it

## NARRATIVE ART IN HENRYSON'S *FABLES*

extends over hill and down dale, through wood and water, over moor and shoreland, if, in short, nothing on earth will stop the wether (as he himself solemnly vows) from capturing and killing the wolf, the humorous contradiction becomes greatly magnified:

Went never Hound mair haistellie fra the hand,  
Quhen he wes rynnand maist raklie at the Ra,  
Nor went this Wedder baith over Mois and strand,  
And stoppit nouthir at bank, busk, nor bra;  
Bot followit ay sa ferslie on his fa,  
With sic ane drift, quhill dust and dirt over draif him,  
And maid ane Vow to God that he suld have him.

vv. 2518-24

One would think that Henryson has now exploited the incongruity of the wether's behavior to the fullest extent that rhetorical skill will allow, but it is just at this stage in the narrative that he introduces, as he so often does throughout the *Fables*, a detail which makes no appearance in his source and which, in a typically economical and effective way, provides the climax of the comic point. The wether, in his mad pursuit, is closing in on the wolf. The latter, understandably, in view of the well-known ferocity of the wether ("For weill he kennit the keneses off the Doig"), is in despair of his life. In an act of desperation, therefore, "To mak him lycht, he kest the Lamb him fra." But if the wolf supposes that the wether will be diverted from his grim purpose by this expedient he is much mistaken:

"Na" (quod the Wedder), "in Faith we part not swa:  
It is not the Lamb, bot the, that I desyre . . ."

vv. 2534-35

and with this final testimony to his daftness he plunges crazily onward to his doom.

The skill with which Henryson expands the central incidents of the tale is made equally apparent by the effectiveness, in terms of narrative logic and plausibility, of the changes he makes in even minor details of his source. In Caxton's version, for example, there appear to be a number of shepherds, evidently the owner of the flock and several helpers; in Henryson this indeterminate number is reduced to one lonely shepherd, a reduction which has the effect of magnifying, since the shepherd has no one to aid him and is presumably poor, the tragi-comic consequences of the loss of the dog and which, neatly reinforced as it is by the comic extravagance of the shepherd's lament, serves also to reduce the implausibility of the shepherd's acceptance of the wether's advice. Again, Caxton's dog dies "of grete age," a de-

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

tail which is surely a narrative infelicity, for if the dog died of old age the process must have been gradual, the failing of the dog's powers must have been evident for some considerable time, and hence the sheep-owner would have had ample opportunity to make provision for his replacement; with more dramatic logic and effect, the dog in Henryson dies "off suddand seiknes," so that the loss is clearly an unexpected catastrophe. In Caxton, too, there is no hint of explanation why a presumably sane shepherd should accept the advice of a mad sheep, but in Henryson this acceptance is reasonably explained not only by the emphasis, suggested above, on the shepherd's desperate straits but also by the implication that the shepherd, if he is not quite as mad as the wether, is at least simple-minded, as his response to the wether's proposal suggests:

"Than," said the scheipheird, "this come of ane gude wit;  
Thy counsall is baith sicker, leill, and trew;  
Quha sayis ane scheip is daft, they leit of it."

vv. 2490-92

In Caxton, similarly, the explanation that the wolf is "sore hongry" is barely adequate to account for the wolf's theft of the ram; in Henryson the wolf's hunger is intensified to the point of starvation: "'I sall have ane' (quod he), 'quhat ever betyde,/ Thocht I be werryit, for hunger or I de,'" a comment which, by revealing the wolf's expectation that the attempted theft is likely to cost him his life, once more reinforces the wether's comic ferocity.

The subtlety and narrative precision that these alterations show is evident also in what appears to be a minor difference between the Caxton version and Henryson's. At the end of the fable, in Caxton, the wolf kills the sheep and eats him; in Henryson the wether is killed, but not eaten. At first glance there seems to be no reason why this latter detail should be omitted; the wolf is certainly hungry, and the wether would make a suitable meal. But Henryson recognizes that by having the wolf eat the wether Caxton allows the dramatic point of the concluding incident, which is not the wolf's hunger at all, but his fury at being tricked by the wether, to be eroded, and it is this recognition that accounts both for the omission of the detail and for the difference between Caxton's unspecific "thenne the wulf took and kyllled hym" and Henryson's explicit description of the manner of the wether's death:

Than be crag bane smertlie he him tuke,  
Or ever he ceissit, and it in schunder schuke.

