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TOPIC

Robert Henryson's Development of the Didactic Role of the Fable Form in "The Moral Fables of Aesop"

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: Robert Henryson's Development of the Didactic Role of the Fable Form in "*The Moral Fables of Aesop*".

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INTENT: The purpose of the paper is to examine Henryson's collection of Aesopic and Reynardian Fables in the light of whatever instructive intent he may have had in undertaking the work.

METHOD: The paper first examines both Henryson's personal history, and the social and legal background against which the fables were composed. There follows a brief discussion of the development of the fable form from its earliest appearances, incorporating an examination of Henryson's possible didactic intentions in selecting this format for his work.

The paper then moves on to examine the various methods according to which instruction has been contained in the fables. This includes a discussion of such topics as Henryson's expansion of the originals, political criticism, the introduction of Aesop as a character, the use of humour and the operation of the "*Fables*" as a single work.

CONCLUSION: It is concluded that Henryson does indeed incorporate both the original moral messages, and a full range of deeper messages, in his *Fables* without compromising their success as literature, or as entertainment.

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INTRODUCTION

Henryson's *Fables* represent a considerable adaptation of the traditional fable form. They contain far more descriptive material and detailed analysis than their traditional ancestors, and exhibit a continuity between fables which has not been seen before.

Despite this, Henryson's fables contain, although often couched in the additions mentioned, the same simple moral messages as their predecessors. These messages, however, do not represent the limit of Henryson's intention for the work. Coupled with the traditional moral teachings common to the fable form are far more specific and sophisticated lessons, seemingly aimed at specific sections of society, particularly at those sections where power is vested.

It is contended that Henryson chooses to modify his fables to such an extent in order to provide himself with the wide canvas necessary to allow the inclusion of these more precise moral messages. The lessons he teaches are conveyed by such means as illustration by example of corruption among animal characters and the presentation of detailed moralities containing overt instruction. The purpose of edification is further enhanced by the addition of a great deal of material which has no moral purpose, but which is included simply for the purpose of entertainment. The inclusion of so much which is extraneous to the basic core of the story requires a far wider canvas than that afforded by the traditionally succinct fable form.

In addition to expansion within the fable, Henryson allows each of the fables he chooses to relate to occupy a particular position in relation to the others. From time to time, he includes overt indications of continuity between the fables. In short, Henryson's *Moral Fables* form a single work in which each part is functional in determining the final interpretation of the intention of the whole.

In order to obtain a clearer view of Henryson's attainment of his didactic objectives, it is necessary to study his methods both in the context of the single fable, and in the wider context of the work viewed as a united whole in which the ordering, tone and balance of the individual fables is vital to interpretation. This essay attempts to do so by first discussing several of Henryson's methods, each in relation to a specific fable in which it is exemplified, and then by discussing the whole of the *Fables* as a unit.

Chapter 1:
Historical background

1.1 Personal History

Very little is known about the personal history of Robert Henryson. We know from his works that he belongs to the latter half of the fifteenth century, but can postulate no firm dates for his birth and death. In Dunbar's Lament for the Makars, he is listed amongst the dead. This puts his death some time before 1505[1], when that poem was written. If we are to believe Kinaston's report that Henryson reached a good age, then the date of his birth can be estimated as falling somewhere between 1420 and 1435[2].

Henryson's position as schoolmaster, and his residency in Dunfermline, are the only completely reliable details of his life. Early title pages confirm his position as schoolmaster at Dunfermline. This evidence is supported by Kinaston, writing in 1693. Dunbar links Henryson with Dunfermline in his "Lament for the Makars"[3]. Douglas Gray refers also to

1 *Although Gray dates this poem at 1505, Wood and Gopen prefer 1508 as the date of its appearance. Fox points to the subsequent lines "he [Death] hes now tane last of aw/Gud gentill Stobo and Quintyne Schaw", and states that Stobo is known to have died in 1505.*

2 *Gopen, p.2*

3 *Fox, p.xiii. In addition, this extract is quoted by all the Henryson biographers included in my Bibliography.*

a lost poem set in that region[4], which from its title would seem to support a familiarity with the area.

Details of Henryson's education can be guessed at, but not confirmed. The position of schoolmaster, and the title of "Magister"[5] both imply that he held a masters degree. The records of Glasgow University do make mention of a "Magister Robertus Henrisone" who was incorporated into the university in 1462 as a licentiate in arts and bachelor in decrees[6]. The latter title refers to the study of Canon Law. This would seem to correspond with what we know of our Henryson, given the knowledge of the law which is revealed in the Fables. Gray also makes mention of a "Magister Robertus Henrison" who was a notary public in Dunfermline in 1477-8. This too would suggest a history compatible with that postulated for our poet[7]. Further, it is not unlikely that both the references above are to the same man. In any case it is clear that Henryson, in order to have secured the prestigious position of schoolmaster, was undoubtedly a man of some education.

