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Rosemary Greentree

The Debate of the Paddock and the Mouse

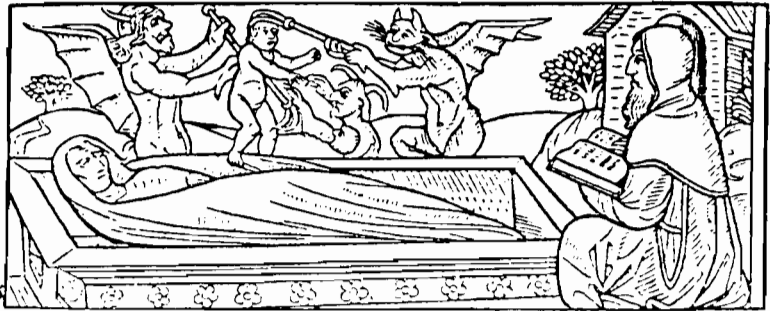
The tale of "The Paddock and the Mouse," the last in Henryson's series of *Moral Fables* offers several layers of meaning in the tale and its lengthy *moralitas*, giving a fable, an allegory, and a body and soul debate. The last aspect is the one I wish to consider in this paper, showing its resemblances to other works of this kind and Henryson's modification and exploitation of the reminders of this genre in his fable.

The tale appears in varied forms in many medieval collections, and it is generally assumed that Henryson used the version of Gualterus Anglicus, Walter the Englishman, as his source.¹ The moral usually drawn is that evil returns to punish those with evil intentions, and that wrongdoers cannot escape justice. In the first three stanzas of his *moralitas*, which are distinguished by their different form, Henryson stresses the particular case of false friends, giving an emphatic warning against the danger of "ane wickit marrow" (ll. 2917, 2933), which forms a refrain to each ballade stanza, resembling those of the *moralitas* of "The Two Mice" which advised contentment with small possession. If the fable ended at this point, as it could, we might feel, as we often do when we read Henryson's *Fables*, that we had heard a

¹Robert Henryson, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), xlv, 324-5; this edition is cited throughout. I. W. A. Jamieson, "The Poetry of Robert Henryson: A Study of the Use of Source Material," Diss. U. of Edinburgh, 1964, p. 61. Robert Pope, "A sly toad, Physiognomy and the Problem of Deceit: Henryson's *The Paddock and the Mous*," *Neophilologus* 63 (1970), 461.

familiar tale with a moral which ignores the obvious lesson in favor of an unexpected variation; "The Trial of the Fox" is a case in point. Henryson surprises us further, by beginning a detailed exposition of the complex and idiosyncratic allegory of his tale. He reveals that the two characters, the toad and mouse, are figures for the body and soul and that their debate, so described by the Narrator (*l.* 2907), illustrates their continual struggle. The incongruous journey of the two creatures offers Henryson's most disturbing comments on human life.

The debate form enjoyed popularity in medieval literature, with such examples as those between Water and Wine and between Summer and Winter. Henryson writes frankly in this style in "The Ressoning betuix Aige and Youth" and "The Ressoning betuix Deth and Man." Debates between the body and the soul were numerous and used for popular instruction.² The tradition begins with Old English addresses of the soul to the body, generally with bitter condemnation for the punishment expected by a damned soul, and continues with an increasing right of reply permitted to the body. In such dialogues, the body reproaches the soul, the thinking entity, for setting the course of the individual's life. The genre reaches an elegant climax in Andrew Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body" (about which more later), and W. B. Yeats gives a more recent example in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul."³



Le débat du corps et de l'âme⁴

²Robert W. Ackerman, "The Debate of the Body and the Soul and Parochial Christianity," *Speculum* 37 (1962), 541-65.

³W. B. Yeats, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (London, 1933), pp. 4-9. I am grateful to Mr. Philip Waldron for this reference.

⁴*Danse Macabre de Guy Marchant* (1486).

In general, the early debates are sternly moralistic, intended to warn the living, while there is still time to change. The soul is sometimes allowed the comfort of the hope of Heaven, after a virtuous life, but more frequently anticipates the torments of Hell, and often holds the sinful body responsible for this punishment. The body must also suffer—not the otherworldly attack of devils—but the revolting earthly process of decay and the ravages of worms and such other creatures as adders, newts and toads.⁵ Only the bodies of the saintly could avoid these humiliations.⁶ To consider these horrors, it is necessary to accept the idea of a visible soul, able to appreciate anguish or bliss, hovering near the corpse, before being dragged away by fiends or borne up by angels. The body, too, is in an improbable state, being capable of speech and able to feel not only the pain but also the shame and rejection which accompany its decay and destruction.⁷ A debate between two reasoning, speaking animals seems no less likely than such preposterous paradoxes. The debate between the paddock and the mouse demonstrates the hatred, revulsion and fear which appear in the other dialogues.