vv. 2586-87



## NARRATIVE ART IN HENRYSON'S *FABLES*

The *Tale of the Cock and the Fox* shows its indebtedness to the *Nun's Priest's Tale* by its adoption of a number of details from Chaucer's version of the fable, but Henryson's treatment of the tale differs from Chaucer's in a number of respects, in part because of a fundamental difference in purpose. Chaucer's objective in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, it may be assumed, was to relate an amusing story that would be appropriate to the nun's priest's character and would at the same time provide an exemplum of woman's fallibility; Henryson, on the other hand, although he does not forget to mingle "merie sport" with more serious matters, as he promises in the "Prolog" of the *Fables*, and although he exploits the comic possibilities of the tale in a way that is not inferior to Chaucer's, is guided in his narration by a serious moral purpose. As the "Moralitas" explicitly states, the cock represents:

Nyse proud men, woid and vaneglorious,  
Of kin and blude quhilk ar presumptuous.

vv. 591-92

The "feyneit Foxe" symbolizes:

. . . flatteraris with plesand wordis quhyte,  
With fals mening and mynd maist toxicate,  
To loif and le that settes thair haill delyte.

vv. 601-603

It is consistent with Henryson's intention of illustrating the twin dangers of "flatterie" and "vanegloir," therefore, that his emphasis is primarily on the central episode of the fable, the fox's successful deception of the cock, and that he omits a number of motifs from the epic versions, including the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, that would divert attention from his theme. Particularly notable is his omission of the cock's dream, which in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* plays so prominent a part and which in all the epic versions serves the function of warning the cock of his danger; since Henryson's purpose is to provide a warning not against lack of prudence but against the sin of vanity the motif of the dream becomes an extraneous narrative element. For similar reasons of narrative economy and emphasis, the number of human characters is reduced so that only the widow remains, the hens number three instead of Chaucer's seven, the mother of the cock disappears, and, for reasons suggested below, only the dogs participate in the chase of the fox.

One of the original features of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is Chaucer's transformation of Chauntecleer, whose role in all previous versions of the fable is that of a gullible fool, into a sympathetic character. For Henryson's purpose, of course, Chaucer's Chauntecleer will not serve,



## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

and it is of particular interest to observe how Henryson accomplishes the reversion to the cock's original character while at the same time retaining in altered form some of the elements that Chaucer uses to make the cock attractive. Chaucer, for example, attributes to Chauntecleer remarkable physical beauty; Henryson retains this motif, but the description of the cock's beauty is not stated as a fact, as it is by Chaucer in his role as narrator, but is instead put into the mouth of the fox, where, since it becomes simply another item in the fox's arsenal of flattery, it does not detract from Henryson's presentation of the cock as unattractive. Similarly, Chaucer's praise of the cock's crowing, in a description that is distinct from the flattering praise by the fox that constitutes the only appearance of this element in other versions of the fable, is borrowed by Henryson, but the praise appears in a speech by Pertok, one of the hens, whose insincerity is very soon made obvious. In much the same way the motif of the love-idyll between Chauntecleer and Pertelote, one of Chaucer's original contributions to the tale, is adopted by Henryson, but once again the testimony of marital bliss appears in Pertok's mock-lament for the loss of the cock, an apostrophe which is the hypocritical beginning of a discussion between the hens that soon establishes their unanimous agreement that the lost cock was a lecherous tyrant of whom they are well rid.

It will be seen, therefore, that Henryson omits some of the elements of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and alters others so that they better accord with his theme; in addition, he makes a number of original additions to the fable that have the function of both increasing the plausibility of the tale and of magnifying its comic effect. One of the basic difficulties inherent in the cock and fox story in all its forms, for example, is the essential implausibility of a situation in which a cock, when suddenly confronted by his natural enemy the fox (and even in some versions, like the *Roman de Renart*, having only narrowly escaped from the fox's jaws), does not take immediate flight but instead forgets his fear and stays to listen to the fox's blandishments, and it is in no way to minimize Chaucer's achievement in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* to say that by his attribution of intelligence and prudence to Chauntecleer he increases the improbability of an already unlikely series of events. Henryson's attempt to make this part of the tale more credible involves a development of the fox's character as an expert flatterer that has no parallel in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, nor, in fact, in any other version of the story. Russell, it will be recalled, is discovered by Chauntecleer as he lies in hiding among the plants, but Laurence is too much a master of guile to be caught in an embarrassing position

# NARRATIVE ART IN HENRYSON'S *FABLES*

that would put him at an immediate disadvantage in the encounter. He sees the cock first, and immediately begins to plan his strategy:

. . . in his mynd he kest  
The Jeperdie, the wayis, and the wyle,  
Be quhat menis he micht this Cok begyle.

