Henryson's Taill of the Wolf and the Wedder

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Henryson's *Tail of the Wolf and the Wedder*

Much of the adverse criticism of Henryson's *Fabillis* has centered on his moralitas. Critics have found them boring, \(^1\) "too ingenious for modern taste," \(^2\) or irrelevant to a "modern" appreciation which can, of course, see the essence of a poem far better than the author himself was able to do: "Henryson's moral preoccupation does not as much as might be expected interfere with his humorous observation. In the *Two Mice*, for example, it provides little more than shrewd marginal comment." \(^3\) All these criticisms deny to Henryson, the Makar, any ability to structure his poetry, and reduce his art to mere occasional felicity.

Of late, however, these attitudes have been called into question. Harold E. Toliver has argued that both tale and moralitas are necessary to convey Henryson's "sentence":

> We approach man the animal directly in the moral, then, and obliquely in the fable, and each approach has its own validity. Even the differences between man and animal can result in comic irony when played off against similarities. The dualism of form and content, in fact, like the awareness of the stage as stage in Shakespeare, is capable of adding levels of awareness not possible without an explicit moral. By matching the inflexible moralist against the too pliable weaknesses of human nature, for example, Henryson may on one hand suggest a golden mean or on the other say in effect, "it is simply our nature to recoil from one extreme to the other. Let us be quick to condemn and somewhat quicker to put our common plight in the proper perspective." \(^4\)

Denton Fox, in analysing *The Tail of the Cok and the Jasp* and *The Preiching of the Swallow*, \(^5\) has shown the part played by the moralitas


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in the structure of these fables. I have tried to show how in The Dog the Scheip and the Wolff the poet has developed, from one instance of seemingly unmerited punishment presented by the tale, a discussion of the nature of and the reason for evil, both human and "natural."

In this article I want to discuss an example of the poems in which the moralitas appears to contradict all that has been implied in the tale itself—characters are blamed whom one would have expected to find praised. Such poems—The Cock and the Jewell and The Wolf and the Wedder and The Fox tryed before the Lyone are the principal examples—have led bewildered critics to the conclusion that Henryson was not quite sure what he was about:

The (moralitas) sometimes comes as a surprise: in the "Tail of the Cok and the Jas..." we sympathise with the cock to whom the jewel, swept carelessly on to the midden by wanton damsels, is of no interest—corn or daft would be more useful. Yet in the moralitas the cock is represented as a fool scorning science, the jewel as the love of learning now lost because men are satisfied with riches and have no patience to seek it. It seems almost as if the poet has allowed his own colourful fable to run away with him, and is now returning to his duty.7

By analysing Henryson's use of his source material in The Wolf and the Wedder I want to show that Henryson knew very well what he was about, that the shock of the unexpected moralitas is a rhetorical device designed to involve readers/hearers in the tale itself, designed to make the moral point more personally relevant.

As David K. Crowne has pointed out8 Henryson’s source is almost

8 "A Date for the Composition of Henryson's Fables," JEGP, LXI (1962), 585-6. To Crowne's argument might be added the point that Henryson, following Caxton, reads "wether." Steinhäwel has "aries" not "vervex." Denton Fox, "Henryson and Caxton," JEGP lxvii (1968), 586-93, questions the evidence Crowne, and I ("The Poetry of Robert Henryson: A Study of the Use of Source Material," unpbl. diss., Edinburgh, 1964, pp. 274-5) adduce to support our contention that Henryson uses Caxton here. Acceptance of his argument would not jeopardize my central point in this article for the other possible sources are considerably closer to Caxton than to Henryson. But it still seems to me probable that Henryson knew Caxton.
certainly Caxton's translation of Julien Macho's translation of Steinbőwel's version of a tale originally from the East. The first departure Henryson makes from his source is to specify the place where the shepherd lived: "be ane Forrest neir" (2456). His danger—the proximity of the Wolf's haunt—is thus immediately emphasized. He was alone too, whereas the shepherd in Caxton's account was "a fader of famylye" who had several to help him: "the shepherdes were sore troubled and wrothe and sayd one to other we shall nomore slepe at oure ease." And in his lonely situation our shepherd's only help was his Dog. Caxton:

(he) had a grete dogge for to kepe them which was wel stronge
And of his voys all the wolves were afarnd wherfore the shepherd slepte more surely.