Let us look at the traditional tale and see how Henryson has modified, enriched and exploited it. It is usually an early tale in fable cycles; and in several collections, including those of Walter and Caxton and some of the French Isopets, it is consistently the third fable.⁸ Henryson places it last in his series, after the preparation of the lessons of the preceding fables, which illustrate the themes he draws together in the concluding work. His use of "The Cock and the Jasp," traditionally an introductory fable, as the first in his collection shows a degree of conformity to accustomed order, when it suits his purpose.

The most obvious change is in the selection of characters. Walter's tale is of a mouse and a frog; Caxton and some others tell of a land rat and a frog. Henryson adjusts the scale of feelings toward the protagonists, by using two animals with many associations. His choice increases the depravity shown in the toad and enhances the helplessness of the mouse. The paddock

⁵ Philippa Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature* (London, 1976), p. 158. *The Testament of Cresseid*, l. 578. *A Disputeson between the body and the sowle*, published in Hermann Varnhagen, "Zu Mittelenglischen Gedichten," *Anglia*, 2 (1879, reprinted 1963), l. 360.

⁶ Tristram, p. 153.

⁷ Ackerman, pp. 549, 564.

⁸ Julia Bastin, ed., *Recueil Général des Isopets*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1929-30), II, l. Léopold Hervieux, *Les Fabulistes Latins. Depuis le siècle d'Auguste jusqu'à la fin du moyen âge*, 2nd edn. (Hildesheim and New York, 1970; first published Paris, 1894).

is, in this case, a toad, although the word "paddock" can also be used for a frog. She is called "the taid" several times, and her description is certainly that of the creature regarded in the Middle Ages with horror and revulsion, thought to be a devourer of corpses, venomous and malevolent.⁹ The horrid details of her appearance and voice which expand Walter's brief reference to a garrulous frog with a flowery tongue confirm this.¹⁰ A rat, necessarily a land dweller, not an accomplished swimmer as a water rat would be, is not endearing. A mouse is more appealing, and Henryson's mice are particularly charming. He has already presented the amusingly anthropomorphic mice from the town and the country, and also the small heroine who rescues the lion. A reader must be well disposed towards the engaging little creature who is hindered by her ridiculous predicament of having no horse to ride across the river and no way of hiring a boat and mariner.

As well as the change in the emotional scale, there is considerable difference in physical size. A land rat and frog would be reasonably well matched—perhaps the rat would be stronger—but a toad, especially this toad, seems more powerful than the tiny mouse, whose littleness is stressed in Henryson's tale. We are told that her legs are too short, even for wading (*l.* 2779). In any case, we may question the probability of any of these combinations of animals, even in a fable. Although it is not difficult to imagine the relationships between predator and prey such as those of the fox and the cock or the wolf and the lamb, or even such a partnership of villains as that of the fox and the wolf, we find no natural or logical connection between the oddly assorted creatures we must consider. The absurdity of such an idea plays its part in the allegory.

Henryson enriches Walter's brief tale with the speciously learned dialogue of the two characters. The mouse is introduced at the river bank, helpless and frantic because she cannot go to the delicious food she can see on the other side. She is greeted politely by the toad, who offers to take her safely across, without a horse or any kind of boat, without even wetting her whiskers (*l.* 2804). The mouse is cautious and asks for an explanation, and the toad gives a spuriously technical account of the operation of her feet and gills. As Denton Fox notes, toads have no gills.¹¹ The mouse now shows her knowledge of physiognomy; she recognizes the depravity she has en-

⁹Pope, 462-3; *Peterborough Chronicle*, f.89^v; *As You Like It*, II, i, 13. *Macbeth*, IV, i, 6ff.

¹⁰Pope, pp. 462-4; "Rana loquax . . . florida lingua." *De Mure et Rana*, ll. 2, 4; Bastin, p. 9. I thank Mrs. Dorothy Hudson for her thoughts on Walter's fable.

