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Medieval Concepts of the figure and Henryson's Figurative Technique in The Fables

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In the Prologue which accompanies his collection of thirteen fables Henryson explains that fables teach "be figure of ane vther thing" (*l.* 7),[1] and that Aesop, the author whose work he professes to be translating, wrote "be figure" (*l.* 59) in order to avoid the scorn of those of both high and low rank in society. While such statements clearly imply that Henryson's own fables will employ a figurative technique, there has been considerable disagreement about the nature of this technique and about the kind of relationship that exists between the literal and figurative levels of meaning in his fables. Whereas some critics have stressed the purely arbitrary connection between tale and moral,[2] others have insisted on the essential harmony of the two elements.[3] Others again, while emphasizing

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[1]All references to Henryson's fables are to *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981).

[2]For some statements of this view, see, Richard Bauman, "The Folk Tale and Oral Tradition in the Fables of Robert Henryson," *Fabula*, 6 (1963), 117; "Allegorical," rev. of *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* in *TLS* (10 August 1967), p. 726 and Daniel Murtaugh, "Henryson's Animals" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (1972), 408, n. 3.

[3]See, for example, Denton Fox, "Henryson's Fables," *English Literary History*, 29 (1962), 337-56; Anthony White Jenkins, "The mind and art of Robert Henryson," unpub.

the interrelatedness of the two parts, have argued that, in some fables, the *moralitas* is designed to shock and surprise and that the effect thus created is not only intentional, but also an important feature of the meaning of the fable.[4]

In an attempt to answer the questions that such differences of opinion have raised about the nature of Henryson's figurative technique in *The Fables*, a growing number of critics have turned to Erich Auerbach's discussion of figural writing and interpretation in his essay *Figura*.[5] Denton Fox, drawing on Auerbach's assertion that

> Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first.[6]

has claimed that

> Henryson's animals while remaining animals signify men, while we are continually reminded that men encompass or fulfill (but sometimes are not better than) animals.[7]

Another Henryson scholar, Robert Gerke, while not wishing to limit the implications of Henryson's use of the term *figure* to the figural method of

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doct. diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 1967), pp. 2-24; Tom Scott, "Allegorical," *TLS* (31 August 1967), p. 780; and John Macqueen, *Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems* (Oxford 1967), pp. 94-188.

[4]For a discussion of the function of the apparent dissonance between tale and moral in some fables, see I. W. A. Jamieson, "The Beast Tale in Middle Scots; Some Thoughts on the History of a Genre," *Parergon*, 2 (1972), 28-32 and "To preue thare preching be a poesye: Some Thoughts on Henryson's Poetics," *Parergon*, 8 (1974); M. M. Carens, "A Prolegomenon for the Study of Robert Henryson," unpub. doct. diss. (Pennsylvania State University, 1974), pp. 155-63; George Clark, "Henryson and Aesop: the Fable Transformed," *English Literary History*, 43 (1976), 1-18; Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), pp. 121-138; Stephen Khinoy, "Tale-Moral Relationships in Henryson's *Moral Fables*," *SSL* 17 (1982), 99-115; Marianne Powell *Fabula Docet: Studies in the Background and Interpretation of Henryson's Morall Fabillis* in *Studies in English* (Odense University), 6 (1983), 112-5 and 152-81; and C. David Benson, "O Moral Henryson," *Fifteenth Century Studies: Recent Essays*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, Ct., 1984), 215-35.

[5]Translated by Ralph Manheim in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, ed. D. Bethurum (New York, 1959), pp. 11-76.

[6]"Figura," p. 53.

[7]"Henryson's Fables," p. 341.

exegesis as Fox does, has suggested that the figural mode described by Auerbach can help to explain "the particularity and apparent self sufficiency of Henryson's fables"[8] and Stephen Knight, when discussing Henryson's use of the term *figure*, has remarked:

> He is using this word in just the sense in which Auerbach has expounded it in his essay "Figura". That is, the story exists as a pleasant, amusing object, and by figuration it may also have another existence, as a moral analysis.[9]

Douglas Gray, the author of one of the most comprehensive and illuminating recent books on Henryson, has also cited Auerbach's essay as an important source of information about the way Henryson is using the term *figure* in *The Fables*.[10] Moreover, in insisting that the allegorical or figurative interpretations which contribute to medieval notions of the *figure*, and which form the background to Henryson's fables, "do not imply any dissolution of the literal senses,"[11] Gray presents a view of figurative writing very similar to that of Auerbach.

Although Auerbach has made an extensive study of the term *figure* in his essay, however, such a study has, as far as Henryson's fables are concerned, two major limitations. One is that it is based on Latin writing of the first to sixth centuries and the other, that it focuses on the relationship between the term *figure* and the typological method of writing and interpretation. Auerbach acknowledges that *figure* was also used in conjunction with the more abstract, ethical kind of allegory and that in the Middle Ages "there were all sorts of mixtures between figural, allegoric and symbolic forms,"[12] but he stresses the dominance of the typological mode and does not explore further complexities, such as the fact that although medieval exegetes believed in the historical truth of the events they were interpreting, they often ignored or dissolved historical contexts when uncov-

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[8]"Studies in the Tradition and Morality of Henryson's Fables," unpub. doct. diss. (University of Notre Dame, 1968), pp. 37-40.

[9]"Some Aspects of Structure in Medieval Literature," *Parergon*, 16 (1976), 11.

[10]*Robert Henryson*, p. 120.

[11]*Ibid*, p. 120.