Henryson:

... ane Hound that did him grit comfort;
Full war he wes to walk his Fauld but weir,
That nouther Wolff nor Wildcat durst appeir,
Nor Fox on feild, nor yit no uther beist,
Boc he thame slew, or chaisis at the leist. (2457-61)

The details are more specific: the Dog attacked all types of animals; he killed them or chased them, not merely barking at them. The poet has focused attention on the Dog's effectiveness by typical devices ("grit comfort", "full war"; "nouther ... nor ... nor ... nor"; allitera-


Les subiill fables de Eioppe.

11 Ulm, c. 1475. The text is more readily available in Hermann Oesterley's edition, Steinbőwel's Aesop, Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, CXVII (Tübingen, 1873), where our story is to be found on pp. 231-2.

12 The story seems to have come from the East through Baldo's Fabulae Superstites—ed. L. Hervieux, Les Fabulistes Latins depuis le siècle d'Auguste jusqu'à la fin du moyen âge, V, Jean de Capone et ses dérivés (Paris, 1899), pp. 368-70; for a general discussion of Eastern stories in mediaeval fable material see pp. 3-75.

13 Some of the differences examined here are also noted by Donald MacDonald, "Narrative Art in Henryson's Fables," Studies in Scottish Literature III (1965-6), 101-13, but to very different purpose—his interest is Henryson as storyteller rather than as moralist, and his interpretation of the changes differs radically from mine.

14 I use the Bassandynye text as printed by H. Harvey Wood, The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson, op. cit.
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So the loss of the Dog in Henryson’s poem appears more disastrous. And the death was sudden (2463) and thus, in its unexpectedness, more disastrous than that in the original: "this dogge for his grete age deyde." The poet stresses the shepherd's suffering, using the traditional lament form:

Bot than (God wait) the keipar off the fe
For verray wo woxe wanner nor the weid:
'Allace' (quod he), 'now se I na remeid
To saif the selie beistis that I keip,
For wir(h) the Wolff wervit beis all my sheip.'

It wald have maid ane mannis hart sair to se
The selie schepiridis lamentatiana . . . (2464-70)

Such an appeal to the reader's emotion is, of course, a common late medieval rhetorical device. But it is certainly in keeping with the other changes we have already seen: an extension of the portrayal of the shepherd's reliance on the Dog, and his utter helplessness without him. The passage quoted is certainly more effective in this way than Caxton's: "we shall nomore slepe at oure ease by cause that our dogge is dede for the wulues shall now come ete our sheep." And Henryson adds the lament:

'Now is my Darling deid, allace' (quod he);
'For now to beg my beid I may be boun,
With psylkstaff and with scrip to fair off toun;
For all the beistis befor bandonit bene
Will schute upon my beistis with Ire and tene'. (2471-5)

This was the end of his livelihood; he must now beg in "fair off toun." Henryson then has made the loss of the Dog far more important to the shepherd — and thus more moving for us — than his source had done. The reason for this can be explained in connection with the change in the portrayal of the Wether; Caxton describes: "a grete wether fyers and pround." At once our sympathies are alienated; doubly so for his fable began with this moral: "Grete follye is to a fool that hath no myght that wylle begyfe another stronger than hym self as reherceth this fable . . ." We soon realize that this criticism refers to the Wether. But Henryson's fable begins without a moral pointed and his Wether is presented sympathetically:

With that ane Wedder wearhitie wan on fute
'Maister' (quod he) 'mak merie and be blyth;
To brek your hart for ball it is na bute . . . (2476-8)

The Wether — and there is no suggestion of pride here, it shared its
master's grief—offered to comfort and succeeded in comforting its master; and, as we are personally involved here, we adopt his point of view, we too are grateful to the Wether for its proffered help.

