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Steven R. McKenna

Tragedy and the Consolation of Myth in Henryson's Fables

Henryson's notions of tragedy in the Fables reflect a dual perspective. From one point of view, which I will call the choric and which is associated with Henryson's narrative voice, the obscure, confusing, capricious, and arbitrary inner workings of tragedy are given meaning by being placed within the context of religious and cultural mythic systems. From the other point of view, that of the tragic figure, the inner workings of tragic action reveal themselves to be logical, orderly, and meaningful regardless of any superimposed mythic systems.¹ What I propose to do here is view several of Henryson's fables in terms of their tragic dimension.

First of all, an essential characteristic of any tragedy, and a characteristic that is present in many of the fables, is the issue of a tragic character's discovering some essential truth, of achieving some growth in self-understanding. The nut metaphor by which Henryson in his Prologue characterizes the deeper meanings of a fable can likewise serve as a metaphor for this particular aspect of tragedy. Just as a fable is a riddle whose meanings must be sought like the meat of a nut, so too the deep and obscure truths about human identity and the human condition are a riddle, the solution of which lies in the power of the tragic figure.

¹These are issues which achieve their fullest development in Henryson's "Testament of Cresseid," as I've shown in a forthcoming article in *Scottish Literary Journal*, particularly in the contrast between her self-understanding and the vision of her we get through the Narrator's commentary.

This issue is raised poignantly in a fable that can be seen as truly tragic, namely "The Wolf and the Wether." Here, the Wether's desire to protect the flock from the depredations of the foxes and wolves is potentially a noble, indeed even heroic, characteristic. Yet this characteristic is balanced by the Wether's desire not merely to protect the flock, but also to hound the Wolf into a state of utter terror.² The Wether both literally and figuratively oversteps his bounds, and we may see this as indicative of a tragic excess in his character. When the Wether's dog skin rips off on the bush as he pursues the Wolf, the Wether must then painfully confront the limits and realities of his own character and the results of attempting to exceed those limits. He must finally acknowledge who and what he really is. His excuses made to the Wolf upon being exposed sound pitiful and cowardly, but they could nonetheless be true. When, for instance, he says he never meant to do the Wolf any harm (*ll.* 2558 & 2575) he is probably being sincere insofar as he implies physical harm rather than the Wolf's deep-felt terror. Consider the absurdity of a sheep chasing a wolf: had he ever managed to catch the Wolf, the Wether at that point would have been utterly helpless in his victory, and quite likely dead, just as he is when he loses his disguise.

The question of identity brings up a fundamental point about the structure of tragic action as Henryson constructs it. The changes of fortune that many of the animals experience, such as the Wether's fall, can be plotted along the traditional lines of tragic action: after the exposition the action rises to a climax or crisis and then falls to a catastrophe. Yet when we view the animals as the allegorical representations of humanity, as the poet and the fable conventions encourage us to do, we can see that a tragic catastrophe for humanity has already occurred—namely that the tragic human condition is inextricably linked in the poet's mind with the fallen human condition (as defined in the context of Christianity).³ In general, then, Henryson's fables can be viewed in terms of rising action, not falling action, leading to climaxes that, if not tragic per se, in many cases carry tragic overtones. The rising action of these fables thus clarifies and illuminates the nature of the original catastrophe vis-a-vis human identity, that is, the original act which resulted in the present bleakness of the human condition.

²Cf. *l.* 2535. All references to Henryson's poetry are from *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981). Hereafter all quotations will be cited parenthetically within the text.

³George Peek, in his "Henryson's View of Original Sin in 'The Bludy Serk,'" *SSL*, 10 (1972), 199-206, points out that original sin is a condition of fallen man for which we are not guilty, but is the burden which we must all bear. This notion is equally applicable to the Fables and the initial condition which the tragic action illuminates.