[12]"Figura", p. 64.

ering the revealed meaning of such events.[13] If we are to fully understand the implications that Henryson's use of the term *figure* in the Prologue has for his figurative practice in *The Fables*, we must, then, go beyond Auerbach's essay and examine some of the different figurative contexts in which the term *figure* is used in medieval Latin and vernacular writing and the kinds of meaning with which it is associated in these contexts.[14] Since, as yet, no satisfactory investigation of this type has been undertaken by Henryson critics,[15] such an examination, and the conclusions to be drawn from it, will form the substance of the first part of this article.

One of the most frequent contexts in which the term *figure* occurs in the Middle Ages is the discussion of sacred Scripture. It is often pointed out by medieval theologians that the Bible differs from other kinds of writing since it manifests its sacred truths not only through words, but also by means of the signification of "things".[16] These two modes of meaning are clearly described by St. Thomas Aquinas in the following passage from the *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*:

> However, the manifestation or expression of some truth is sometimes able to be made concerning things and words, in as much no doubt as words signify things and one thing is able to be a figure of another. Indeed, the author of things is

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[13]For a discussion of the difference between exegetical theory and practice in the Middle Ages see David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (London, 1975), pp. 9-32. Aers challenges the assumptions of Auerbach and others about the historical nature of Biblical typology, claiming that the dominant figurative mode in the Middle Ages was one in which figuralists dissolved "events and actions, and with them both the text's images and existential dimensions" (p. 32).

[14]Unfortunately, since very little is known about Henryson's life, it is not possible to do more than guess at the sources of his information about the term *figure*. It is only by establishing the concepts and principles with which the term was commonly associated in the Middle Ages, therefore, that we can hope to shed some light on its implications in the Prologue.

[15]Some critics have recognized the wide-ranging nature of the term *figure* in the Middle Ages (see, for example, the comments of Robert Gerke, "Studies in the Tradition and Morality of Henryson's Fables," pp. 37-8; Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson*, p. 120; and Marianne Powell, *Fabula Docet*, pp. 72-3), but they have failed to support their insights, either with any detailed discussion of the term's use, or any analysis of the different kinds of figurative writing and interpretation with which it was associated.

[16]On the traditional nature of this type of statement and for further examples see H. de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale: Les Quatres Sens de l'Ecriture*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1959-64), vol. 1, pt 2, pp. 496-7.

not only able to use words to signify something, but is also able to arrange a thing as a figure of another thing. And in accordance with this, in Sacred Scripture, truth is manifested *doubly*. According to *one way* since things are signified through words: and in this way the literal sense is formed; according to *another way*, since things are figures of other things and in this way the spiritual sense is formed.[17]

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Manifestatio autem vel expressio alicuius veritatis potest fieri de aliquo rebus et verbis; in quantum scilicet verba significat res, et una res potest esse figura alterius. Auctor autem rerum non solum potest verba accommodare ad aliquid significandum, sed etiam res potest disponere in figuram alterius. Et secundum hoc in sacra Scriptura manifestatur veritas *dupliciter*. *Uno modo* secundum quod res significantur per verba: et in hoc consistit sensus litteralis. *Alio modo* secundum quod res sunt figurae aliarum rerum: et in hoc consistit sensus spiritualis.

Aquinas employs the term *figure* in this passage when speaking of the "meaning of things" and, on each of the three occasions on which the term is used, it denotes the kind of symbol which is both a "thing" with a signification of its own and, also, a "sign" of another "thing."[18] The truths which are made manifest by means of this type of symbolism, Aquinas explains, pertain to the spiritual sense, while those expressed by means of words involve only the literal sense.

In a later section of the *Quaestiones*[19] Aquinas distinguishes three kinds of spiritual sense: the moral or tropological, the allegorical or typical and the anagogical. When discussing the allegorical and anagogical senses he employs the term *figure* in the more specialized, typological meaning of "prefiguration" or "foreshadowing". The allegorical sense, he asserts, has its foundation in that mode of figuration in which the Old Testament foreshadows, or is considered to be a prefiguration (*figura*) of, the New Testament, and the anagogical, in the mode of figuration in which

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[17]S. Thomae Aquinatus, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, ed. P. Fr. Raymundi Spiazzi, O.P. (Taurini, 1949), q. 6 a. 1, p. 146. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

[18]The distinction Aquinas draws between "the meaning of things" and "the meaning of words" derives from St. Augustine. See *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. Joseph Martin, *Corpus Christianorum*, 32 (Turnholt, 1962), Bk 2, 10:15, p. 41. For a detailed discussion of Augustine's views and their transmission see also J. Chydenius, "The Theory of Medieval Symbolism," *Societas Scientiarum Fennica: Commentationes Humanarum Literarum*, 27(2) (Helsinki, 1960), pp. 5-39.

[19]See *Respondeo*, q. 6, a. 2, p. 147.

the Old and New together signify, or are considered to be a prefiguration (*figura*) of, heavenly things.

Aquinas, though, does not only use the term *figure* when speaking of the symbolic "things" of Sacred Scripture. In the *Summa Theologiae*, in a reply defending the use of metaphors in Holy Teaching, he states:

> Dionysius teaches in the same place that the beam of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sense imagery (*figuras sensibiles*) that veils it, and its truth does not flicker out, since the minds of those given the revelation are not allowed to remain arrested with the images (*in similitudinibus*) but are lifted up to their meaning; moreover, they are so enabled to instruct others. In fact truths expressed metaphorically in one passage of Scripture are more expressly explained elsewhere. Yet even the figurative disguising (*occultatio figurarum*) serves a purpose, both as a challenge to those eager to find out the truth and as a defence against unbelievers ready to ridicule it.[20]

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

> Ad secundum dicendum quod radius divinae revelationis non destruitur propter figuras sensibiles quibus circumvelatur, ut Dionysius dicit, sed remanet in sua veritate, ut mentes quibus revelatio fit non permittantur in similitudinibus remanere sed elevet eas ad cognitionem intelligibilium; et per eos quibus revelatio facta est alii etiam circa haec instruantur. Unde ea quae in uno loco Scripturae traduntur sub metaphoris in aliis locis expressius exponuntur. Et ipso etiam occultatio figurarum utilis est ad exercitium studiosorum et contra irrisiones infidelium.

