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Gregory Kratzmann

Henryson's *Fables*: "the subtell dyte of poetry"



Henryson's *Fables* were once discussed almost exclusively as documents of social realism, or as humorous poems which at their best might be designated "Chaucerian." In an important article in 1962, Denton Fox urged "that it might be helpful to look at the *Fables* from a more severely literary viewpoint, and to examine them as poems"; further, he pleaded the necessity to examine the poems "as wholes," that is, as fables consisting of two carefully related parts, story and moralization.¹ Although there has been some stimulating criticism of the *Fables* during the past twenty years, commentary has been neither as prolific nor as wide-ranging as that directed at *The Testament of Cresseid*, and there is room for more discussion of those two closely-related critical issues raised in Fox's article. This essay has two concerns. The first is to examine the Prologue to the *Fables* as poetry, to observe how a number of traditional ideas about the nature, purpose and value of allegorical poetry are presented in a way that is both original and challenging. The second is to see what relation the questions about the nature of poetry which are raised in the Prologue bear to the fables

themselves—in particular, to those which are usually considered to be problematic, because the meaning or "doctrine" adduced in the *moralitas* is not what we would have expected from a reading of the tale in naturalistic terms.

Critical commentary on Henryson's Prologue all too frequently takes the form of paraphrase of the traditional ideas about the nature of poetry which it contains, thereby representing the poetry of the Prologue itself as little more than a vehicle. Even Denton Fox's notes on the construction of the Prologue, in his recent meticulous edition of Henryson, underestimate the extent to which vehicle and tenor, style and content, are inseparable in these nine stanzas which are themselves an illustration of "the subtell dyte of poetry" which they introduce.² Although the poetry of the Prologue is not itself allegorical, its highly individual way of proceeding from point to point, and its unexpected changes of tone and emphasis, serve to alert the attentive reader to some of the rhetorical strategies of the fables which are to follow it. Henryson's Prologue is more than a theoretical statement of a theory of figural poetry: it is an elliptic and ironic "defence" which raises as many questions as it appears to answer, the work of a poet who like Chaucer was more an innovator than a traditionalist.

It is entirely appropriate that the speech of Aesopic animal characters should be described in terms of argument and debate ("And to gude purpois dispute and argow,/Ane sillogisme propone, and eik conclude"). The concessive clause with which the Prologue opens ("*Thocht* fein₃eit fabils") suggests from the very beginning the presence of a mind which has a keen interest in dialectic, the *pro* and *contra* approach to the establishment of truth. The Prologue proceeds in the manner of an argument or "demonstracioun," but although its separate parts are all drawn from literary convention, the synthesis is highly individual and thought-provoking. The syntax of the first stanza suggests that the thoughts being presented have a logical or causal relationship ("Thocht . . . ₃it than . . . And als") but the apparent self-assurance and casualness of the narrator constitute a challenge to the reader. Fox's explication of the stanza as a highly compressed introduction to Henryson's aims ("to be *dulce et utile*") and methods ("a highly wrought style, a satirical mode, and a figural technique") is cogent enough, but the dominant impression remains the manner rather than the matter of the

stanza. The casual transitions from one major aesthetico-moral topic to another—from the notion of how art can be truthful when its literal basis is fiction, to the capacity which art possesses for giving pleasure, to the conception of the artist as moral and social reformer and from thence to the technique of the figure—direct our attention towards the fundamental and complex question of the relationship between art and truth, and alert us to the possibility of at least one contradiction (can the same work of art be the source of both delight and reproof?). The casual manner, which verges on naïveté, disguises what is indisputably a very exalted view of poetry—of the present poem no less than the "ald poetre" which is the ostensible subject.³

The second and third stanzas help to resolve the apparent dichotomy between correction and aesthetic pleasure, but in such a way as to open further questions for the reader. Stanza 2 opens with an apparently conventional simile in which poetry is compared with the bounty of Nature:

Swa it be labourit with grit diligence,
 Springis the flouris and the corne abreird,
 Hailsum and gude to mannis sustenance;
 Sa springis thair ane morall sweit sentence
 Oute of the subtell dyte of poetry,
 To gude purpois, quha culd it weill apply. (ll. 8-14)

The relevant section of Henryson's source, the Prologue to the fables of Gualterus Anglicus, might be translated thus:

This garden brings forth both fruit and flower, and
 flower and fruit alike give pleasure: the one has beauty,
 the other savour. If the fruit appeal more than the
 flower, pick it out: if the flower more than the fruit,
 gather it: if both please, gather both . . .⁴