Specifically, we can point to the omnipresent theme of carnality in the Fables, for in Henryson's view carnality makes humanity bestial. We might even say that human carnality is a condition which leads people to tragic errors of judgment and more importantly reflects the essential criminality of tragic figures. And, significantly, "criminality" can only exist within the context of cultural and religious values that define right and wrong. Take, for instance, the first fable, "The Cock and the Jasp." Here the Cock's preference for food instead of the jewel is framed by the tale and its *moralitas* in terms of carnality as opposed to reason. Implicit in the Cock's attitude is the idea that we as human beings are prisoners of our own inescapable limitations of desire, reason and spirit. The mind and soul are in this sense fettered by the body and its needs. Rather than embodying pride, traditionally associated with cocks and the first of the seven deadly sins in the Gregorian order, the Cock of this first fable seems to reflect gluttony, being as he is so concerned with the dictates of his belly. Significantly, the Cassianic, as opposed to the Gregorian, order of the seven deadly sins places gluttony and lechery (not pride) first because as the theologian Cassian argued those two needs were the most difficult to overcome since they were the two sins most closely related to the necessary human functions upon which survival depends—eating and procreating. The Cock's crime here, according to the Narrator, is thus his failure to live up to the spiritual and moral ideals of the Narrator's contextual Christian mythic system, governed as the Cock is by the physical necessities of his own flesh. Making the allegorical leap to the human realm, Henryson's attitude on this point is clearly and succinctly expressed in the Prologue:

Na meruell is, ane man be lyke ane beist,
 Quhilk lufis ay carnall and foull delyte,
 That schame can not him renze nor arreist,
 Bot takis all the lust and appetyte,
 Quhilk throw custum and the daylie ryte
 Syne in the mynd sa fast is radicate
 That he in brutal beist is transformate.

(ll. 50-56)

This theme appears frequently in the Fables. For instance, in "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger" the Fox appeals to the Wolf's greed, gluttony and sloth in the scheme to steal the Cadger's fish. But more to the point, the first truly "tragic" fable, "The Fox and the Wolf," has within it a succinct explanation of the tragic human condition as Henryson envisions it and as articulated by his narrator: "neid may haif na law" (l. 731). The tragic condition for the Fox, and for humanity, is that the body and soul have different, competing, and ultimately irreconcilable needs. In the mortal realm, as Hen-

ryson presents it, the body usually wins out because of carnal, bestial, and biological necessity, and through this victory, when seen from the Christian perspective of the "law," the soul comes out the loser. This so-called need and its dominance over the soul represents for Henryson the essential criminality of the tragic figure and his condition, for without the overarching Christian mythos there can be no tragedy or tragic dimension. The tragic action must take place in relation to some infraction of cultural or cosmic rules.

Furthermore, the "need" as Henryson envisions it decidedly does not make of the human being a passive, suffering victim of powers beyond mortal control. To the contrary, the implications of many of the fables' morals are that humanity exercises poor judgment, blinded as we are in our fallen state by corporal concerns. Yet for Henryson the essential tragic dimension of this state of affairs is not so much the stock commonplace of traditional views of tragedy, that is tragedy being brought about by some fundamental error of judgment, though for him error certainly plays a crucial role. Rather, the Christian mythological context which frames the fables indicates that the tragic dimension of the human condition is ultimately associated with cognition, volition and guilt. Error of judgment, like sin itself, results from willful action and leads to consequences. As an example, we can look at the Fox in "The Fox and the Wolf." In this fable the Fox reads his destiny in the stars. For him Nature in its cosmic dimension offers a guide, even a caveat of sorts. But in the end he brings destruction down upon himself by stealing the kid and incurring the punishment and retribution of the goatherd. This criminality exists independent of the astrological messages of the stars and planets. It comes about through the dictates of the Fox's character—that need in the Fox which makes him unwilling and unable to foreswear flesh. Presented with the law on one hand (the Wolf's administered penance to the Fox requiring him to fast on fish until Easter), and on the other hand the biological need of having to eat flesh, the Fox chooses to cater to his need. Hence, such behavior, when viewed from the Christian perspective, carries culpability and therefore punishment. The biological need may seem to imply a lack of control, but the message of the moral is that the animals, and by extension humanity, do exercise ultimate control over their fates.