Thus in the first few stanzas Henryson has removed from his source any material which condemns the Wether, and he has made the Wether's action more understandable, has involved his audience in support of it. The changes are continued. Caxton reads:

and thrende a grete wether fyers and proud whiche herd al these wordes came to them and sayd I shalle gyue you good councelye Shewe me and put on me the skynne of the doxge And whanne the wulues shalle see me they shalle haue grete fere of me And whanne the wulues came and sawe the wether clothed with the skynne of the doxge they beganne al to flee and ranne away.

Henryson's Wether stressed the service it would give, service which at this time the shepherd needed more than anything else:

All haill, the cure I tak it upon me,
Your schep to keip at midday, lait and air.
And he persew, be God, I sall not spair
To follow him as fast as did your Dog.
Swa that, I warrand, ye sall not want ane hoig.' (2845-9)

And he performed his promises:

For all the nycht he stode, and tuck na sleip,
Swa that weill lang thairwantit not ane Hog.
Swa war he wes and walkryfe thame to keip ... (2498-2500) et seq.

Henryson has often been admired for his attention to detail: and certainly, as we can see, this detail is almost all added by the poet. But we should note two points, points which should help disabuse us of the picture of the Scottish rustic "observing" in the meadows near Dunfermline: we should note the rhetorical skill displayed in presenting the material (alliteration [2500 ff.], balance [2506], the pointedness of rhyme [2502-3]); and we should note how this detail is used to present the "character" of the Wether, and eventually to reinforce the moral point of the fable.

Analysis of the central incident of the fable shows further the poet's desire to make the Wether attractive to us. The Wolf's action (it is portrayed partly through its own speech here, not so in Caxton) did not harm one lamb only as in Caxton; Henryson adds "the laif start up for
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that ye wer all agast" (2516) — our sympathies are thus further engaged with the Wether, the sole protector of the flock. The poet stresses the action of the chase. Caxton states merely:

And thenne the sayd wether ranne after hym And the wulf whiche supposed that it had ben the dogge shote thryes by the wyre for the grete fere that he had And ranne ever as fast as he coude and the wether also ranne after hym withoute cesse tyll that he ranne thurgh a busche full of sharp thornes.

Henryson involves us in the chase, we sympathize with the Wether's efforts to catch the Wolf. So:

Bot (God wait) gif the Wedder followit fast.
Went never Hound mai raiestelie fra the hand,
Quhen he was rynned maist raklie at the Ra
Nor went this Wedder baith over Mois and strand,
And stoppit nowther at bank, busk, nor bru;
Bot followit ay sa ferslie on his fa,
With sic ane drif, quhilk dust and dirt over draif him
And maid ane Vow to God that he suld have him. (2517-24)

Heavy alliteration, rhetorical emphases ("baith . . . and"; "nowther . . . nor"; "sa"; "sic") bring out the hectic nature of the chase. We, at this stage thinking the Wether to be on God's side, second its vow (2524). Added details too make the chase more "realistic", involve us further; the Wolf stretching out its tail (2525), night drawing on (2526), the Wolf's constant fear (2527-9).

Thatairfoir he spairit nowther busk nor boig,
For weill he kennet the keneses off the Doig. (2530-1)

The Wolf threw the Lamb aside to lighten its load (2532). "Syne lap over lacs and draif throw dub and myre" (2533). Suspense: will the Wether catch the Wolf?

The Wolff ran still quhilk ane strand stude behind him
Bot ay the neitar the Wedder he couthe bind him.
(2537-8) et seq.

By contrast to the lengthy description of the chase the unmasking is swift and final, reversing irredeemably the roles of the animals:

The wedder followit him baith out and in,
Quhill that ane breir busk raifeldude off the skyn. (2544-5)

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The Wolf is master now and his stress on his defilement, his delight in his new gained superiority ("For all your mowis ye met anis with your marche," 2555), his oaths and the horror of his revenge, alienate him from us and bring pity for the virtuous Wether. Again, the immediacy of the event — its power to grip — is highlighted by contrast with the source. Caxton:

And thenne the wulf ledde hym unto the place where as he had shyre sayenge thus to hym Lokr hyther callest thou this a playe I take hit not for playe For now I shalle shewe to the how thou oughtest not to playe so with thy lord And thenne the wulf took and kyld hym and devoured and ete hym.

Henryson moulds this passage into a debate between the creatures (a device very common in his Fabillis) building towards the tyranny of:

'I have bene ofrymis sitt in grit effray,  
Bot (be the Rude) sa rad yit wes I never,  
As thow hes maid me with thy prettie play.  
I schot behind, quhen thow overtuke me ever,  
Bot sickkerlie now sail we not dissewer.'  
Than be craig bene smertlie he him tuke,  
Or ever he ceisit, and it in schunder schuke. (2581-7)

The poet then has changed his source markedly to eliminate any of the blame attached to the Wether in Caxton's version and added detail and emotional involvement which would make one believe in the Wether as hero.

Yet in the moralitas the interpretation given is exactly the opposite to that we had expected. The Wether is blamed: its "riches of array" caused it "presumptuous for to be." It provides a warning for social climbers:

Out of thair cais in pryde thay clym sa hie,  
That thay forbeir thair better in no steid,  
Quhill sum man til thair heillis over thair held. (2599-2601)

The reason for the discrepancy between fable and moralitas will perhaps become more obvious when we examine the development Henryson has made to Caxton's final warning. Caxton's very limited moral reads:

And threfore he that is wyse muste take good heed how he playeth with hym which he is wyser more sage and more stronge than hym self is.

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Henryson's *moralitas* is much broader in scope.\(^{10}\) His warning is against the folly of putting one's complete trust in material values for these are sure to pass: into the *moralitas* are woven metaphors reminding of the wheel of fortune—the passage quoted above (2599-2601) is one; again:

It setis na servand for to uphold weir  
Nor clym so sic, qhull he fall of the ledder; (2613-4)  

or, in a line which bears the strength of a traditional proverb,\(^{17}\) "Bewar in welth, for Hall benkis ar ryczh sliddar" (2608). To trust in material possessions, to make it one's whole desire to progress in social status in this world is dangerous for the world and its stability (see *The Lyon and the Mowe*, 1580-1600) but even more so for the individual. To do so is the ultimate of blindness, whereas truth lies in the following:

Thairfoir I counsel men of everilk stait  
To knaw thame self . . .  
(2609-10)

The emphasis is thoroughly Boethian and I wish to refer to a passage from *Consolations of Philosophy* which will highlight the implication of Henryson's *moralitas*:

So is thanne the condicion of thynge turned up-so-doun, that a man, that is a devyne beest be merye of his resoun, thynker that hymself nys nether fair ne noble but it be thurw possessioune of osterelmeete that ne han no soules. And certes alle othere thynge been aptyed of hir owene beaute, but ye men that ben semblable to God by yowre resonable thought, desiere to apparylen your excellent kynde of the loweste thynge, ne ye unlesstrande nat how greet a wrong ye don to your creatour. For he wolde that mankyde were most wyorthy and noble of any othere ethyly thynge, and ye threten adoun youpre dignytes bythen the loweste thynge. For yif that al the good of every thynge be more precyous than is thilke thynge whos that the good es, syn ye demen that the loweaste thynges ben your godes, thenne submitte ye

\(^{10}\) Marshall W. Stearns, *Robert Henryson* (New York, 1949), argues for a political application. He suggests that the fable denounced the favourites of James III—Roger, Hommylye, Cochrane and others—whom the nobles despised and against whom they eventually acted. If this is so Henryson must have wished merely to remind of the lesson of their fall—the poem can scarcely have been directed against them for when it was written (Caxton's *Esope* appeared in 1484) these favourites had been overthrown and Cochrane killed (1482). Such a reference may have been intended though it is impossible to prove and seems unlikely.

\(^{17}\) Cf. Henryson's *Twa Myis*, 210; Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1, 215-6.

\(^{17}\) Ferguson's *Scottish Proverbs*, ed. Erskine Beveridge, S.T.S., NS, 15 (Edinburgh, 1924), No. 335 (1641 version).
and putten yourself under the foulest thynge by your estimation: and certes this beydeth nat withouten your desert. For certes swich is the condicion of alle mankynde, that onely whan it hath knowynge of itself, thanne paseth it in noblesse alle othere thynge; and when it forleith the knowynge of itself thanne it is brought beyten alle beesjes.\(^{18}\)

Of course this reminds us of Henryson’s avowed purpose:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{My Author in his Fabillis tellis how} \\
\text{That brutal beistis spak, and Understude . . .} \\
\text{. . . putting example and similitude} \\
\text{How mony men in operation} \\
\text{Ar like to beistis in condioun. (Prolog 43-9)}^{19}
\end{align*}
\]

Henryson warns then in his moralitas, of the folly of trusting this world’s transitory state: those who do so are blind to true reality, they do not know themselves or their place in God’s creation. And not only the animals in the tale are blameworthy, we ourselves do not know the truth: we too are blind. We had expected (at the author’s instigation of course) a certain moral to be drawn; but our expectations were very different from the truth—we too are blind to the true implications of life, we too judge by externals. And the shock of the moralitas which, as we have seen, Henryson deliberately created, should help guide us to this conclusion.

And looking back at the fable itself one can recognize the ambiguity of its presentation.\(^{20}\) The Wether’s self confidence can be seen not as service but as boasting in the blind belief that clothes make the man:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And he persee, be God, I sall not spair} \\
\text{To follow him as fast as did your Doig} \\
\text{Swa that, I warrand, he sall not want ane hoig. (2487-9)}
\end{align*}
\]

Verbal echoes tie tale and moralitas together:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In all thingis he counterfai the Dog: (2497)} \\
\text{Thay think thay hald of nane, be thay als gay,} \\
\text{Bot counterfute ane Lord in al degre. (2597-8)}
\end{align*}
\]

For the Wether is as blind to the truth as we: “thus worth the Wedder


\(^{19}\) I have amended l. 47 to follow the Bannatyne reading.

\(^{20}\) MacDonald’s article, “Narrative Art in Henryson’s Fablitz,” has stressed the negative aspect of the ambiguity—the stupidity of our Wether; cf. also John MacQueen, Robert Henryson, A Study of the Major Narrative Poems (Oxford, 1967), pp. 184-8. It is my contention that we do not take full account of this aspect until our attention has been drawn to it by the moralitas.
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wantoun off his weid" (2495). In taking on Dog's clothing it believes itself to have taken on the Dog's characteristics:

To mak him lycht, he kast the Lamb him fra . . .
. . . 'Na' (quod the Wedder), 'in Faith we part not swa:
It is not the Lamb, but the, that I desire . . . (2532-5)²

Henryson's moralitas then, far from being irrelevant or "too ingenuous for modern taste" or an artistic blunder is, because of its very unexpectedness, a living part of the whole poem. The device is very sophisticated, demanding a sophisticated audience; but then Henryson is a highly sophisticated poet whose essential character we miss if, disregarding his use of philosophical, religious and rhetorical traditions, we approach him merely as the "countryman" whose "philosophy is as firmly rooted in rustic folk wisdom as in religious faith."²²

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²² It may be noted also that the Wether's techniques in attempting to persuade the Wolf to save its life—deference ("Maister," 2558; "SCHIR," 2574) proverb quoting (2576), promise to serve (2579-80)—are similar to those used by the false, flattering Wolf of other fables, to gain its ends.

²² Wittig, The Scottish Tradition in Literature, p. 31.

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