In this passage the term *figure* has a rhetorical sense and refers to the figurative images and comparisons which serve as a protective covering for Divine truths and through which such truths are revealed to mankind.[21]

From what he has to say, both in the *Summa Theologiae* and in the *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, it is clear that Aquinas considers such comparisons and likenesses to have a single referent only and to involve no more than "the meaning of words" and the literal sense. In the case of figurative expression, he observes in the *Summa*,[22] the literal sense is not the figure

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[20]St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby O.P. (Cambridge, 1963), Vol. 1, q. 1, a. 9, r. 2, p. 35.

[21]It should also be noted that Aquinas is here speaking about the metaphorical expression of the Bible in much the same way as the poets speak about fiction. On the notion of fiction acting as a veil for truth see Peter Dronke, *Fabula*, (Leiden, 1974), pp. 47-55 and Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval attitude Towards Fables," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 59 (1960), 410-11.

[22]Vol. 1, q. 1, a. 10, r. 3, pp. 40-1.

of speech itself but what it signifies. To illustrate his point he cites the example of the expression "the arm of God". When Scripture speaks of "the arm of God," he maintains, "the literal sense is not that God has a physical limb, but that he has what it signifies, namely the power of doing and making." In the *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*[23] he expresses a similar point of view. Here he argues that imaginary comparisons such as the goat, by which some people are designated by Christ in Sacred Scripture, have no reality of their own, but are designed solely for the purpose of signifying the things to which they refer. He therefore concludes that they involve only the "historical" (i.e. the literal) sense and distinguishes them from the historical realities of Scripture which signify Christ and His mystical body and which are not mere "signs" of other things, but both "things" and "signs".

Another medieval theologian who uses the term *figure* in more than one sense when discussing the figurative writing and interpretations of Sacred Scripture is Hugh of St. Victor. In his *Allegoriae in Vetus Testamentum* Hugh applies the term to the kind of symbolism whereby Jacob is considered to be a prefiguration of God the Father[24] and Saul, a prophetic foreshadowing of Christ.[25] In *De Scripturis et Scriptoribus Sacris*, on the other hand, he uses it when speaking of the metaphorical expression of Scripture:

> If, as they say, we ought to leap straight from the letter to its spiritual meaning then the figures and likenesses of things by which the mind is educated spiritually, would have been included in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit in vain.[26]

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> Quod si, ut isti dicunt, a littere statim ad id quod spiritualiter intelligendum est, transiliendum foret, frustra a Spiritu sancto figurae et similitudines rerum quibus animus ad spiritualia erudiretur, in sacro eloquio interpositae fuissent.

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[23]*Respondeo*, q. 6, a. 2, p. 147. For a discussion of what Aquinas has to say in the *Quaestiones* about figurative comparisons see J. Chydenius, "The Theory of Medieval Symbolism," pp. 37-8.

[24]"In hoc figura, Jacob figurat Deum Patrem," *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Latina, ed. J. P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris, 1844 ff.), vol. 175, col. 686. This work will hereafter be referred to by the abbreviation *PL*.

[25]"Secundum aliam figuram Saul (1 Reg. 11) significat Christum." *Ibid*, col. 686.

[26]*PL*, 175, col. 14 D.

Unlike Aquinas, however, who insists that in figurative expression the image has no importance in itself, Hugh stresses that, in figurative speech, what the letter says is just as important as what it signifies:

> For even in that which is accepted as having been said figuratively, the letter is not denied to have its own significance, for when we claim that what is said ought not thus, as it is said, to be understood, we assert that very thing to have been said in some other way. Therefore something is said and is signified by the letter, even then when that which is said is not understood just as it is said, but something else is signified by that which has been said. So then in general something is said and is meant by the letter and we must understand first of all that which is meant by the letter, so that what is signified by it can subsequently be understood.[27]

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> Nam in eo etiam quod figurative dictum accipitur, littera suam significationem habere non negatur, quia cum id quod dicitur, non sic, dicitur, intelligendum esse asserimus, id ipsum aliquo modo dictum esse affirmamus. Dicitur igitur aliquid et significatur a littera, tunc etiam quando id quod dicitur, non ita intelligitur ut dicitur, sed aliud quod per id dictum significatur. Sic igitur omnino aliquid dicitur et significatur a littera, et intelligendum est illud primum quod significatur a littera ut quid per illud significatur, postea intelligatur.

Furthermore, whereas Aquinas claims that the figurative comparisons of Scripture constitute only "the meaning of words," Hugh, following St. Augustine, treats such comparisons as a form of nature symbolism and cites them as an example of the "meaning of things":

> That the Sacred utterances employ the meaning of things, moreover, we shall demonstrate by a particular short and clear example. The Scripture says: "Watch because your adversary the Devil goeth about as a roaring lion." Here, if we should say that the lion stands for the Devil we should mean by "lion" not the word but the thing. For if the two words "devil" and "lion" mean one and the same thing, the likeness of the same thing to itself is not adequate. It remains, therefore, that the word "lion" signifies the animal, but that the animal in turn designates the Devil. And all other things are to be taken after this fashion, as when we say that worm, calf, stone, serpent, and others of this sort signify Christ.[28]

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[27]*Ibid*, col. 14. That Hugh's views on figurative expression differ from those of Aquinas is also remarked on by J. Chydenius, "The Theory of Medieval Symbolism," p. 37 and Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature*, (London, 1971), p. 38.