¹¹Fox, p. 327, note on *l.* 2816.

countered, but her efforts to avoid it are futile. She denounces the evil revealed by the toad's wicked appearance, backing her statements with the authority of learned clerks, but her fear and her learning are overcome by the toad's superior forensic skills and her own failing of greed. The toad's plausible counter arguments offer biblical allusions against judging by appearance and an appeal to common sense, praising the value of bilberries over that of primroses. She denies any responsibility for her looks, and brazenly refers to those of "silkin toung" and "mynd inconstant" (ll. 2848, 2849). This eloquence exasperates the hungry mouse, who asks how the crossing can be accomplished. The toad's idea of tying their legs together to teach her to swim is frightening, and she hesitates to bind herself, wisely preferring freedom. The mouse insists that the toad must swear the ominously named "murthour aith" (l. 2865), but apparently does not notice that the wicked creature makes her vow to Jupiter, as did the fox just before he deceived the wolf, in *The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger* (l. 2026).

The journey of the two creatures does not end their wrangling, because of the difference in their intentions; the mouse wants to swim and the toad to pull her down. The mouse denounces the toad's false oath, calling her "tratour to God, and manesworne unto me!" (l. 2883). They struggle in the river and the toad attempts to drown the mouse; she succeeds in some versions of the fable. In Henryson's tale, neither quite overcomes the other, although the mouse, after a last attempt to ride on the toad's back, is ready to give up and calls for a priest. After their eloquent reasoning on the bank and the hopeless conflict in the water, they are taken, without thought or emotion, by a kite, which utters its natural cry as it picks them up by the thread binding them together. It flies away, kills them and hungrily devours them. For this natural predator, the tiny philosophers who have commanded our attention are not even "half ane fill" (l. 2905). This gruesome moment gives a shocking restoration of perspective to the reader, as Henryson undermines the fantastic world of the fable, showing it as an absurd fiction by placing it beside the world of nature, and preparing to move to the world of humanity, where the reader must examine not the preposterous contention of engaging animals, but that of body and soul.

The *moralitas* gives a clear exposition of the allegory, and the idea of the journey of a toad and mouse, bound together as they struggle in the water of the world, the "mortall se" of "The Thre Deid Pollis," is a despondent and pathetically ludicrous figure for human life.¹² The toad, which in nature has nothing to gain from drowning such an unlikely adversary, suggests pointless

¹²—"The Thre Deid Pollis," l. 1.

malevolence, the continual lusting of the flesh against the spirit.¹³ The mouse is an instructed and well-intentioned soul, whose aspirations are thwarted in ways which she cannot anticipate. Neither journeys without the other, and neither can overcome the other; only death, represented here by the kite, can release them.



The Paddock and the Mouse¹⁴

"The Paddock and the Mouse" is a premortal body and soul debate, which shows the spirit's inability to control the corruptible flesh, the body's longing to destroy the soul, and their mutual loathing. We are reminded of earlier debates and of Marvell's work in this striking demonstration and in the two creatures' skilful reasoning and desperate wish for freedom. The revelation that the fable is such a work has a disturbing effect on the reader. In retrospect, we find reminders of body and soul dialogues which set up surprising and disconcerting associations which sharpen the effect of the allegory.

The helpless, tiny mouse evokes the child-like form in which the soul is often pictured.¹⁵ Her lack of sweet food, horse, boat, riches and authority seem more than gentle ridicule, as they recall the deprivation of the dead af-

¹³Galatians 5:17.

¹⁴*The History and Fables of Aesop* (William Caxton, 1484).

¹⁵Ackerman, pp. 543, 549.

ter lives of earthly power, often expressed in scornful *ubi sunt* passages, but generally applied by the soul to the body.¹⁶ Her revulsion and fear when she looks at the toad resemble the shunning of the hideous corpse. Parallels to the mouse's identification of evil from physiognomy are found in the Middle English debate poem, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, in the nightingale's scornful description of the owl and in the owl's vicious reply.¹⁷ The futility of this learning may be compared to that of attempting to answer the questions posed by the skulls of "The Thre Deid Pollis," (ll. 41-8), Henryson's frank warning from the dead, which ask the reader what physiognomy could now reveal about the three in their lives. The toad's assertion that she cannot help her ugliness parallels the body's claim of inability to control its actions, because of its lack of reason.¹⁸

The binding of the body and soul is a familiar conceit of such debates, expressed most vividly by Marvell, in such images as "fetter'd . . . in Feet; and manacled in Hands."¹⁹ The contention of the two and the alternating mastery gained by the bound creatures resemble the mutual accusations of body and soul—that the soul has ordered the course of an individual's life, and that the body has frustrated the soul's intentions. The horse and rider image is transmuted to a bizarre variation, when the mouse springs on to the toad's back in her desperate attempt to save herself from the water and the toad—the world and the flesh.²⁰ This last effort is made when the mouse realizes that the toad means to drown her, suggesting that control over the wayward body has come too late to save the soul. The cry of "tratour" (l. 2883) resembles the accusation made by the soul in the *A Disputeson between the body and the sowle* (l. 311).