Here we must consider the role of the Narrator in the fables, since he functions as a choric voice which articulates the governing moral and ethical principles. As such, the Narrator can be seen to function as the voice of collective humanity speaking to collective humanity. The Narrator becomes both an idealized audience and a pointedly moral commentator on the action which he describes. Take, for instance, "The Cock and the Jasp" again. The Narrator's *moralitas* superimposes a socio-religious ideal of knowledge and wisdom upon the Cock's rejection of the gem. This superimposition gives

the fable it's meaning for the Narrator and in doing so points to the Cock's essential criminality. From the Narrator's perspective, the Cock's action represents a serious error of judgment, a grave mistake, one that is worthy of at least a serious moral reproach. But from the Cock's perspective, his rejection of the jewel is logical: he sees no intellectual or cosmic significance in the stone and is correct, in light of the biological need, in seeking instead scraps of corn and other morsels.

A key characteristic of the Narrator is his tendency to shun the criminality of the animal figures in the fables. If we look at the fable of "The Fox and the Wolf" as an example here we see in the *moralitas* that the Narrator, by assuming a religious perspective, can't accept the Fox's criminality or its biological basis, but instead exhorts folk to mend their sinful ways and not make false confessions. This particular moral clearly implies that tragedy, through the example of the deceased Fox, can serve an idealized, prophetic function—namely that there is a human capacity to discover profound truths about the self and one's fate and to act upon these truths. However, this utopian element of tragedy is counterbalanced and neutralized by the Narrator's own attitude and function. Whatever profound truths the tragic figure finds, whatever visionary truths are discovered are doomed to remain hidden, secret and solitary with the tragic figure. On the one hand the fables point to the tragic necessity of violating the cultural and religious myths (upon which the Narrator ultimately relies for his meanings) in order to reach the great insights into the workings of fate, truth, and identity. Yet on the other hand the Narrator counsels vehemently against people engaging in this tragically necessary action. As the Narrator says in his prologue to "The Preaching of the Swallow,"

Nane suld presume be ressoun naturall
 To seirche the secreitis off the Trinitie,
 Bot trow fermelie and lat all ressoun be.
 (ll. 1647-9)

Neither human reason nor action should, in his view, aspire to divine wisdom in any way; and since we are assumed to be created in God's "image," this call is in effect a taboo against knowing who we are. For the Narrator, God is incomprehensible, and by extension so are we. The human mind should content itself with the more limited knowledge that God, as perceived through His creations (ll. 1650-52), is at least "gude, fair, wyis, and bening." Yet it is, after all, a profound glimpse of some fundamental truth that the little birds implicitly see in their collective downfall and ruin—a glimpse that the Narrator believes is best avoided.

The Narrator's attitude indicates that for the choric mind nature and the cosmos embody the signs, symbols and guides whereby human beings can

come to at least a rough understanding of their place in the grand scheme of things. If God is partially knowable through His creations, then we can know our place in the hierarchy of the universe and through this understanding also come to know something of ourselves. This optimistic, choric attitude ignores the question of evil, however, especially in light of the bleakness of so many of the other fables where error and wrongdoing abound. In fact, this optimistic, idealistic stance taken by the Narrator is not even borne out by the fable itself. The little birds, when viewed in light of the tragic characteristics that I've outlined here, do not and cannot orient themselves in relation to Nature and God as the Narrator implies is possible in his prologue. The birds don't read Nature as do the Narrator and the Swallow. This fable, broadly speaking, echoes Henryson's general theme of reason versus carnality, of need having no law. The Swallow believes in fate as it reads the signs of its environment; it believes that the birds will surely be the victims of their own short-sightedness. For this reason the Swallow advises action, but the other birds won't listen. We might well say that the birds suffer and die because of their own action of inaction, and this points back to the essential criminality and culpability of the tragic figure. Like the prophet Tiresias, the Swallow and its "truth" go unheeded. The birds must learn the painful truth of reality for themselves, a truth that the Swallow's cautionary voice tries to prevent the birds from learning. As Daniel Murtaugh has noted of "The Preaching of the Swallow," "what the *moralitas* leaves out in its account of the fable [is] the surprised pain of the discovery of just how dark the workings of Providence must seem to us here below."⁴ Indeed, the choric collectivity of the Narrator (and his mouthpiece the Swallow) keeps the tragic truth distant, dark, and secret. Implicit in the fable is a warning to humanity to avoid the action taken by the birds in order to avoid the tragedy that befell them. Furthermore, Henryson's Narrator and his surrogate the Swallow seek to order and make sense of the horrors of reality by superimposing a mythic dimension which keeps that existential despair and senseless cruelty at bay.