[28]*The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*, trans., Jerome Taylor, (New York, 1961), p. 122. For the Latin text see *Eruditiones Didascalicae*, *PL*, vol. 176, col. 790. On the fact that

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Quod autem rerum significatione sacre utantur eloquia, brevi quodam et aperto exemplo demonstrabimus. Dicit Scriptura: Vigilate, quia adversarius vester diabolus tanquam leo rugiens circuit (1. Pet. 5). Hic si dixerimus leonum significare diabolum, non vocem, sed rem intelligere debemus. Si enim duae hae voces, id est diabolus et leo, unam et eamdem rem significant, incompetem est similitudo ejusdem rei ad seipsam. Restat ergo, ut haec vox leo animal ipsum significet, animal vero diabolum designet; et caetera omnia ad hunc modum accipienda sunt, ut cum dicimus vermem, vitulum, lapidem serpentem, et alia hujusmodi, Christum significare.

Not only did medieval theologians sometimes disagree about the way in which the figurative language and imagery of Sacred Scripture signified, but, in their exegesis of Scripture, they also sometimes treated historical realities or "things" as mere "signs." Honorius d'Autun's interpretation of the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Kings 11) is a good example of such exegesis. Honorius expounds the significance of the story as follows:

Whence it is written: *all these things happened to them as a foreshadowing*, (1 Cor. 10). And thus David is a figure of Christ, Bethsabee a figure of the church and Urias a figure of the devil. And just as she, while she bathed in the Cedran fountain, her clothes having been stripped from her, delighted David and was considered worthy of coming to the embraces of the King by whose princely order her husband also was slaughtered, so too, the church, that is the congregation of the faithful, having been cleansed from the dirt of sins through the washing of sacred baptism, is known to have been united with Christ, Our Lord, and the devil is overcome by those who oppose him. And this the names themselves signal. For David is called *the desirable one*, Bethsabee *the well of the testament*, Urias *the glory of my God*, and he designates the devil, who usurped for himself the glory of his God, saying: *I will be like the most high*. (Isa. 14).[29]

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Unde scribitur: *Omnia in figura contingebant illis* (1 Cor. 10). David itaque Christi figuram, Bethsabee Ecclesiae, Urias diaboli imaginem gessit. Et sicut illa, dum in fonte Cedron lavaretur exuta vestibus suis, Davidi placuit, et ad regios meruit venire complexus, maritus quoque ejus principali jussione est trucidatus: ita et Ecclesia, id est congregatio fidelium, per lavationem sacri baptismatis mundata a sordibus peccatorum Christo Domino noscitur esse sociata,

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in *The Didascalicon* Hugh makes a spiritual sense of the metaphoric sense of Scripture see, too, H. de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, Vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 278, n. 4. Hugh, moreover, is not the only medieval theologian who treats the metaphorical expression of Sacred Scripture in this way. Another who does so is Nicholas of Lyre. For a discussion of his views see de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, Vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 354.

[29]*Selectorum Psalmorum Expositio, PL*, Vol. 172, col. 283.

et diabolus apostolis impugnantibus est annihilatus. Hoc et ipsa nomina innuunt.
David namque *desiderabilis*, Bethsabee *puteus testamenti*, Urias dicitur *gloria Dei mei*, et designat diabolum, qui sibi gloriam Dei usurpavit, dicens: *Similis ero Altissimo* (Isa. 14).

In the above passage, Honorius, as is traditional, identifies David, Bathsheba and Uriah as figures (i.e. prefiguring types) of Christ, the Church and the devil respectively.[30] The authority on which he does so is 1 Cor. 10. where it is stated that everything that happened to the Jewish race was a foreshadowing (*figure*) of what would happen to Christian people. On the same authority, he also goes on to find in the adulterous union of David with Bathsheba a foreshadowing of the spiritual union of Christ with the faithful through Baptism. But while Honorius' exegesis of the David and Bathsheba story discovers a typological relationship between the historical realities of the Old Testament and those of the New, the methods by which the relationship is established are anything but historical.[31] In the typological reading of the story the fact that David has been seduced by Bathsheba's physical beauty into committing adultery with her is ignored and, the bathing which gives rise to their adulterous union, removed form its immediate historical context and treated as a mere "sign" of Baptism. In addition, the significance of the historical personages David, Bathsheba and Uriah is located in the meaning of their names, that is to say, in "the meaning of words."

When we turn our attention from Scriptural "figures" to poetic "figures" we find that the situation is just as complex. In the Medieval Latin poetic tradition the term *figure* was not only used to denote various rhetorical figures,[32] but was also applied to the poetic images which served as a covering for hidden truth,[33] as well as to the hidden truths

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[30]On the traditional nature of this type of exegesis see H. de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, Vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 463.

[31]For some examples of the unhistorical nature of typological interpretation, including medieval exegesis of the David and Bathsheba story, see David Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory*, pp. 20-32.

[32]Geoffrey of Vinsauf, for example, applies the term to the stylistic figures *sinodoche*, *thapinosis* and *methonomia*. See *Les Arts Poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle*, ed. E. Faral (Paris, 1924), p. 292.

[33]Bernard Silvestris, for instance, points out that *figura* was used as a synonym for *involucrum* (covering or wrapping) and could encompass both historical narrative and fable. For a discussion of Silvestris' views on *figura* see Peter Dronke, *Fabula*, pp. 119-20. See also John of Capua's use of the term in *Directorium Humanae vitae* (*Les Fabulistes Latins*),

themselves.[34]   Similarly, in Middle English poetry the word *figure* is found in such diverse figurative senses as "symbol," "significant sign," "example," "prefiguration," "foreshadowing or foreboding," "parable" and "metaphoric comparison,"[35] while in Middle Scots poetry *figour* is recorded in the sense of "symbol or symbolic representation" and "figure of speech."[36]

Of even greater significance than the fact that the term *figure* was used in a number of different senses in poetic contexts as in Scriptural ones is the fact that, in such contexts, it could also indicate more than one mode of signification and imply more than one kind of relationship between the literal and figurative levels of meaning. The following passages will serve to clarify these points. The first is taken from a twelfth century commentary on the *Thebaid* of Statius. In introducing his work the author of the commentary compares the compositions of poets to a nut:

> . . . the compositions of poets seem not uncommonly to invite comparison with a nut. Just as there are two parts to a nut, the shell and the kernel, so there are two parts to poetic compositions, the literal and the allegorical meaning. As the kernel is hidden under the shell so the allegorical interpretation is hidden under the literal meaning; as the shell must be cracked to get the kernel so the literal must be broken for the allegories (*figurae*) to be discovered;[37]

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ed. L. Hervieux (Paris, 1899; rpt. Hildesheim, 1970), Vol. 5, p. 81; and Pierre Bersuire's statement that "a figure is perceived as an exterior image or form." Bersuire's definition is quoted in full by J. B. Allen in *The Friar as Critic* (Nashville, 1971), pp. 42-3.

[34]*Figura* is used in the sense of "inner" or "figurative" meaning in the commentary on the *Thebaid* of Statius commonly attributed to Fulgentius—see S. Fulgentii Episcopi, *Super Thebaiden* in *Fabii Planciadis Fulgentii V. C. Opera*, ed. R. Helm (Stuttgart, 1898; rpt. 1970), *ll.* 12-20, p. 180, and in the *moralitas* of a fable attributed to Odo of Cheriton (see *Les Fabulistes Latins*, Vol. 4, p. 253).

[35]See *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. H. Kurath, S. M. Kuhn and J. Reidy (Ann Arbor, MI, 1952), p. 551.

[36]See *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, ed. William A. Craigie (Chicago and London, 1931-), II, 468-9.

[37]*Fulgentius the Mythographer*, trans., Leslie Whitbread (Ohio, 1971), p. 239. For the Latin text of the commentary see S. Fulgentii Episcopi, *Super Thebaiden* in *Fabii Planciadis Fulgentii V. C. Opera*, ed. R. Helm, p. 180. Whitbread argues in the introduction to his translation that although the commentary has been commonly ascribed to Fulgentius "it seems safer to speak of an imitator or pseudo Fulgentius as its author," (p. 235). He also notes (p. 236) that a twelfth or thirteenth century date has been proposed for the commentary.

> . . . non incommune carmina poetarum nuci comparabilis uidentur: in nuce
> enim duo sunt, testa et nucleus, sic in carminibus poeticis duo, sensus litteralis et
> misticus; latet nucleus sub testa; latet sub sensu litterali mistica intelligentia, ut
> habeas nucleum, fragenda est testa; ut figurae pateant, quatienda est littera;

The term *figure* refers in this passage to the allegorical meanings
which lie hidden beneath the literal sense of poetry. To obtain these hid-
den allegorical meanings, it is necessary, according to the author of the
commentary, to break open the literal sense and this he does in his com-
mentary by offering ingenious etymological explanations of personal
names and details.[38] The mode of meaning that is implied by his use of
the term *figure* in the above passage would thus appear to involve no more
than the "meaning of words."

In the second passage I have singled out for discussion, namely Boc-
caccio's interpretation of the myth of Perseus, the situation is quite differ-
ent. To illustrate his contention that poetic fiction can have more than
one sense, Boccaccio gives an example of how the Perseus myth can be
read in four different ways:

> Perseus, the son of Jupiter, by a poetic fiction, killed the Gorgon and, victorious,
> flew away into the air. If this is read literally, the historical sense appears; if its
> moral sense is sought, the victory of the prudent man against vice and his ap-
> proach to virtue is demonstrated. If, however, we wish to adopt an allegorical
> sense, the elevation of the pious mind above those mundane delights which it de-
> spises, to celestial things, is designated. Further, anagogically it might be said
> that Christ's ascent to his Father after overcoming the prince of this world is
> prefigured (*figurari*) by such a fiction.[39]

* * *

> Perseus Iovis filius figmento poetico occidit Gorgonem, et victor evolavit in
> ethera. Hoc dum legitur per licteram hystorialis sensus prestatur. Si moralis ex
> hac lictera queritur intellectus, victoria ostenditur prudentis in vicium, et ad vir-
> tutem accessio. Allegorice autem si velimus assummere, piementis spretis mun-
> danis deliciis ad celestia elevatio designatur. Preterea posset et anagogice dici
> per fabulam Christi ascensum ad patrem mundi principe superato figurari.

The fourfold system of interpretation Boccaccio is employing in pas-
sage derives from Biblical exegesis, but he is using such a system very

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[38]On the prevalence of this type of interpretation in the twelfth century see J. B.
Allen, *The Friar as Critic*, pp. 14-7.

[39]*Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*, ed. V. Romano (Bari, 1951), Vol. 1, iii, p. 19,
ll. 23-30.

loosely, for as Robert Hollander has noted, the second and third senses are essentially the same and their order has been inverted.[40] However, although Boccaccio is not adhering strictly to the rules of exegesis, when he states in the above passage, that, anagogically, Christ's ascent to his Father after overcoming the prince of this world, is prefigured by the story of Perseus, he is using the passive infinitive *figurari* in the typological sense of theological allegory. In doing so he is suggesting that the same kind of relationship exists between the events of the myth and those of Christ's life as exegetes claim holds between the historical events of Scripture and the future glory they adumbrate. It is also noticeable from Boccaccio's comments immediately prior to his fourfold interpretation of the Perseus myth that he does not attempt to restrict the allegories of the poets to the "meaning of words." Such allegories, he observes, are to be discovered in "the things signified through the cortex" and not in the cortex itself.[41]

A comparison of two occasions on which Chaucer uses the term *figure* reveals differences of a similar kind. When, on describing the Parson in *The General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer remarks,

> And this figure he added eek thereto
> That if god ruste, what shal iren do?[42]
>
> (*ll.* 499-500)

he is employing the term *figure* in the sense of "metaphorical comparison." The primary meaning of words such as *gold*, *ruste* and *iren* in the above lines is figurative, that is to say, the words function as "signs" only and do not denote "things" which, in turn, signify other "things." This is not the case though, when, in Book 5 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer uses the same term *figure*, in reference to the symbolic boar which Troilus, in his dream, has seen embracing Criseyde and which we are later told, "bitokneth Diomede" (*l.* 513). In acting as a symbol for Diomede the boar functions as both a "thing" and a "sign" and has a separate literal and figurative significance. The two levels of meaning in this instance are equally important; moreover, the relationship between them is one of analogy.

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[40]See R. Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (Princeton, 1969), pp. 34-5. On the similarities between the allegories of the poets and those of the theologians see also Hollander, pp. 19-24, J. B. Allen, *The Friar as Critic*, passim. and pp. 69-116, and H. de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, Vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 208.

[41]*Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*, Vol. 1, iii, p. 19, *ll.* 19-23.

[42]All references to Chaucer's work are to *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (2nd edn., Oxford, 1957).

When considering poetic "figures" the point also needs to be made that, by the time Henryson was writing in the fifteenth century, the habit, which had developed over the previous two centuries, of reading poetic fiction in the same way as the theologians read Scripture, was firmly established. In seeking to understand the principles and practices which are implied by his use of the term figure in *The Fables*, it is important, therefore, to look closely at some examples of the kind of overtly Christian interpretations that were supplied for fiction by fifteenth century writers. One fictional work which attracted a good deal of attention through the Middle Ages was Aesop's fables. Walter, the Englishman's twelfth century version of these fables was widely read in medieval schools where its words, constructions and meanings were analyzed and commented upon. It is consequently not surprising to find that a tradition of Latin commentaries exists in which additional allegorical interpretations are offered for Walter's fables. A fifteenth century commentary[43] belonging to this tradition is particularly relevant to the present discussion since it provides additional moralities for Walter's *De Lino et Hirundine* and *De Mure et Rana* which are remarkably close to Henryson's moralizations of these fables.

In dealing with *De Lino et Hirundine*, Walter's fable about the swallow whose warning to other birds to destroy the flax before it poses a threat to them goes unheeded, the fifteenth century commentator first explains the general moral truth that the fable demonstrates:

> Here the author includes another fable of which the lesson is that none should spurn the counsel of another because it often happens that people rejecting the advice of others become ineffectual and so often get into trouble.[44]

<div align="center">* * *</div>

> Hic autor, ponit aliam fabulam cuius documentum est quod nullus debet contemnere consilium alterius quia accidit multotiens quod respuentes consilium aliorum inutiles fiunt unde frequenter eis malum evenit.

At the conclusion of the *expositio ad sensum*, which consists of a prose retelling of the fable, he then offers an allegorical interpretation:

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[43]See *Esopus moralisatus cum bono commento* (1492), Bodleian Library. Auct. 5.6.80. For a discussion of this and similar commentaries see Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson*, pp. 125-8.

[44]Esopus moralisatus cum bono commento (1492). There are no folio or page numbers in the MS.

In allegorical terms we can take the birds to mean sinners and the swallow spir-
itual men who often advise sinners to desist and refrain from their sins, but the
sinners, spurning the warnings and the doctrine of the spiritual men, at length
are ensnared by the nets of the devil and are delivered over to everlasting fire.[45]

* * *

Allegorice per aves intelligere possumus peccatores, per hyrundinem vero spiri-
tuales homines qui sepe ammonent peccatores ut desistant et abstineant a pec-
catis, sed peccatores ammonitionem et doctrinam spiritualium contemnentos
tandem per retia dyaboli capiuntur et eterno igno traduntur.

In discovering a parallel between the actions of the swallow and the
birds in Walter's fable and those of holy men and sinners the commentator
does not treat Walter's animals, which, as vehicles for observing human
life and morality, function as descriptive symbols or "signs" in the narra-
tive, as mere "signs" of other "things," but rather as interpretative symbols
which are "things" with an identity of their own as well as being "signs" of
other "things." As a result the allegorical sense of the fable is an addi-
tional level of meaning which co-exists with the literal narrative and pre-
serves literal contexts.

Such was not always the case, however. Very often, Christian inter-
pretations of medieval fictions ignore and dissolve literal contexts and do
not easily fit the shape of the narrative. Sometimes, too, more than one
interpretation is provided for a particular story. The treatment accorded
the story of Focus, the smith, in the Middle English *Gesta Romanorum*,[46]
is an excellent illustration of such practices. We are informed in this story
that, because he has disobeyed the emperor's command that his birthday
should be kept as a holiday, Focus is called before the emperor to account
for his disobedience. When he announces that he must earn eight pence
every day so that he can yield two to his father, lend two to his son, lose
two on his wife and spend two on himself, he is deemed to have given a
good account of himself and, instead of being punished by the emperor, is
chosen as his successor.

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[45]*Ibid.*

[46]See *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Sidney J. H. Herrtage
(London, 1879), pp. 30-3.

Two separate moralizations accompany the story. In the first of these the emperor is interpreted in a good sense (*in bono*)[47] and equated with "our Lord ihesu crist." Virgil, the philosopher who made the emperor a statue that revealed the names of those who failed to observe his day, is said to represent the "Holy ghost" and the smith, Focus, is identified as "euery goode cristyn man." In addition, an appropriate religious significance is provided for the messengers of the emperor and for each two pence that the smith claims he must yield, lend, lose or spend.

Most of this first moralization corresponds fairly closely with the events of the narrative. The one instance where this is not the case is the interpretation of Focus, the smith, as "euery goode cristyn man." It is stated in the moralization that such a man "owith euery day to worch goode workys, and so ben worthi to be presented to þhe Emperour of Hevene," but in the narrative the smith is not brought before the emperor on account of his worthiness, but because he has broken a law established by the emperor. In the second moralization that is provided for the story this conflict does not occur. Virgil, the philosopher, and Focus, the smith, are again respectively equated with the "holy ghost" and "every good Christian," but this time the emperor is interpreted in a bad sense (*in malo*) rather than in a good sense and is said to represent the "devill þe which sterith a man to holde his day, that is to synne, and to wroth god euermor." Since, in this second interpretation, the emperor is equated with "the devil," it is quite fitting that Focus, the smith, who breaks the emperor's law, should be interpreted as "every good Christian." But while one problem has now been solved another has arisen. This new problem concerns the role of the prelate whom it is said the Holy Ghost sets up in the Church "to shewe and pronounce vicis, and allege holy scripturis aȝenst synnerys." By exposing vices and quoting Holy Scripture to sinners the prelate is opposing the devil, yet, in the narrative, Virgil's statue, which has a similar function in that it has been designed to reveal the names of those who break the emperor's laws, acts *for* the emperor by helping him to uphold his law. In the second moralization as in the first, therefore, the figurative reading does not fully co-exist with the literal narrative and does not always preserve literal contexts.

On the basis of the evidence that has been presented, then, two important conclusions can be drawn. The first is that it is likely that Henryson would have understood a good deal more by the phrase "be figure" than the typological mode of writing and interpretation that Erich Auer-

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[47]The principles behind this type of interpretation are expounded by St. Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. 3, 25:36. For some examples in the commentary of Hugh of St. Cher see J. B. Allen, *The Friar as Critic*, pp. 31-3.

bach describes as "figural" and the second is that his use of the phrase allows not only for a wide range of figurative practices in his fables but also for more than one kind of relationship between their literal and figurative levels of meaning. I will now briefly examine Henryson's figurative methods in *The Fables* and will attempt to show that such methods are both more varied and more traditional than is usually acknowledged.

If Henryson's fables are classified according to the type of figurative technique he employes in them and the kind of relationship between story and morality that results, they fall, not into two categories, as some critics have suggested,[48] but into three distinct groups including a number of sub groups. To the first group belong such fables as *The Two Mice, The Fox and the Wolf* and *The Wolf and the Wether*. These fables are typical of most fables belonging to the Aesopic tradition in that the animal protagonists are metaphoric representatives of the human world and have a single referent only and in that the fable narrative concludes with a general moral statement which either sums up the main idea of the fable (*The Two Mice*) or explains what the whole fable illustrates or warns (*The Fox and the Wolf* and *The Wolf and the Wether*).

The second group of fables is a much larger and more diverse one. In the concluding moralization of each of the fables belonging to this group Henryson follows the exegetical practice of reducing the narrative to a number of parts and of providing one-to-one correspondences for each part. The mode of meaning he employs and the relationship between tale and moral that results, however, are not the same in all fables. In the case of *The Cock and the Fox* and *The Wolf and the Lamb* the figurative meaning expounded in the *moralitas* is the metaphoric sense of the fable and arises out of what the animal protagonists, as metaphors for human beings, say and do in the narrative. In fables such as *The Sheep and the Dog, The Cock and the Jasp, The Trial of the Fox, The Preaching of the Swallow, The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadgear* and *The Fox, The Wolf and the Husbandman*, on the other hand, the meaning expounded in the *moralitas* is an additional sense which co-exists with the literal narrative and extends and complements it thematically.

Sometimes, in explaining this additional sense, Henryson treats details of the literal narrative as interpretative symbols which are both "things" and "signs." The jasp is treated in this way in *The Cock and the Jasp* and so also is the mare in *The Trial of the Fox*, the fowler, the swallow and the birds in *The Preaching of the Swallow*, and the fox, the husbandman, the hens, the woods and the cabok in *The Fox, the Wolf and the Husbandman*.

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[48]See, for example, M. M. Carens, "A Prolegomenon for the Study of Robert Henryson," pp. 155-63, and Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson*, pp. 121-4.

On other occasions the additional sense is established by means of direct comparisons, such as when in *The Fox, the Wolf and the Husbandman,* the wolf is likened to "a wicked man," or when, in *The Trial of the Fox,* the lion is likened to "the world," the wolf to "sensuality," the mare's hoof to the "thought of death" and the fox to "temptations." Sometimes, too, Henryson combines direct comparison with metaphorical interpretation (e.g., in *The Sheep and the Dog* where the sheep is said to be a *figure* of "the poor common people" while the wolf and the raven are respectively likened to "a sheriff" and "a coroner") or with "the meaning of things" (e.g. in *The Cock and the Jasp* where the jasp, which is figuratively equated with "wisdom," is treated as an interpretative symbol,while the cock, which functions as a descriptive symbol, is likened to "a fool who scorns learning").[49]

In fables belonging to the second group, moreover, the additional sense is sometimes based on only one part of the narrative (e.g. *The Trial of the Fox* and *The Preaching of the Swallow*) and may even conflict with the narrative action. Examples of such a conflict are to be found in *The Trial of the Fox* where the mare's absence from the parliament called by the lion is condemned in the narrative but justified in the *moralitas,* and in *The Fox, the Wolf and the Husbandman,* where the husbandman, who agrees to bribe the fox in order to resolve his dispute with the wolf, is equated with "ane godlie man" (*l.* 2434) and the hens which are used as the bribe with "warkis that fra ferme faith proceidis" (*l.* 2437). In the case of the latter fable the fact that Henryson's text underwent Protestant revision during the Reformation may well account for such inconsistencies, but, at the same time, it must be remembered that the situation where something is interpreted in a bad sense in the narrative and in a good sense in the allegorical reading was common in scriptural and homiletic exegesis and justified by churchmen such as St. Gregory the Great.[50] The use of association rather than the literal narrative as a basis for forming an interpretation was also common in both traditions and the technique appears to have been employed in the case of Henryson's interpretation of the Husbandman as "ane godlie man," for ploughing is associated with godli-

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[49]For a detailed discussion of Henryson's figurative techniques in *The Cock and the Jasp* see my article, "Henryson's Figurative Technique in *The Cock and the Jasp*," in *Words and Wordsmiths: A volume for H. L. Rogers,* ed. G. Barnes et al. (Sydney, 1989), pp. 13-21.

[50]See D. Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory,* p. 24, and H. de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale,* Vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 461.

ness in Langland's *Piers Plowman*[51] and the plough with good example, by Rabanus Maurus in his *Allegoriae in Sacram Scripturam.*[52]

Because of the difficulties that are encountered in relating tale to moral in *The Trial of the Fox* and *The Fox, the Wolf and the Husbandman*, it has been argued that, in the moralization, Henryson deliberately sets out to surprise the reader and to reverse the readers' expectations.[53] In these fables, though, as in *The Cock and the Jasp*, this line of argument seems to me inappropriate, since precedents for Henryson's techniques are to be found in both the exegetical and homiletic traditions. In addition, it should be noted that despite the lack of synthesis of the individual parts of the interpretation, Henryson's allegorical reading of *The Trial of the Fox* and *The Fox, the Wolf and the Husbandman*, does, in an additive kind of way, form an interpretation of the whole and does, thematically, extend and complement the narrative, for while the narrative of each fable is concerned with worldliness and with greed, the *moralitas* examines the spiritual implications of such behavior.

The third of the three groups into which Henryson's fables can be divided consists of only two fables: *The Lion and the Mouse* and *The Paddock and the Mouse*. Both of these fables combine allegorical interpretation with moral application of a more general nature. In the first part of the *moralitas* which concludes *The Lion and the Mouse* individual interpretations are provided for the two animals and for the forest. These interpretations relate to only one part of the narrative and, whereas the forest is treated as an interpretative symbol which is both a "thing" and a "sign," the relationship between the lion and the ruler he is said to signify and between the mice and "the community" is a metaphoric one. In the second part of the *moralitas* the fable is addressed to "lordis of prudence" (*l.* 1594). Here the whole narrative is treated as an *exemplum* which illustrates the virtue of *pietie* (*l.* 1595)[54] and which serves as a guide to others to act in the same way.

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[51]See William Langland, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, C Text, EETS, O.S., 54 (1873; rpt. London, 1959), Passus 22, *ll.* 260-6.

[52]See *PL* 112, *aratrum*, col. 867.

[53]See I. W. A. Jamieson, "The Poetry of Robert Henryson: A Study of the Use of Source Material," unpub. doct. diss. (University of Edinburgh, 1964), p. 272 and Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson*, p. 131.

[54]In the fifteenth century the term could mean "faithfulness to duty" as well as "compassion."   See, N. Von Kreisler, "Henryson's Visionary Fable: Tradition and

A two-part *moralitas* also concludes *The Paddock and the Mouse.* The first of the two parts is written in ballade stanzas and expounds the metaphorical sense of the fable while the second is written in rhyme royal stanzas and presents an allegorical interpretation of the narrative. Although this allegorical interpretation is based on only one part of the narrative, and although, in the case of the equation of the frog with "man's body," literal contexts have been ignored and dissolved, the allegorical reading relates thematically to the whole fable and is an extension of its literal sense. Furthermore, the frog and the mouse are treated as both "things" and "signs" in the allegorical reading with the result that the relationship between the literal and figurative levels of meaning is one of analogy rather than metaphor.

Owing to the range of material to be covered it has not been possible to examine any of Henryson's fables in detail. Nevertheless, it should be clear from my discussion of his figurative practices that he employs more than one type of figurative technique in *The Fables* and that this results in more than one kind of relationship between the literal and figurative levels of meaning. When Henryson's figurative methods are properly understood, therefore, not only is there no evidence of any tension between theory and practice, but also many of the difficulties critics have had in relating tale to moral cease to exist, for what at first may appear to be discrepancies, turn out, on closer inspection, to be accepted features of the traditions in which he is writing.

Sydney University

Craftsmanship in The Lyoun and the Mous," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15 (1973), 397-9.