vv. 429-31

Unlike Russell, therefore, he reveals himself to the cock only when he is quite ready, and when he does so he approaches the cock (although "dissimuland in to countenance and cheir") with every appearance of genial deference:

On kneis fell, and simuland thus he said:  
"Gude morne, my maister, gentill Chantecler!"

vv. 433-34

The cock starts back, of course, as he does in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, but with considerably less reason after this deferential greeting than from the sudden discovery of his enemy crouched in hiding, and thus the fox has a less impossible task to perform to persuade him not to flee. Further, Laurence shows a mastery of the psychology of guile that Russell does not possess. Russell's plea that the cock remain begins with his statement that he has come to hear him sing, but Henryson evidently regards the transition from the cock's initial fright to his acceptance of the flattery as unconvincingly abrupt. Therefore, begging (still on his knees) that the cock remain, Laurence first tempts the cock with an appeal to his self-interest: "I come bot heir service to yow to mak." And as assurance to the cock that he may place confidence in the sincerity of this offer of service he supplies as evidence not only the fact that he had been on friendly terms with the cock's father, as does Russell, but much more effective proof; the relationship between Laurence and the cock's father had gone far beyond mere friendship, for not only had Chantecler's father sent him "meit ffra midding to the muris," but it had been none other than Laurence who with tender care had nursed the cock's father on his death-bed, who had given him "drinkis warme,/ Syne at the last the Sweit swelt in my arme." More, it had been Laurence who had

. . . held up his heid,  
Quhen that he deit under ane birkin beuch;  
Syne said the Dirigie quhen that he wes deid.

vv. 447-49

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

It is with considerably more reason than Russell has offered, therefore, that Laurence is able to say:

Betwix us twa how suld thair be ane feid?  
 Quhame suld ye traist bot me, your Servitour,  
 That to your ffather did sa grit honour?

vv. 450-52

But even after this skilful preparation, which has no parallel in other versions of the fable, Laurence is not yet ready to broach the crucial matter of the cock's singing. He further increases the cock's susceptibility to the ruse by offering extravagant praise of Chantecleir's beauty, a motif transferred, as I have suggested, from the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The cock's beauty so overwhelms him that he is impelled to offer himself again as a servant to the cock:

Quhen I behald your ffedderis ffair and gent,  
 Your beik, your breist, your hekill, and your kame,  
 Schir, be my Saull, and the blissit Sacrament,  
 My hart is warme; me think I am at hame:  
 To mak yow blyith, I wald creip on my wame,  
 In ffroist and snaw, in wedder wan and weit,  
 And lay my lyart loikkis under your feit.

vv. 453-59

Only after this masterly demonstration of duplicity, an expansion which in Henryson's typical fashion elaborates pertinent motifs from his original and introduces new elements into the tale, does the real business of trapping the cock begin, and, in Henryson's version, given the subtlety of the fox and the demonstrated gullibility of the cock—deftly indicated by Henryson: "'Knew ye my ffather?" (quod the Cok) and leuch"—the episode of the fox's ruse thus not only becomes more comically credible than it is in any other version, including the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, but by its fuller and more convincing presentation of Laurence's expert dissimulation it admirably reinforces Henryson's theme of the danger of flattery.

The implausibility which has been suggested in connection with the "oculis clausis" section of the tale is unavoidably present, also, in the incident of the cock's escape, for the latter involves in most versions of the fable, and particularly in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, three very improbable elements. Since in the pursuit of the fox as it is described in most versions other than Henryson's, and on which in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* Chaucer so effectively expends his comic talents, emphasis is on the ludicrous, there is little reason for the fox to feel threatened by his pursuers, particularly when they include, as in the

## NARRATIVE ART IN HENRYSON'S FABLES

*Nun's Priest's Tale*, the "cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges;"<sup>6</sup> being in no real danger, the fox is hardly likely to stop and listen to the cock's suggestion. In addition, the fable asks us to accept a sudden and unexplained reversal of roles, in which the cock becomes crafty and the fox gullible, and, finally, to believe that shrewd fox could be deceived by a proposal of such doubtful strategic value as the cock's suggestion that he mock his pursuers in order to make them halt. "Turneth agayn, ye proude cherles alle!" Chauntecleer urges Russell to say in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*:

A verray pestilence upon yow falle!  
Now am I come unto the wodes syde;  
Maugree youre heed, the cok shal heere abyde.  
I wol hym ete, in feith, and that anon!

VII 3410-13

Taunts of this kind are surely less likely to discourage pursuit than to incite the pursuers to greater effort.