Gualterus dissociates himself with graceful irony from the question of interpretation—the reader may do as he pleases, according to his capacity and his interests. His image of the poem as garden expresses the traditional contrast between *dulcis* and *utilis*, although the opposition is not an absolute one, since presumably *fructus* has some of the surface beauty of *flos*. The Henrysonian simile is more complex. No essential difference is

implied between the products of nature, the "flouris" and the new shoots of grain: the syntax of lines 10-11 expresses the idea that *both* are "Hailsum and gude to mannis sustenance" (the phrase cannot be satisfactorily read as qualifying only the second of the nouns in line 10). By the repetition of "sweit," the "rhetore" of line 3 is associated with the "sentence" of line 12 (which as Fox rightly indicates is "meaning" here rather than the narrower sense of "moral"⁵). What poetry means is both "morall" and "sweit": the oxymoron expresses the hope of a full and inclusive response more seriously than Gualterus's invitation "take what you can." The pleasure of reading poetry is to be a necessary part of the experience of understanding it, and the reader is left in no doubt about the effort which the "subtell dyte" and its author expect of him. Understanding is to be achieved only after mental and imaginative effort, just as the bringing forth of a crop from "a bustious eird" is made possible only by the physical labor of the husbandman. The repetition of "springis" articulates with fine exactness the sense that meaning, at once moral and sweet, emerges like flowers and grain from the earth—gradually, and only after sympathetic effort. (Denton Fox's note to ll. 8-14 seems to give a misleading emphasis, by suggesting that "ane morall sweit sentence" is implied solely by "corne," while "flouris" denotes pleasure.⁶ The syntax and logic of the similitude suggest that the associations of both natural objects are present in the "sentence" of allegorical poetry). Poetry, no less than the husbandry of the soil, is seen to have a practical and utilitarian value. "Quha culd it weill apply," placed like an apparent afterthought at the end of the stanza, suddenly introduces the idea that there is a necessary connection between intellectual engagement and moral action. The poem will not have achieved its object unless there is a practical effect on the "misleuing" of mankind, an idea which receives fuller expression in the Prologue to *The Lion and the Mouse*.

The second stanza, then, brings into focus a connection between the two aspects of poetry, pleasure and profit, which are juxtaposed in stanza 1: the "sweitnes" which highly-wrought poetry can impart is seen now to be something more than decoration, as an inseparable part of the moral function of letters. The reader is left, however, with the bemusing awareness that what pleases the ear might not be synonymous with what pleases the mind, and perhaps also that since poetry is so

"subtell," it may be all too possible to seize upon a "sentence" which is not there at all. In this context, it is worth remarking that Henryson, unlike Gualterus Anglicus and Lydgate (in the Prologue to his *Isopes Fabules*), omits to invoke any divine guidance for his projected "translatioun," thereby depriving the reader of the illusion that there might be a final and ultimate authority for what he is to read.

The third stanza proceeds to emphasize more strongly than the second the priority of the moral element of poetic meaning, through the traditional allegorical image of the nut. This image differs from the natural image of the previous stanza in that a clear distinction is made between its two literal elements: whereas the flowers and corn were both interpreted as parts of poetic "sentence," the shell of the nut is viewed as something dry and ultimately worthless in comparison with the kernel of truth which it contains and preserves. (Some of the witnesses give for ll. 15-16 the reading "The nuttis schell . . . Haldis the kinnell, and is delectabill," which if adopted would lead to a very different interpretation of the figure. However, the reading given by the Bannatyne and Makculloch MSS., followed by Fox, is clearly preferable, because it gives a sense which provides a logical relation to the second part of the simile). Although the nut image does not contradict that of the previous stanza, the rhetorical emphasis is clearly different: the shell of poetic fiction, the literal element, is now seen to be worthless in relation to the "doctrine" which it contains. The kernel is described as "sueit," and the logic of the image denies sweetness to the surrounding shell which, being "hard and teuch," would appear to offer no kind of pleasure. After this definition of poetry as an adjunct to Scripture the remainder of the stanza is quite startling, especially as it is offered as having a logical connection with the preceding idea:

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

Although their emphases are different, the images of the second stanza and the first part of the third agree in representing poetry as a serious kind of discourse. There is nothing to prepare the reader for this abrupt change to a much less elevated view of

poetry, as pastime or "merie sport," whose profit consists not in any moral function, but rather in recreation from "ernist" matters. This genial and even jocular strain continues into the fourth stanza, as "the mynd that is ay diligent" is now exhorted to take "sum merines" lest it become stale. I.W.A. Jamieson, in a valuable short essay on the poetics of the *Fables*, notes that there is something "decidedly inorganic" about this stanza:

There is no discussion of the effect that "merie sport" might have on the serious material, the "sentence," the "sad materis," the reproof of total misliving. The comment is a little, only a little but the analogy may help, like Harry Bailly's claims, as critical referee for the progress of the *Canterbury Tales*, that doctrine should be followed by mirth.⁷

The dominant effect of this change of mood and the apparent undermining of what has gone before is to challenge the reader's assumptions about the nature of poetry—in particular, about the nature of the "feinzeit fabils" to follow. Is it possible for poetry to be "merie" and at the same time to make the kind of intellectual demand on the reader which is conveyed by the image of flowers and corn? Is the view of poetry as vehicle for "doctrine" and agent of moral reformation necessarily incompatible with the concept of poetry as entertainment?

These are questions which several of the fables themselves raise, principally through the unusual and unexpected links which are made between their two formal parts, *taill* and *moralitas*. In them, as in the Prologue, Henryson shows himself to be keenly aware of the way in which his audience is likely to respond, and to make this imagined response an integral part of the dialectic of the poetry. The fourth stanza of the Prologue gestures towards the authority of "clerkis" by quoting a Latin line from "Esope"—actually, from Gualterus Anglicus—which appears to be a synthesis of the two opposing views, poetry as edification, and poetry as entertainment: *Dulcis arrident seris picta iocis*. At the level of theoretical statement this is unexceptionable, but it does not proceed naturally from the thought of the preceding stanzas, which has given emphasis first to one, then to the other aspect of the experience of reading. The Prologue directs the reader to observe more than this

traditional theory of the nature of poetry, the combination of seriousness (*seria*) with mirth (*iocis*). It draws our attention to the question, at once fundamental and complex, of *how* poetry can accommodate and reconcile these divergent impulses. The modesty-topos of stanza 6, with its plea for the beneficent reader's correction where necessary, is a playfully ironic gesture towards the larger questions of involvement and comprehension raised within the Prologue. Henryson leaves us in no doubt about his own commitment to the cause of moral and spiritual reform through the practice of poetry. The final metaphor of the Prologue is concerned not directly with the nature of poetry and how it is to be comprehended, but rather with the nature of man:

Na meruell is, ane man be lyke ane beist,
 Quhilk lufis ay carnall and foull delyt . . .

This lament for man's depravity achieves its full force by gathering up echoes of what has preceded it—the function of poetry as reproof (stanza 1), the implicit injunctions to "apply" the fable's "sentence" and "doctrine" (stanzas 2 and 3)—and working them into an urgent and authoritative appeal to the reader. The moral seriousness has an edge of stern wit, in Henryson's reversal of the terms of the traditional beast-fable's metaphor of beast-as-man. Beasts may behave like men for the combined purpose of edification and entertainment in poetic fiction, but this poet insists on a stronger kind of reality. The biblical notion of man-as-beast is commonplace, as Fox notes,⁸—but here the context makes the comparison unexpected and even startling, as the self-disparaging voice of the narrator as servant of his audience gives way to the uncompromising authority of the preacher. One of the effects of this is to raise a further question about the appropriateness of the idea of poetry as recreation—the tone implies that it may well be too late for gentle persuasion. The fact that the fables were written at all would seem to indicate that Henryson's pessimism did not extend so far, although the discussion between the poet-dreamer and the fictional "Aesop" in the Prologue to *The Lion and The Mouse* raises in a more explicit way this question of the possible moral inefficacy of poetry:

Sa roustit is the world with canker blak
 That now my taillis may lytill succour mak. (l. 1396-7)

The final stanza of the Prologue returns to the mood of quiet reflection on past fable-writing with which the first stanza begins. Here as before the emphasis is upon style ("In gay metir, and in facound purpurate/Be figure wrait his buke"), but now more insistently in terms of audience reception. Fox's note to line 60, which cites a passage from Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum* as a parallel, seems to me to distort the sense by claiming that it is "that the *gay metir* will please some readers, and the figure others."⁹ The allusion to "Esope's" way of writing seems rather to combine the two social estates of "hie" and "low" into one audience, capable of responding in the same way to both the elegant rhetoric and the figurative technique of the fable. Implicit is a further large claim for this genre of poetry, that it has the potential to reach the widest possible audience through the present poet's skillful use of the resources of his "mother toung."

The prime function of any literary prologue is to attract the reader's interest in what is to follow. Henryson's Prologue does this in a way which is partially ironic and dramatic in the continued awareness of audience response manifest in it: in this respect it is reminiscent of the rhetorical preliminaries in *The House of Fame* where, as J.A.W. Bennett observes, Chaucer keeps his readers "on the *qui vive* as he quickly shifts from one stance to another."¹⁰ The Prologue to the *Fables* leaves little room for doubt about its author's belief in the high seriousness of figural poetry, its relevance to what is perceived to be a state of universal moral decay. In other ways, though, the Prologue is distinctly open-ended: the reader is made aware that he will need to pay very careful attention to the poetry if he is not to misunderstand it, but at the same time he is reassured that fables offer entertainment and recreation to a mind which is in danger of becoming stale. Douglas Gray, whose structural and stylistic analysis is the most penetrating account of the *Fables* yet written, observes that by the end of the Prologue "we should expect to find delight in the midst of instruction and morality, and, perhaps, that we should not be surprised to find some 'merie sport' in the moralities as well as in the fables."¹¹ The first test of the reader's ability to comprehend what proclaims

itself as a "subtell" and possible ambiguous art is *The Cock and the Jasp*. The Prologue leaves little doubt that this was intended to be read as the first of the *Fables*:

And to begin, first of ane cok he wrate
Seikand his meit, quhilk fand ane iolie stone
Of quhome the fabill 3e sall heir anone.

Bassandyne's arrangement is in this respect preferable to that of the mid sixteenth-century anthologist George Bannatyne, who appears to have regarded the Prologue as having an exclusive application to this fable. *The Cock and the Jasp* offers, as part of its "sentence," an illustration of what is implied in the Prologue about the potentialities of the allegorical mode, the peculiar attractions and the peculiar difficulties of the "fenz₃eit fabils" which are to follow. In his *moralitates*, it is customary for Henryson to address his audience in a direct and often intimate way, but *The Cock and the Jasp* is the only one of the *Fables* to offer the reader what amounts to an open challenge: "Go seik the iasp, quha will, for thair it lay." This, the last line of the fable, has an obvious application to the *moralitas*: the jasp, which is scorned by the Cock, "Betakinnis perfite prudence and conning." John MacQueen's account of the biblical echoes in the *moralitas* supports his view that the "science" praised in the *moralitas* is the knowledge of the way to salvation.¹² But Henryson's challenge to his audience in the line quoted above suggests that the jasp has a secondary and more localized significance, as the "science" to be found within poetry. *The Cock and the Jasp* offers an extreme instance of the interpretive difficulties which are to be encountered elsewhere: its meaning (which goes beyond the content of the *moralitas*) depends upon the creation of a tension between actual and ideal, literal and figurative. Here, as in several of the other fables, the reader is confronted in the *moralitas* with an allegorical reading of the *taill* which is at odds—or apparently at odds—with his experience of the *taill* and the kind of allegorical reading which seems natural to it.

It is not that there is a tension between the literal level and allegorical interpretation *per se*: rather, the tension comes into being because of the unexpectedness of the interpretation. The Cock in *The Cock and the Jasp* has—even if he is "richt cant and

crous"—an appealing kind of commonsense. He recognizes that the gem is valuable ("O gentill Iasp, O riche and nobill thing") but that it is not fitting adornment for one whose needs do not extend beyond mere subsistence. The Cock's language is discussed by both MacQueen and Fox:¹³ Both see the abrupt transitions from the extravagant high rhetorical mode to the "low" style appropriate to the farmyard as conveying a sense of moral error—the foolish complacency of bondage to appetitive demands. In terms of the significance given to the Jasp in the *moralitas*, this reading of the Cock and what he stands for is undeniably accurate, but it is necessary to recognize the implications of the irony that the Cock, unlike his critics, had not read the poem. And as we read the *taill* for the first time we are more than likely to respond to him as an exemplar of a reasonable and attractive way of life, especially as he is such a fluent rhetorician. Reading the poem on a literal level, we may even be touched by the Cock's unconcern for market economics: he does not, after all, rush off to sell the "gentill Iasp," but simply bids it "Rise . . . Out of this fen, and pas quhar thow suld be." When we turn to other versions of this fable we are likely to be confirmed in our reaction. His English cousin, the creation of Lydgate, embarks upon an even longer address to the stone. He is even more sententious than his Scots counterpart, and is learned enough to have read in a lapidary that it has more than a material value. Like Henryson's figure, he propounds a philosophy of each to his own, and this system of values is endorsed, without any suspicion of irony, in Lydgate's *moralitas*:¹⁴

The cok demyd, to hym hit was more dew
 Small simple grayne, then stoness of hygh renoun,
 Of all tresour cheif possessioun.
 Suche as God sent, eche man take at gre,
 Nat prowde with ryches nor groge with pouerte
 (ll. 213-17)

If we are called upon to approve Lydgate's rather dreary fowl, then we can hardly be at fault for liking Henryson's, especially as he is without the benefit of a lapidarian's education. What is perhaps most appealing about him is his unflinching deference to the stone: the "apology" to the jasp because of the Cock's

preference for worms and snails,

And thow agane, vpon the samin wyis,
May me as now for thyne auaill dispyis (97-8)

is characteristic of the spirit of high comedy in which Henryson frequently links the animal and human realms, and not surprisingly it has no counterpart in Lydgate's handling of the fable.

While the critical interpretations of the fable provided by MacQueen and Fox are essentially sound, they give insufficient emphasis to the experience of reading the fable sequentially as a determinant of its "sentence." Although it may seem naive to argue from the standpoint of what the *tail* seems to say at a first reading, it is highly probable that this experience is a calculated element in the way the poetry works. The rhetorical strategy is one of deliberate misleading: we are led to expect one interpretation, the natural one, and instead we are given a highly ingenious interpretation of the Cock as the foolish man,

Quhilk at science makis bot ane moik and scorne,
And na gude can; als lytill will he leir—
His hart wammillis wyse argumentis to heir,
As dois ane sow to quhome men for the nanis
In hir draf troich wald saw the precious stanis.
(ll. 143-47)

Henryson begins to manipulate his audience towards the Cock's viewpoint at the conclusion of the Prologue, where the fable is summarized as being of a cock "quhilk fand ane iolie stone." The subsequent "characterization" of the jasp in the *tail* gives no indication that the stone is to be regarded as anything but a stone (albeit a valuable one). MacQueen finds a direct biblical allusion (to Luke 15:8) in the detail of the "damisellis wantoun and insolent" who sweep away the jewel in their excess of housekeeping zeal, but if this is a biblical allusion it is so muted as to be unrecognizable till one reads the tale with the information provided by the *moralitas* (where the jasp betokens "perfite prudence and cunning"). In any case, the detail is conducive to a literal understanding of the story. Clark comments that "the cock's early rising and diligence. . .contrast

with the idleness and indifference of the hypothetical girls."¹⁵

Although Fox does not discuss the overall rhetorical strategy of the fable in the way that I am attempting to do here, he is clearly aware of the shock effect of the *moralitas*, "which appears to be as impertinent and mechanical as the moral of an inferior fablieau."¹⁶ The stylistic mode of the *moralitas* is very similar to that of the Cock's peroration upon the jasp, in its modulation between the high style of parallelism and rhetorical question and a simpler, more intimate and particularizing level of language (well exemplified in ll. 134-47). The narrator's rhetoric in the *moralitas* is more persuasive than that of the Cock in the *taill*: Henryson speaks with the accents of the Christian moralist, whereas the cock is only a cock on a dunghill. The authoritative voice of the narrator (which now has none of the deference and mock-naiveté which hovers over the Prologue) compels its audience to return to the *taill*, to attempt to see why and how its central character "may till ane fule be peir." And it is possible to see how the tale will accommodate the allegorical reading which is proposed. Providing that we accept the symbolic identification of the jasp with Wisdom and Knowledge and the metaphorical association between beast and man (and there is no reason we should not), the Cock's failure to recognize the jasp's true value, and his rejection of it in favor of the singleminded quest for physical sustenance, can be seen as the marks of willful stupidity. (In our first reading of the *taill*, where the jasp seems to represent an object of material beauty and value, there is no such pressure to condemn the Cock as a fool, even if his elaborate language does make him look slightly absurd.) The Cock's admission that he loves "fer better thing of les auaill" denotes a certain kind of wisdom according to our first reading—it is attractively honest to admit a greater concern for food and warmth than for a courtier's splendors. But it is not so appealing, I imagine, to hear an admission that learning is of more "auaill" than material satisfaction from one who persists in seeking the latter to the exclusion of all else.

The effect of the *moralitas* in persuading us to review our original comprehension of the *taill* is both witty and complex. The poet has provided a practical demonstration of his proposition that the shell of the nut can indeed be "hard and teuch" to crack, and the "moralitie" about the value of wisdom and learning is made the more memorable because it has come

upon us in such an unexpected way. The stern injunction "Ga seik the iasp, quha will, for thair it lay" has the effect of locating wisdom not only in Scripture but also in "the subtell dyte of poetry." Although the voice of the *moralitas* is so magisterial that it might seem impertinent to raise the question, we are surely justified in asking about the final validity of our original response to the *tail* as a lively and amusing exemplum of what is described in *The Two Mice* as "blyithnes in hart, with small possessioun." Are we now to forget that we recognized the Cock as a representative of ordinary humanity, perhaps self-important, but basically well-intentioned? Or are we to recognize in the language of the Cock what one Milton critic calls "sin-centred" poetry,¹⁷ claimed to achieve its effects by inducing the reader to assent to attitudes and actions which are then shown to be vicious? This kind of rhetorical descent is surely no more a feature of Henryson's art than it is of Milton's. The theory makes unreasonable assumptions about the naivete of the reader: it disregards the concept of aesthetic distancing entirely, and presupposes an inclination towards empathy. But the *moralitas* is startling nevertheless, and there is every reason for the reader to feel that he has been deceived, probably consciously, by a narrative which has never given an indication that the jewel is meant to be seen as anything other than a jewel.

The assumption has usually been made in criticism of the *Fables* that it is necessary to regard the allegorical interpretation as having priority over the literal sense implicit in the tale, in those fables where there is an apparent collision of meanings. Denton Fox, for example, comments that it is "fairly obvious that the solution to this apparent discrepancy between the fable itself, which appears to approve the Cock, and the *moralitas*, which explicitly condemns him, lies in the fact that Henryson is working on several levels of meaning, or to put it differently, is using a figurative technique."¹⁸ Clark, replying to what he sees as Fox's incorrect emphasis on the harshness of the *Fables*, sees the narrative as being "transformed" by the moralization into an evocation of the difficulty confronting any exercise of free-will.¹⁹ Implicit in both ways of reading is a negation of the reader's initial response to the tale—the necessity for this exists in the minds of the critics rather than in the poetry, which is more flexible than either recognizes. For although in *The Cock and the Jasp* there are details of the narrative and the dramatic

monologue which can be seen to provide, as it were, a retrospective "justification" for the *moralitas*, the *taill* itself continues to be amenable to the reading which sees the Cock as a figure of the man who is wisely content with his lot. Both interpretations of the fable are finally possible, although in terms of the metaphor in the Prologue it is the interpretation endorsed by the *moralitas* which constitutes the "kirknell": the "science" celebrated by the *moralitas* is of course superior to the commonsense wisdom represented in the tale. Henryson's distinctive treatment of the traditional story enables it to carry a double "sentence," one part of which is explicit and highly ingenious, the other implicit and eminently natural. Obviously, the kind of double response outlined here depends on our being able to read poetic allegory with the kind of flexibility and sensitivity to paradox which is embodied in the Prologue's image of flowers and corn, equally "hailsum and gude to mannis sustenance." Gray observes that Henryson has in this fable "set up a careful, hidden pattern of irony at the expense of the cock, and surreptitiously and wittily has operated the same pattern against us, his readers."²⁰ He refers to E.H. Gombrich's first example of the impenetrability of pictorial illusion, the trick drawing from *Die Fliegenden Blätter* which is either a rabbit or a duck, depending on how we look at it (*Art and Illusion*, p. 5). The parallel is an illuminating one, providing that we recognize that both areas of allegorical meaning, the "natural" and the "dark," like the illusions in the trick drawing, exist with equal force and validity. (Perhaps an even more appropriate pictorial analogue to the illusion-building in *The Cock and the Jasp* might be the kind of Elizabethan perspective painting alluded to in Cleopatra's image of Antony's doubleness—"Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon, The other way's a Mars." This kind of perspective picture usually has a richer surface texture and a greater representational accuracy than the kind of drawings to which Gombrich refers.)

Elsewhere in the *Fables*, it is possible to find a more explicit validation for the kind of double-sided response which *The Cock and the Jasp* requires. *The Paddock and the Mouse*, probably intended as the concluding fable, is unique in the collection in that it has not one but two *moralitates* at the end of the *taill*. The first of these follows in a natural, organic way from the vividly particular account of how the mouse in her desire to

partake of delights on the opposite bank of the stream allows herself to be won over by a suspicious-looking frog, with predictably disastrous consequences—both frog and mouse are seized by an observant kite who is even more greedy than the mouse, and strong enough not to have need of the frog's seductive eloquence. The moral that caution is a necessary part of any personal commitment:

Be war thairfore with quhome thow fallowis the (2914)

Grit folie is to gif ouer sone credence
To all that speiks fairlie vnto the (2920-21)

is so obvious that it is not necessary for there to be explicit reference to the action of the tale. There follows a second signification, clearly marked off from the first by a change of stanza form and by explicit authorial comment:

This hald in mynd; rycht more I sall the tell
Quhair by thir beistis may be figurate. (2934-5)

The *tail* is now explicated as an allegory of the soul's bondage to the body, swimming "with cairis implicate" through the turbulent waters of the world. The thread which binds together the legs of frog and mouse is life itself, easily and unexpectedly severed by death, *alias* the kite. This interpretation has an ingenious force, not least because of what the figure implies about the desperate and always potentially discordant relationship between spirit and matter.

The spreit vpwart, the body precis down;
The saull rycht fane wald be brocht ouer, I wis,
Out of this warld into the heuinis blis. (2959-61)

The conventional identification of waves with worldly strife acquires new force in Henryson's masterly alliterative colloquialism within the control of an insistently rhetorical form.

Now dolorus, now blyth as bird on breir;
Now in fredome, now wardit in distres;
Now haille and sound, now deid and brocht on beir;

Now pure as Iob, now rowand in riches;
 Now gounis gay, now brats laid in pres;
 Now full as fishe, now hungrie as ane hound;
 Now on the quheill, now wappit to the ground.
 (2941-7)

The allegory works, but only if we are prepared to accept certain inconsistencies between the details of the *taill* and the interpretation which is proposed. (In this respect the *moralitas-taill* link differs from that of *The Cock and the Jasp*, because there the particulars of the tale can be accommodated to the allegorical interpretation). The reader who demands complete consistency between figure and interpretation will be hard put to make any theological sense out of the mouse's foolish willingness to join herself to the paddock: the implication that the soul's hunger for "the heuinis blis" on the other side of life's troubled stream could lead it to accept control by the body is nonsense. So too is the conclusion to which a consistency-conscious interpretation of the kite must lead—namely, that death, which cuts the strife between body and soul, also ends the journey to heaven's bliss. The second part of the *moralitas* depends not only on certain details of the tale itself, but also on the first part of the *moralitas*: the soul is implicitly likened to the mouse who abrogates responsibility. Thus the first three stanzas of the *moralitas* are seen to gain their point not so much by relation to the *taill*, but by their connection with what follows from "rycht more I sall the tell." The folly exemplified in the mouse is, in terms of the final allegorization, the kind which leads to damnation. The kite is evoked with the same kind of savagery as the fiendish churl in *The Preaching of the Swallow*. Henryson does not make the connection explicit, but the implied link between unprepared death and damnation underlies his quiet prompting towards vigilance and "gud deidis." That the poet's main concern is not with making the terms of the allegory absolutely consistent with the working out of the *taill* is very clearly highlighted by the juxtaposition of two very different, and partly contradictory, *moralitates*. The total effect of the fable is two-fold: a stern reminder of the frailty and unpredictability of earthly things co-exists with a sympathetic and good-humored involvement in the world of transparently human animal creation, an involvement which continually draws

attention to itself through the wit and suppleness of the poetic language. The two views of reality are seen, by the end of the fable, to be complementary: the affirmation of life gives depth and poignancy to the warning of its transience. What is advocated, here and in other of Henryson's fables, is understanding rather than rejection of the world. The final stanza illustrates a characteristic and highly appropriate fusion of wit and high seriousness:

Adew, my freind, and gif that ony speiris
Of this fabill, sa schortlie I conclude,
Say thow, I left the laif vnto the freiris,
To mak a sample or similitude.
Now Christ for vs that deit on the rude,
Of saull and lyfe as thow art Saluour,
Grant vs till pas in till ane blissit hour.

This elaborate fable, the only one of the collection to have two *moralitates*, is not of course ended "schortlie" at all, and the irony is Henryson's way of directing his audience towards the individuality of his achievement. Those whose tastes are for a simple connection between morality and art may find what they seek with the friars.

In *The Cock and the Jasp*, a tension between literal and figurative ways of reading is sharply emphasized by the apparent failure of the *moralitas* to answer to the mood of the tale. In *The Paddock and the Mouse*, a tension is highlighted by the form of the *moralitas* itself. Each fable achieves its effect by sudden shifts in perspective: the reader is left to find ways of reconciling the intellectual ingenuity of the *moralitas* with the realism which proceeds from a configuration of descriptive detail, plot development, and dramatic speech. The naturalistic mode for which the *Fables* have so frequently been praised should be recognized as only one element, albeit an important one, in a predominantly non-naturalistic poetic. The reader who comes to these poems with the assumption that there should be a logical, organic connection between the two parts of their formal structure will not be disappointed by fables such as *The Two Mice*, *The Cock and the Fox*, *The Wolf and the Wether*, *The Wolf and the Lamb*, *The Sheep and the Dog*, and *The Preaching of the Swallow*. One testimony to the intelligence which conceived

these poems is that although the moral interpretation proceeds unambiguously from the narrative, it is never trite or anticlimactic. *The Wolf and the Lamb* and *The Sheep and the Dog*, for example, are bold and topical explorations of injustice: in both fables, the function of the *moralitas* is to bridge the distance between the poetic fiction and the world of the poet and his audience. Here the *moralitates* disturb by the the urgency of the authorial voice as it pleads with God and man for an end to the exploitation of the poor and innocent. In neither of these, nor in the magnificently wide-ranging fable of the swallow and her companions does humor (except of the most dark and bitter kind) play any part. So serious are their moral preoccupations, it would appear, that there can be no disjunction between *taill* and *moralitas*, no room for misunderstanding or evasion of the issues raised. I mention these works here because I do not wish to suggest that the kinds of indirect and witty yoking of the two conventional elements of fable structure are necessarily the marks of a superior kind of poetic composition.²¹ All of Henryson's *Fables* are dialectic in structure, but in some of them the oppositions exist between elements within the narrative rather than between narrative and its formal explication.

The expectation that the *moralitas* of a fable "suld correspond and be equialent" to the logic of the preceding narrative does not arise, usually, in the experience of reading other medieval beast fables. What distinguishes Henryson's works from most of their sources and analogues is the extent of naturalistic detail, physical and psychological, with which the narrative is presented. The mode of the narrative is itself an encouragement to the organic kind of interpretation, but the poet frequently challenges his audience's assumptions about what makes sense. At least once in the *Fables*, there is something close to parody, as an apparently arbitrary link is made between the "moralitee" and a detail of the story. In *The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman*, the wolf and the fox are likened, respectively, to a wicked man and the devil, while the husbandman becomes a figure of the godly man, and the woods and the cheese images of worldly riches and covetousness. All of this is ingeniously and enjoyably relevant to the logic of the tale. A comically discordant note is struck, though, by the apportioning of an allegorical value to the husbandman's hens:

The hennis are warkis that fra ferme faith proceedis:
 Quhair sic sproutis spreidis, the euill spreit thair not speidis,
 Bot wendis vnto the wickit man agane—
 That he hes tint his trauell is full vnpane. (2437-40)

The similitude between hens and good deeds appears ridiculously far-fetched, and even more so the implied need to relate *all* of the major elements of the *taill* to the moralization. There seems here to be some playful mockery of the assumption that poetic allegory involves a patient working out of all the later details. Characteristically, though, Henryson manages to have it both ways, and to give the game a serious edge. For when we return to the *taill* itself, we can see that the allegorization has a kind of relevance, since it is only the husbandman's possession of the hens which saves him from the depredations of the fox and the wolf. (Obviously enough, the allegory will not work if we insist on a strictly literal interpretation, which would have the virtuous man using his good deeds to buy off the devil). The inclusion of this apparently insignificant detail has a similar effect to the omission of apparently important episodes from the *moralitates* of two other fables, *The Cock and the Fox* and *The Two Mice*.

Henryson's delight in the sudden leap from one level of interpretation to another—usually when his reader least expects it—presupposes a high degree of confidence in his audience's powers of assimilation and discrimination. It is unwarranted, I believe, to regard some of the fables as being less successful than others on the grounds that the high-minded admonitions and exhortations of the *moralitates* are not always supported, and in fact are sometimes apparently contradicted, by the approval of clever and self-satisfied worldliness implicit in the texture of the poetry. It is not necessarily the function of the "poesye" to prove or support the "preching" at all, although few readers can have failed to notice how the cleverest representatives of Henryson's human/beast world overreach themselves, usually with disastrous consequences. I agree with Ian Jamieson when he suggests that the *Fables* carry the marks of an experimental essay on the theme of transitoriness, that they illustrate different ways of exploring the question "How shal the world be served?"²² But I disagree with him about the degree of success which the experiment achieves. He finds something distracting, and ultimately detrimental to the seriousness of the poetry, about the

way in which it sometimes presents sin as being funny and even admirable. The poet's identification with the sin-prone natural world is emphasized several times by the dream-vision device of his physical presence as "I," but nowhere with such deliberately startling effect, surely, as in *The Fox and the Wolf* and *The Trial of the Fox*, where the sober preacher of the *moralitates* represents himself as the pupil of the wily Lawrence (ll. 634, 884). One of the effects of the naturalistic, dramatic mode employed in most of the *taillis* is to convey a strong sense of delight in aspects of the fallen world to which the poet and his audience belong.²³ This involvement coexists, however, with an equally strong sense of the world's transience, and its capacity for confusing the unwary and the weak-minded. In *The Trial of the Fox*, the lion is presented by the narrative as an impressively just (if somewhat gullible) worldly ruler: the *moralitas*, however, presents a view of the lion which seems disconcertingly at odds with this. He is now "the world . . . To quhome loutis baith empriour and king" (ll. 1104-5), a force to be shunned by "monkis and othir men of religioun." It is noteworthy, though, that what is represented here by the lion is condemned only inasmuch as it has the potential to lead men astray: the lion is dangerous only when the rule of sensuality is adopted,

As quhen lyke brutall beistis we accord
Our mynd all to this warldis vanitie. (1119-20)

"All to this warldis vanitie": the effect is not unlike that created by the address to "yonge fresshe folkes" at the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*, where the very terms in which the world is dismissed evoke the sense of its inevitable and legitimate attraction. Henryson's poetry is indeed "Chaucerian" to the extent that it reflects a dualistic perspective on the world—on the one hand delight, and on the other a keen awareness of pain, mortality, and the immanence of divine justice. This complex viewpoint is implicit in the Prologue, in its alternation from wittily understated aesthetic theorizing to stern reproof, and in the indirect and sometimes startling connections which are made between narrative and moralization in the fables themselves.

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NOTES

¹"Henryson's *Fables*," *ELH*, 29 (1962), pp. 337-56.

²*The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), p. 187. All quotations are from this edition.

³In his article, "Henryson and Aesop: the Fable Transformed," *ELH*, 43 (1976), pp. 1-18, George Clark suggests that within the Prologue itself there is an implied contrast between the present work and the conventional Aesopic fable (pp. 2, 5). But this is to underestimate the extent to which Henryson represents the aims and methods of his own work indirectly, in terms of the Aesopic tradition. Clark's comments on the Henrysonian "I" within the fables themselves are, however, very revealing.

⁴In Julia Bastin, ed. *Recueil général des Isopets* (SATF, 2 vols., Paris 1929-30), Vol. 2. See also Fox, *Poems*, p. 194.

⁵*Poems*, p. 189.

⁶*Poems*, p. 189.

⁷"To preue thare preching be a poesye": Some Thoughts on Henryson's Poetics," *Parergon*, 8 (1974), pp. 28-9.

⁸*Poems*, p. 192.

⁹*Poems*, p. 193.

¹⁰*Chaucer's 'Book of Fame'* (Oxford, 1967), p. 54.

¹¹*Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), p. 121. Gray's discussion of Henryson's exploitation of the connection between animal and human worlds (pp. 70-117) is particularly helpful. His view of the Prologue does not find in it the degree of ingenuity suggested here, although with his general conclusions I am basically in agreement.

¹²*Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 100-5.

¹³MacQueen, *Robert Henryson*, pp. 107-10; Fox, "Henryson's *Fables*," p. 344.

¹⁴*The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. H.N. MacCracken (EETS, 1911, 1934), Vol. 2, no. 24.

¹⁵"Henryson and Aesop," p. 7.

¹⁶"Henryson's *Fables*," p. 343.

¹⁷Stanley E. Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (London, 1967).

¹⁸"Henryson's *Fables*," p. 343.

¹⁹"Henryson and Aesop," p. 10.

²⁰*Robert Henryson*, p. 123.

²¹See also Harold E. Toliver, "Robert Henryson: from *Moralitas* to Irony," *ES* 46 (1965), pp. 300-9. Toliver does not altogether succeed in illustrating his central proposition that Henryson's *moralitates* "dissolve both sympathy and moral judgment in an ironic solution."

²²"To preue thare preching be a poesye," pp. 31-2.

²³Gray draws attention to what he calls "a suggestion of tentativeness about most of the *moralitates*," in the context of this relativism within the *Fables* (pp. 129-30). His account of the "dark" moralities is particularly stimulating.