The attacks of worms and devils which follow a debate are translated to the action of the kite, which carries the creatures away by the connecting thread of life and releases them from their bondage, but kills and consumes

¹⁶E.g. in *Disputeson*, ll. 21-64.

¹⁷*The Owl and the Nightingale*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1960). The Nightingale describes the Owl in ll. 71-80, offset by the Owl's idea of her own appearance (ll. 269-71, 1675f); the Owl describes the Nightingale ll. 561f, 577-82. I thank Professor Walter Scheps for this comparison.

¹⁸Ackerman, p. 553.

¹⁹Andrew Marvell, *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, 3rd ed. rev. P. Legouis and E. E. Duncan-Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1971), "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body," I, 21, ll. 3-4.

²⁰Ackerman, p. 556.

them. The animals are no more than natural prey; there are none of the feelings evoked in body and soul disputes. In this moment, Henryson undermines his world of the fable, reducing the protagonists, who could have no logical or natural connection, to morsels for a predator which is acting in an entirely consistent manner. He restores perspective and proportion with a dramatic jolt, and forces readers to examine their own lives without the distraction and comfort of fiction. The concluding admonitions of the *moralitas* are similar to those of most body and soul debates, and resemble "The Trial of the Fox" and "The Thre Deid Pollis" in warning of death's inevitable but unpredictable assault. "The Paddock and the Mouse" gives a hint of optimism in recommending "ane strang castell / Of gud deidis" (ll. 2966-7). The concluding prayer expresses the familiar wish for a blessed death.

The whole effect of the fable is disturbingly far from the comforting message that punishment comes to all wrongdoers. The conceit of human life as the journey of a mouse and a toad, incompatibly and inextricably bound together, is a depressing one, rescued from complete pessimism only by the collapse of the fable world and the Narrator's willingness to join the reader, addressed as "brother" and "freind" (ll. 2910, 2969). The idea of the struggle between soul and body may be extended to that between good and evil, and "The Paddock and the Mouse" recalls the teachings of Henryson's previous fables, as it alludes to deception, contentment, temptation, the world and death, with the inevitable separation of the soul and body, for which all must prepare. We are shown again the susceptibility of the innocent and the delusion of their reliance on earthly justice, the helplessness of the weak and the ruthlessness of the strong and corrupt.

Characteristically, Henryson shows us a soul and body which are neither entirely good or wholly evil, continuing his idiosyncratic and surprising ways of presenting aspects of the virtuous and villainous. He shows us some competent villains in the *Fables*.²¹ The mouse's aspirations are oddly shown as an urge for delicious food which overcomes her judgment, and also exposes the toad to the danger of being taken by the kite, just as the soul makes the decisions which govern the body's life. The country mouse of "The Two Mice" was chased and frightened when she sought sweeter food in the town, but she lived to learn her lesson of contentment; this mouse pays for her folly with her life. The longing for delicacies may be compared with teachings from other body and soul debates about mortifying the body by fasting, to

²¹The toad and the fox are bold and proficient in their wrongdoing. Lowrence is the source of the Narrator's knowledge of astrology (l. 634); and the hens used to bribe Lowrence, (named as the Fiend), are works proceeding from firm faith (l. 2437). In contrast, the wolf is merely brutal and frequently stupid.

nourish the soul.²² The toad is as evil as she looks, but her reasoning defeats that of the mouse. As in "The Preaching of the Swallow," a proposition of good quality is overwhelmed by a greater quantity of misleading arguments. Both creatures may be praised and blamed, as humanity may present aspects which are commendable and contemptible.

The lesson eventually drawn from the bizarre idea is entirely conventional, but its presentation is novel. Henryson uses his most preposterous fable to illustrate the fundamental conflict of good and evil, as the "wretchit battel" (l. 2897) of a mouse and a toad. The mouse's eager greed contending with the murderous malevolence of the toad almost gives a parody of the debates of the soul and body. The exposition induces us to look at the fable, and by extension at life, in a new way. Such examination and the discovery of analogies must be a fabulist's intention.

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²²*Disputeson*, ll. 282, 321-4; Ackerman, pp. 552-3, referring to *Dialogus inter Corpus et Animam*. Allen J. Frantzen, in "The Body in *Soul and Body I*," *The Chaucer Review* 17 (1982), refers to fasting and feasting, pp. 80-81.