If we turn here to "The Two Mice," we can see a similar reliance on mythic consolation at work. The Country Mouse is a thief, as is her sister the Town Mouse, but in the *moralitas* the Country Mouse's way of life is praised while that of the Town Mouse is condemned. The moral is strictly biblical but doesn't necessarily follow from the experience of the Burgess Mouse herself. She is quite at home with the abundance of city life and its inherent hazards. The Country Mouse suffers because she is out of place in the town. The biblical mythos of the moral thus gives meaning and a higher value to her rural experiences and the bareness of that existence. Though the

⁴Daniel M. Murtaugh, "Henryson's Animals," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (1972), 409.

Country Mouse cannot be considered a tragic figure, since she does not die and ultimately embodies the humble life that the choric Narrator finds so meaningful in his *moralitas*, nevertheless the fable does imply the possibility of a tragic view of reality. Despite the Narrator's attempt to elevate the significance of the Cat to cosmic and mythic proportions (the Cat being implicitly an embodiment of Death and fatal destiny), in the fable it "remains a playful household pet."⁵ Had the Country Mouse been killed by the Cat, her death would have been meaningless unless, of course, the choric Narrator placed that death in some sort of context, such as Christian values. Yet what the Country Mouse learns through her city experience bears little relation to the Narrator's perspective. The Country Mouse sees her experience predominantly in its existential dimension—namely one of survival and trade-offs. The Narrator is the one who elevates the experience of the mice to mythic significance wherein tragedy can potentially exist for both mice, though in the case of this fable tragedy is averted by luck and pragmatic reasoning. But consider the Burgess Mouse, whose whole existence can be seen as a deliberate cat and mouse game with death. Herein lies the tragic grandeur!

Another fable where the Narrator's superimposition of myth comes into play is "The Fox and the Wolf." The Fox's confession and judgment exist within a human code of religious conduct which is antithetical to the necessities of a fox's survival. Again, this tale illustrates that the inescapable demands of the flesh take precedence in the mortal realm. We may even see through the Fox's example, in the violation of the Christian values, that such religious doctrine of fasting and diet is a perversion of natural and biological necessity, reflecting utter contempt for those biological needs. The Fox's confession raises serious questions about what sin really is. In his case, his criminality is intimately tied to that which lets him survive. The Lenten fasting, for the Fox, appears to be totally unnatural to the point where it becomes comically ridiculous when we consider a fox trying to fish or mockingly baptizing a kid so that it can be called a salmon. The fasting is for him an aberration of the needs of his nature, and as the tale indicates, need may have no law.

The Narrator's adherence to myth embodies in addition to religious values social myths as well. For instance, in the case of "The Wolf and the Wether," as I mentioned earlier, the central issues can be seen as corruption and self-delusion which eventually lead to tragic insights into the truth about the self. In the *moralitas* the Narrator, in typically conservative choric fashion, urges that humanity therefore maintain the bounds of propriety within the social sphere. In other words, the status quo should be upheld, and this

⁵Murtaugh, p. 419.

is the key to avoiding the upset of social order that leads to the Wether's destruction.

Frequently, the social and the religious themes intertwine themselves. For instance, the Lamb in "The Wolf and the Lamb" believes in an external, rational force in the universe to which a being may appeal in seeking justice. As it says, "nature will me defend" (l. 2644) when the Wolf accuses it of polluting the stream (the Lamb, remember, was down-stream from the Wolf and "logically" could not have fouled the Wolf's drinking water). However, the logical laws of nature offer no defense. The Wolf simply refuses to accept them. Nature here, like the God in "The Sheep and the Dog," is seemingly asleep and won't come to the rescue of the Lamb. The assumed rational laws of nature, and any mythic dimensions perceived therein, may finally be arbitrary when viewed from the tragic perspective, as the Wolf's dismissal of the Lamb's arguments implies. The tragic element in the Lamb's case is that all the myths, religious and cultural, fail him precisely because the Wolf will not accept their premises. The truth here is all relative.

The moral for this fable is both social and religious. The Lamb represents the poor, oppressed masses, and the Wolf represents the agents of oppression. The Narrator claims that hell's fire will be the eternal reward for the human wolves' injustices inflicted upon the poor. Here again, the Narrator seeks the consolation of myth in an attempt to make sense out of what, in the absence of such a socio-religious perspective, can be viewed as nothing but bleak, senseless, existential horror. The *moralitas* here raises an important consideration for Henryson's general treatment of the tragic dimension of human existence, namely, to use Chaucer's Monk's famous question, "How shall the world be served?" In "The Wolf and the Lamb" Henryson attacks the ruling class's unjust treatment of the poor, their perversions of law, the abuse of power, their avarice. In a direct address to landlords (ll. 2756 ff.) the Narrator pleads for mercy toward the poor, telling the rich and powerful to beware of their souls. Here, the world should be served by an adherence to the religious values and the social values which derive from them.

The social dimension of Henryson's tragic vision receives its clearest and most comprehensive treatment in "The Lion and the Mouse." Henryson's source, Aesop, tells this fable within the framing device of a dream vision, and the tale is the most potentially topical of any of Henryson's fables. It is certainly the most socio-political of the fables and also proposes an answer to the question of how the world shall be served.⁶ Aesop, particularly in his

⁶The potential topicality could even reflect Henryson's own dependence over particular current events in his day. However, this is by no means certain. See for instance Marshall Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York, 1949) esp. ch. 2, and Robert L. Kindrick, "Lion

prologue to the tale, reflects in generalized terms about worldly woe and the human condition. He is primarily concerned not with the transcendent realities, but rather with the state of humanity within the mortal realm. His poetic eye is directed at the world we all inhabit.

In lines 1398-1403, Henryson's Narrator asks for a moral fable from his ancient and revered master in a manner which echoes Chaucer's Host's plea to the Monk for a moral tale in the vein of Chaucer's recently completed tale of Melibee. Henryson's Narrator here seems to be seeking moral consolation, perhaps in the face of the bleakness of Aesop's other fables which the Narrator nominally has been translating. However, the Narrator doesn't get what he wants, just as Harry Bailly gets instead of a moral tale the Monk's series of tragedies in which an ultimate scheme of justice is a dubious proposition. Aesop's *moralitas* focuses attention away from the cosmic and mythic and places this attention squarely on the mortal realm. In the moral there is no ultimate justice (as the *moralitas* of "The Sheep and the Dog" might want to suggest). He thus provides one possible answer to Chaucer's Monk's question of how the world shall be served by pointing out the necessity for rulers to be good governors, to exercise control and pity. Otherwise, a ruler who wallows in worldly lust and vain pleasure (*ll.* 1602-4) may find himself overthrown, his fortunes turned. Aesop's moral offers a formula for establishing and maintaining the harmony of man's social existence. The consolation here is ultimately of this world, not of the next.

In contrast to this fable, the sheep of "The Sheep and the Dog" casts its eyes and its prayers heavenward, but to no avail. In this tale, the Wolf threatens the Sheep with excommunication (*ll.* 1156-7) if a certain debt is not paid. Presumably this action of excommunication would determine the Sheep's ability to find salvation in heaven or damnation in hell (assuming, of course, that the Wolf's authority and power are somehow genuine). At least this is what seems to be motivating the Sheep's compliance with the verdict against him (*ll.* 1245 ff.). But, we may well ask, why should the Sheep seek salvation through a religious system (if that's what it is) that is capable of such gross injustice? Is the assumption that the system, despite its corruption, is the only key to heaven? I think so, for at least nominally Henryson calls into question religious figures, not religion itself. I say "nominally" here because the undercurrent of the fable with its comatose God potentially

or Cat? Henryson's Characterization of James III," *SSL*, 14 (1979), 123-36. At best, the case for political topicality is dubious, as pointed out by R. J. Lyall, "Politics and Poetry in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 3 (1976), 5-29). In my article, "Legends of James III and the Problem of Henryson's Political Topicality," *SLJ*, 17 (1990), 15-20), I show how sixteenth-century legendary histories of James III contribute to what I feel is the inappropriate superimposition of legends onto Henryson's fables.

casts a demythologizing pall over the religious system as well when viewed from the tragic, as opposed to the choric, perspective.

In terms of the mythic consolation offered by the fable, we are told that the tyrannical oppressors hope to maintain the status quo and in doing so will go to hell as a result. We might even say that from this perspective the Sheep's acquiescence to the unjust verdict against him is partially necessary for the damnation of the unjust. At least this seems to be the Narrator's choric sentiment. Yet this sentiment is counterbalanced by the Sheep's bleak existential condition vis-a-vis the cosmos and the unresponsive God. The consolation of myth here offers a way to resolve the question of justice raised in the fable, yet in the fable itself the Sheep complains bitterly and to no avail to the heavens about his victimization, echoing the Book of Job. He also only obeys the court's order out of fear for other and what he thinks are more severe forms of punishment. So he projects his misery, its cause and continuance, onto what he concludes is a sleeping God who cares not about earthly injustice. Yet even the bleakness of this vision for the Sheep carries with it an element of consolation for him. It absolves him of having to face any responsibility he might otherwise feel for the choices that have led him to his own plight, or what is even a grimmer prospect, that there really is no justice at all operative in the cosmos, that the mortal and divine realms may be forever isolated and estranged. But such is not the case. The Sheep finally accepts Christian doctrine and the meaning it can provide—namely that the victims are to blame for their suffering in the sense that it is punishment for wrong-doing, and that the cosmos does hold out the possibility of an ultimate justice, obscure as it may appear to faulty mortal reasoning.⁷ In the end, the Sheep is pitiful because he won't or can't rise to the height of a tragic figure even though he is caught up in a potentially tragic situation. He won't follow through the implications (tragic and horrifying as they are) of his question about a sleeping God and its result for the cosmos. In the end he instead prays to this God for salvation, which is what the Sheep wants above all else and which is why he tolerates such gross and blatant injustice perpetrated against him. He is decidedly not a Captain Ahab or a Miltonic Satan.

The bleakness hovering over this fable like a pestilent fog informs other fables as well, and here we may briefly turn to some of the other manifestations of this tragic element. For instance, if we return to "The Preaching of the Swallow" for a moment we find a wholly spiritual fable with an equally

⁷Yet paradoxically, the selection of the "guilty" victim here requires the selection of an "innocent" victim; thus the selection process is revealed to be entirely arbitrary. This paradoxical quality of selecting a scapegoat as a victim is given detailed coverage in René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1986), esp. ch. 3.

spiritual moral wherein the Narrator tells us human reason is blinded by the emotional faculties. Similarly, in the prologue to the tale the Narrator views reason as being deficient in its capacity to understand God. Reason, at least for the Narrator, thus functions as a key to salvation; in other words, it is the key to knowing the self in relation to the divine scheme of things. It does not, however, necessarily mean a direct and full understanding of that scheme or the self. Nor does this scheme, when viewed in light of some of the other fables, seem entirely consistent. Various fox and wolf figures are condemned for their thieving from human beings. Yet in "The Preaching of the Swallow" the birds are condemned precisely for not having the good sense to rob the Fowler of his seed and crops when they have the chance to do so. When looked at in this way, the Narrator's moral absolutes seem to be ultimately relative to time, place, and circumstance. The birds may be condemned for their actions (or inactions) when seen from the perspective of the *moralitas*, yet with a slight change of perspective the birds might also be condemned had they in fact destroyed the Fowler's flax crop.⁸

The bleakness of this fable and the vision of existence it portrays is countered by the Narrator's reliance on religious thought as a way of explaining away the existential horror implicit and explicit in the tale he tells. Curiously, this fable rationalizes the action both in a prologue as well as in the moral. The moral itself turns out to be a rationalization about rationality and its relation to saving the soul. The prologue, on the other hand, questions the ultimate validity of reason in its capacity to understand God and the nature of the cosmos. If, as the prologue claims, God is only partially knowable, and that through His reflection in His creations, then the tale of the birds does not necessarily reflect a God that is "gude, fair, wyis, and bening" as the Narrator claims in the prologue (*l.* 1652).⁹ So in this fable too the choric Narrator relies on the consolation of myth in both Prologue and *moralitas*. Of course, another possibility presented by the fable is the issue raised in "The Sheep and the Dog"—that God is asleep and exerts no control, good or bad, over human existence. Yet that possibility is one our Narrator cannot and will not accept.

⁸This relativity of perspective in the fable is implicit in J. A. Burrow's remark: "Even the fowler, whose activities are so ominous from the point of view of the birds, delights the narrator" ("Henryson: *The Preaching of the Swallow*," *Essays in Criticism*, 25 (1975), 26.

⁹In fact, as Daniel Murtaugh has noted: "... the God of plenitude and universal design threatens to turn chimeric or downright wicked as our theories confront a cosmos whose indifference or hostility to us is only too clear. So, in our disappointment, we turn to the other God who repudiates our rationalizations, whose benevolence is preserved for us at the cost of his intelligibility" (p. 407).

A similarly grim and bleak fable is the last one, "The Paddock and the Mouse." Here, too, the Narrator's adherence to the religious interpretation of the action is all that keeps the tragic and existential horror of the tale's implications at bay. Reason here, as in "The Wolf and the Lamb," can potentially be seen as meaningless. The soul's "reasonableness" and the body's "lawlessness" struggle, perhaps to a draw, and death comes swooping down to devour all, potentially rendering meaningless the struggle between body and soul in the river of life (the Paddock's natural environment), except that the soul is the Narrator's device by which to attempt to find meaning here.

I have concluded with these two fables, "The Preaching of the Swallow" and "The Paddock and the Mouse," because they pose the fundamental problem of the relation of the soul to the body through the mythological apparatus with which the choric Narrator attempts to make sense out of the potentially senseless. The tragic condition in "The Paddock and the Mouse," as the Narrator explains it, is that the soul may not be parted from the body (*l.* 2950). By definition in the Christian context, and as indicated by the Narrator in the General Prologue to the Fables, the body is corrupt and endowed with a soul that can all too easily become corrupt through giving in to the body's dictates—and as we know, need may have no law. The only solution for the soul, then, is reflected by the Narrator's contempt for human carnality: govern the corporeal needs with a spiritual, doctrinal law even though this governance creates displeasure, discomfort, and perhaps even destruction of the flesh. Yet when we turn to "The Preaching of the Swallow," the Narrator claims that the tragic root of all human misery and suffering is, paradoxically, the partition of the body and soul. Since the body wields the ultimate power in the mortal realm it is not governed by the soul. The mortal and the spiritual here are forever estranged, and this very estrangement is seen to be the cause of the soul's inability to govern the body.

So, if we listen to the Narrator, the tragic human condition results from two things—the soul's separation from the body, and the soul's lack of separation from the body. Can the Narrator have it both ways? Possibly. Without a reliance on mythic concepts of God, the soul, religious doctrine, and social organization, the vision of this carnal reality in many of the fables is one of unrelieved, meaningless bleakness and horror. Yet the mythic dimension simultaneously makes the tragic dimension possible because the tragic figure must exist in distinct relation to some system of order that he or she violates. By placing interpretations in mythic contexts, moreover, Henryson's Narrator attempts to make human existence, if not less bleak, at least a bit more tolerable because meaningful. In other words, the tragic dimension of the fables, grim as it is, affirms some fundamental value of existence. The choric sentiments of the Narrator lend validity to the governing cultural and religious myths by drawing the implicit comparison of what the meaning

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of life would be without them—a vision of existence where life and nature have no mythological dimension, where there is no metaphysical anchor, where there is nothing but pointless suffering and horror.

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