It is true that Chaucer's transformation of Chauntecleer into an intelligent rather than a foolish cock to some extent reduces the implausibility of this part of the tale, but it by no means avoids the basic difficulties. Henryson is perhaps unable to remove all the improbabilities from this incident of the fable, but he tries diligently to do so. First of all, in Henryson the chase is not entirely ludicrous; it is not conducted, as it is in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, by a harum-scarum array of noisy pursuers but by a pack of hounds with serious intent to capture the fox and rescue the cock, "Or ellis to me," the widow has threatened them, "se ye cum never agane." The hounds are speedy and determined pursuers:

With that but baid thay braidet over the bent;  
As fyre off flint thay over the feildis flaw;  
Full wichtlie thay throw wood and wateris went,  
And ceissit not schir Lourence quhill thay saw.

vv. 551-54

The fox is clearly being overtaken, and that he recognizes real peril in the approach of the formidable hounds is indicated by his muttered aside to the cock as the dogs draw near: "God sen," he grumbles, "that I and thow wer fairlie in my den." Even more, Henryson gives him additional reasons for wishing that the dogs would relinquish the chase: "Hungrie thow art, and ffor grit travell tyrit," Chanteleir

<sup>6</sup> Quotations from the *Nun's Priest's Tale* are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

reminds him, "Richt faint off force, and may not ferther fle." Thus, as Henryson's additions make clear, Laurence, unlike Russell, is in a situation of real danger, and hence he is in a frame of mind to welcome any solution to his predicament, even a suggestion from the cock. Further, the inherent improbability of a vain and stupid cock outwitting the fox is minimized by Henryson's explanation that the idea of the ruse comes to Chantecleir not through his natural wit but because he is "with sum gude Spirit inspyrit;" nor does the cock suggest, as does Chauntecleer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, that the fox invite intensification of the vigor of the chase by mocking his pursuers. The suggestion he makes to the fox, if it does not provide an entirely convincing reason for the dogs to call off their pursuit, is more likely to accomplish its purpose than is Russell's taunt. "Swyith turne agane," says Chantecleir,

. . . and say that I and ye  
Freindis ar maid, and fellowis ffor ane yeir;  
Than will thay stint, I stand ffor it, and not steir.

vv. 562-64

And, finally, Henryson attempts to increase the credibility of the fox's succumbing to Chantecleir's ruse, in spite of his wide experience in trickery, by suggesting that Laurence must have been "desaut . . . be menis richt mervelous."

A final illustration of Henryson's modification of the material of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* may be provided by his treatment of the poor widow, whose appearance as the principal human character of the fable distinguishes the versions of Chaucer and Henryson from all the extant analogues of the fable. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, it will be recalled, the widow is poor, but she is only relatively so. Although "litel was hir catel and hir rente," she is nevertheless the owner not only of Chauntecleer and the seven hens but of, in addition, no less than three cows, three large sows, and a sheep, and if her diet of milk, brown bread, bacon, and eggs is not lavish it is at least adequate. Henryson's widow is considerably poorer. She has neither cow, sheep, nor sow, and her livestock consists only of Chantecleir and the three hens. Why is Henryson's widow so much poorer than Chaucer's? The answer seems to be that by increasing the poverty of the widow Henryson magnifies the value of the cock above that which he possesses in other versions of the fable, even above that of Chauntecleer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. In Henryson, Chantecleir is not simply one of a number of barnyard animals; he is, apparently, the widow's most valuable possession, and therefore his loss is a serious threat to her livelihood. The widow's poverty and the consequent seriousness of the loss of the

#### NARRATIVE ART IN HENRYSON'S FABLES

cock is thus consistent with the fact that the chase has a degree of earnestness that is absent in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*; the latter element, in turn, explains the fox's recognition that he is in actual danger, as well as making more convincing his susceptibility to the cock's ruse.

Thus both the *Tale of the Wolf and the Wether* and the *Tale of the Cock and the Fox* illustrate, in a fashion that is typical of all of the *Moral Fables*, the high degree of originality shown by Henryson in his treatment of his sources. As will be seen from the examples cited above, his method varies; sometimes parts of his sources are made, to use his own word in the "Prolog" to the *Fables*, "deminute;" other parts are made "superfluous." Both the compression and the expansion that are habitual in his narrative practice are far from being eccentric or capricious; instead, the narrative structure that is the result of the processes of reduction, on the one hand, and of amplification, on the other, consistently demonstrates Henryson's unerring recognition of the crucial comic point of the tale, a point that receives additional skillful development and emphasis by his insertion into the tale of new and original elements. The precision, the narrative economy, and the structural logic which Henryson's treatment of his sources consistently reveals account in large measure for the high esteem the *Moral Fables* have been accorded.

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY