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Henryson's *The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger* again

So much confusion has gathered around the origin of Henryson's ninth fable that the commonly accepted opinion is that there now exists no complete written analogue. Some eighty years ago A. R. Diebler pointed to the second and tenth branches of the *Roman de Renart* (Méon's edition, Paris, 1826) as probable sources,¹ and he also noted that Chapter IV of Caxton's *History of Reynard the Fox* contained an allusion to the fish-merchant story: "know not you [Sir Isegrim] how you misdealed on the plaice which he [Reynard] threw down from the car when you followed after from afar. . . ." ² Gregory Smith,³ understandably mistrustful of many of Diebler's claims for verbal parallels between the *Moral Fables* and other fable collections, stated categorically that "the source of this fable, one of Henryson's best, has not been traced" (*Notes*, I, 30). This verdict was repeated in H. Harvey Wood's first edition of the *Poems and Fables*.⁴ Meanwhile, Gavin Bone,⁵ unaware of Diebler's ascription, had drawn notice again to the link with Caxton's *Reynard*, and this was incorporated into Wood's revised edition (1958) with a note that the fable combined two episodes from the *Roman de Renart*, which the editor called the eighth (Diebler's second) and twenty-fourth adventures.

The first of these tales (Méon, I, 29-35) ⁶ recounts how Renart tricks the merchants of their fish by shamming death, but the wolf does not appear until later and is then persuaded to angle for more fish by letting his tail down through a hole cut in an icy pond. Wood's second suggestion (Méon, I, 292-8) is less happy. The story of how Ysengrin robs a peasant of a ham and is then cheated of it by Renart does show how the fox gets the better of the wolf by his cunning, but to cite it as a source suggests a great ingenuity on Henryson's part in shaping it into the second portion of his tale,

¹ *Henrisone's Fabeldichtungen* (Halle, 1885), p. 65.

² *The History of Reynard the Fox* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 49.

³ *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Text Society, 1906-14), 3 vols.

⁴ (Edinburgh and London, 1933). All quotations here are from the 2nd rev. edn., 1958.

⁵ "The Source of Henryson's 'Fox, Wolf and Cadger,'" *RES*, X (July 1934), 319 f.

⁶ The tale appears as Branch III in Ernest Martin's edn. (Paris, 1882), I, 131-6. It is also Branch XII of Mario Roques's edn. (Paris, 1948-63), V, 1-16.

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and many another branch of the *Roman* provides the same situation. More recently Richard Bauman in an exciting article on the folk element in Henryson⁷ called attention to the fact that the fable "is almost a paradigm version of [Aarne-Thompson] Type I, 'The Theft of Fish,' a tale which has been in European oral tradition since before the Saxons settled in Germany" (p. 122). Although Bauman himself traces the scholarly muddle from Diebler onward, he is content to accept the written analogues as fragmented versions in favor of the more complete folk tale. But the entire tale did exist in written form—in the tenth episode of the *Roman de Renart* (Méon I, 147-60).

Part of the difficulty in finding one's way through the *Roman de Renart* lies in the variations between the numbering of the branches in the printed editions and in the differences between the MS versions of the same branch. The tenth episode in Méon's edition (the sections are not actually numbered) tells of the struggle between Primaut, the brother of Ysengrin, and Renart. The two animals meet a priest and exchange some stolen clothes for the cleric's fat goose. Once in the shelter of a wood, Primaut makes it clear that he does not intend to share the prize; and Renart, knowing that he would certainly lose in a battle with his stronger adversary, is forced to give up the goose and has to be content to search for food along the hedgerows. Primaut is not, however, allowed to enjoy the fruits of his victory, for the goose is promptly seized by Mouflart, the vulture. In the meantime Renart has sighted some merchants on their way to the fair, and here the Henryson story begins (l. 3919). Renart tricks his way onto the cart and eats the herrings. While considering how he will make his escape, it occurs to him that the adventure offers a fine means of revenging himself on Primaut for his theft of the goose. Snatching a fresh, sleek herring, the fox leaps down from the cart, and followed by the threats of the carters, he runs off in search of Primaut. The wolf, having lost the goose, is by now very hungry, and the sight of Renart's herring prompts him to make his peace. Renart seems to accept his friendship, gives the fish to the wolf, and repeats to him the story of how he has tricked the merchants. Primaut is far too ravenous to be satisfied by one fish and is thus anxious to try his luck, too. Following Renart's methods, the wolf plays dead in the road and endures the proddings and beatings of the now-suspicious carters without flinch-

⁷ "The Folktale and Oral Tradition in the Fables of Robert Henryson," *Fabula*, VI, 2 (1963), 108-24.

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ing. At length one of the merchants thinks he sees the wolf breathe and so draws his sword; whereupon Primaut decides to make a hasty retreat, still smarting from his beating and unrewarded for his pains. A condensed version of this episode appears as Branch XIV in Martin's edition (I, 124-7). The branch begins very differently with the story of how Renart lures Primaut into a church, gets him drunk on the altar wine, and causes him to be beaten by the irate clerics. Primaut retires with his wounds and rejoins Renart, who now holds a large fish in his hand; the branch then continues from Méon, l. 4120 ff. (p. 154), with Renart's own account of how he came by the herring. This shorter version condenses the two repetitive accounts of Renart's adventure into the fox's report of his trick, with the lengthy explanation of how Primaut and Renart patch up their quarrel also discarded. In outline the plot remains that of Henryson's fable, but the tale is now presented as one of a series of clever ruses that the fox plays on the wolf, and Renart's actions are no longer motivated by any desire for revenge.

Source hunting is not a fashionable pursuit at present, but the failure to recognize this version of Henryson's tale in the *Roman de Renart* has led to a certain amount of disproportion among the poet's commentators. Most noticeably the fleeting reference to the story in the Dutch *Reynard*, widely publicized through Wood's edition, has been given undue prominence. What is, after all, only the merest hint of the story, has lately been used to strengthen the case for Henryson's indebtedness to Caxton's translation.⁸ In a like manner Bauman uses "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger" as his chief weapon in arguing for Henryson's dependence upon folk motifs. Although he admits that the poet's subject matter "was drawn from both levels of literature," his conclusions about "The Theft of Fish" give too much prominence to the popular aspects of the *Moral Fables*: "This use of actual folktales by Henryson in his masterpiece is perhaps the most graphic indication of his debt to oral tradition" (p. 122). When one acknowledges the existence of both written and oral versions of the "herring episode," one is still faced with the problems that are argued over by the editors of the *Roman de Renart* itself concerning the relationships between the written and the popular versions. Bauman argues convincingly for the interchange of stories between the Low Countries and the trading ports of eastern Scotland (Henryson's Dunfermline among them), and the passing allusion

⁸ See David A. Crowne, "A Date for Henryson's Fables," *JEGP*, LXI (October 1962), 583-90.

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to the tale in the Dutch *Reynard* suggests that it was known well enough to be immediately recognizable. A slightly different version of the same adventure appears in the German *Reinike*,⁹ and a woodcut for the edition of *Reinke de Vos* printed in Lübeck in 1498 shows the wolf gorging upon the herring while the fox stands by watching the carter disappear.¹⁰

There is, however, some evidence that Henryson used a written version similar to those printed by Méon. The poet himself says that "myne Authour expreslie can declair" that the wolf is ravenous and spends his life hunting through the bleak countryside. The various readings of Méon II all begin with a bitter winter landscape ("ce fu en cel termine / Que li doz tens d'esté define / Et yver revient en saison," ll. 749-51.), and the adventures in Méon X are motivated by Primaut's extreme hunger. Each version of the tale gives some prominence to the problem of how Renart will leap down from the cart: "Or li estuet enging porquerre / Comment il vendra jus à terre; / N'i trove planche ne degré. / Agenoilliez s'est tot de gré / Por esgarder à son plaisir / Comment il puisse jus saillir:" (ll. 853-8); Henryson in his turn is careful to explain that the fox was able to escape "at ane burne [when] the Cadgear luikit about" (l. 2084). Also, in Méon X we are told that the merchants approach the wolf with "les granz sauz" (4209), which perhaps furnished a hint for Henryson's cadger: "And all the trace he trippit on his tais" (2061). In addition the French merchants' promise shortly to have the fox's skin, "Mes enquenuit a lor ostel / Li reverseront la gonele" (829-9), finds strikingly similar expression in the cadger's "At the nixt bait, in Faith, ye sall be flane" (2058).

These echoes are admittedly very minor and might quite as well have come from some oral version, but there is one detail that does point conclusively to Henryson's dependence upon a written version. It will be remembered that the ninth fable begins with an interview between the fox and the wolf in which the stronger animal demands that the fox "sall beir office, and my Stewart be" (1966) . . . "Bot yit I will thow mak to me ane aith / For to be leill attour all levand leid" (2021-2). It is this bullying that is the pretext for Lawrence's desire to get his own back. The revenge motif in itself puts the fable nearer to Méon X than to the folk tale type constructed to illustrate the cleverness of the fox's comic pranks. But more sig-

⁹ See synopsis in A. Rothe, *Les Romans du Renard Examinés* (Paris, 1845), pp. 74-5.

¹⁰ Printed in Sands, *op cit.*

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nificantly this demand for fealty is extraneous to the requirements of the basic story and would surely not have been part of any folk version; whereas there is a parallel to this relationship in Méon's text, where it appears not in the "herring episode" but just before it. Primaut has cheated Renart of the goose; and as the fox retreats, he laments this breach of faith and adds that one can take loyalty too far:

C'est la compaignie Tassel
Que vos me fetes voirement.
Puis dist en bas tot coieient,
A droit ai-ge descovenue,
Trop vos ai loiauté tenue;
Déable m'ont fet si loial
Envers traitor desloial . . .

(p. 144, ll. 3820-6; my italics)

I would suggest that this provided Henryson with the idea for his introductory passage, a sequence not necessary to the basic story of the fox and the herrings and one that could not have been part of any relation of "The Theft of Fish" that Henryson might have heard.

If Henryson's indebtedness to the *Roman de Renart* is granted, one is still struck by the skill with which he has adapted his materials.¹¹ He has realized that Renart's urge to revenge himself gives an added piquancy to his turning the tables on the wolf; but instead of narrating the long quarrel over the goose, Henryson has substituted the wolf's overbearing and bullying manner so that Lowrence becomes another of the victims of unjust force everywhere present in the *Moral Fables*. In passing one might also notice that in transforming the several carters of the *Renart* into the single cadger, Henryson has increased the sensuous greediness of the tradesman; this in turn gives added logic to the cadger's gullibility over the "dead" fox. In the *Renart* the merchants argue with each other about the price that the pelt will fetch. The cadger's interior monologue is directed toward his vivid appreciation of the warm mittens that the rich fur will make; like the wolf he is not the sort of creature who would willingly share his find: "Thair sall na Pedder, for purs, nor yit for gluifis, /Nor yit ffor poyntis pyke your pellet ffra me" (2070-1). Henryson has turned the *Renart* tale into a story that more fully illustrates the delusion of the greedy, and his running

¹¹ For a fuller treatment of Henryson's adaptation of his source materials see Donald MacDonald, "Narrative Art in Henryson's *Fables*," *SSL*, III (October 1965), 101-13.

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pun on the word "Nekhering" points up the ironic justice of the fact that the use of force is likely to be rewarded by force.

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