4 *Gray, p.2. The poem referred to is "Dreme on fut by forth".*

5 *Fox, p.v.*

6 *Fox, p.xiii, and many other sources.*

7 *This is further supported by Fox's comments on the two Dunfermline schoolmasters who precede Henryson, and the possibility of a "tradition in Dunfermline that the schoolmaster was a notary public" (Fox, p.xvii).*

1.2 Social History[8]

Scotland at the time of Henryson was in a state of some turmoil. This was the period during which one King James was followed by another, each ascending as a minor, and being represented by one or more Regents, each of whom served a different and particular set of interests.

James I spent the early years of his reign in captivity in England. He returned to Scotland in 1424 to find the crown greatly weakened and the great nobles very powerful. Although able to subdue the nobles and quell his opposition successfully, James proceeded to introduce a far-reaching programme of reforms, legal, social and ecclesiastical. This earned him more enemies. He was eventually assassinated as a result of a plot by three powerful nobles.

James II ascended to the throne in 1437 at the age of six. The Regency passed to the Earl of Douglas, and on his death, to Sir William Crighton, who would later murder Douglas' heirs. James II eventually took power at age nineteen. Although keen to follow a path of reform similar to that of his father, James was thwarted by the necessity of defending the crown against the vengeful Douglases. James II died in 1460 in an accident on the battlefield, leaving the nine year old James III as his successor.

8 *This section relies primarily on Maclean and Gray.*

Again, Scotland passed into the hands of Regents, the first of whom was the Queen Mother. Two years later, the position was taken by Bishop Kennedy. Kennedy was succeeded by the ambitious Lord Boyd, who was removed from power by a resentful James III when the latter assumed power in 1469.

James III was an ineffective king, more devoted to intellectual pursuits than to affairs of state. His reign was punctuated by plots and counterplots. Finally, in 1488, James was killed by rebel troops led by Archibald Douglas. These rebels placed James' fifteen year old son James IV on the throne.

James IV reigned at first under the Regency of Douglas, but soon proved himself an able ruler in his own right, and one who was not to be subjected to domination by his nobles. A leader of "energy, intelligence and charm"[9], he did penance his whole life for the death of his father. His reign introduced a period of far greater stability in Scotland. The position of the king was assured, and the nobles controlled.

It is clear from this brief summary that Scotland was in turmoil for most of the fifteenth Century, order only being restored with the majority of James IV. It is clear also from the drive to reform shown by the first two James' that such reform was much needed. It is certain that their aborted attempts to improve legislation and to maintain law and order were not

9 *Maclean, p.63.*

furthered by the reign of the ineffective James III. Reform was effectively delayed until almost the end of the century.

At no time during the fifteenth century until the rise of James IV, was the position of the king assured. With no firm authority, the nobles fought among themselves for power. Similarly, struggles for power must have been quietly waged at lower levels in the social order. The situation was ideal for the flourishing of corruption. No strict order was enforced from above, and so those in positions of power, in whatever degree, were free to use that power as they wished. It would indeed be strange in any human society, for this level of freedom from authority to cause anything other than an erosion of law and order down to the lowest levels, an erosion reflected in the *Fables* wherever they portray social, legal or ecclesiastical institutions.

1.3 Legal Background

The legal background to the fables is important in that the law is often referred to, and is used and abused by the characters of the fables.

It is likely that our Henryson is that one who was trained in canon law. There are indeed several references to courts and to legal proceedings in the *Fables*. Corke argues[10] that the degree of legal expertise shown in the *Fables* could have been gleaned by an intelligent

10 *Unpublished essay by Donald Stevenson Corke, examining contemporary legal theory in the light of the Fables.*

observer, and does not indicate any particular knowledge of the law. Although this may be so, I cannot agree that there is any indication that Henryson does *not* have a lawyer's knowledge of the law. It can, and will, be argued that Henryson had reasons more positive than ignorance for excluding a sweep of legal detail from his work, and that he was in fact aware of the legal intricacies of the time.

The legal system of the time offered three types of courts, all of which are covered in the scope of the *Fables*. The secular Sheriff's courts were the first of these. For those unable to afford this type of court, the Church provided Consistory courts. These were designed specifically to allow the poor access to legal process, and provided legal representation for those who could not afford to provide it for themselves. Finally, there was the Royal court, whose decision superseded that of the others, and to which appeals could be directed.

Chapter 2:
The Fable

2.1 A Brief History of the Fable Form

A fable is, in the simplest terms, a short tale carrying a moral message. The characters are represented by animals who, despite their diverse animal natures, can speak and reason as humans. The fable form is not restricted to any particular culture or society. Fables have appeared both in oral and in written literature from all over the globe.

Henryson's *Fables* derive primarily from the fables of Europe, most of which are traditionally attributed to Aesop, himself an almost mythical figure whose life is shrouded in mystery. Herodotus claimed that Aesop was a storytelling slave living on Samos in the middle of the sixth century, who was killed by the citizens of Delphos. Later writers believe him to have been Phrygian or Thracian by birth. With the passage of time, the stories surrounding Aesop became more and more complex, until the standard representation was of Aesop as "a deformed hunchback, grotesquely ugly, partially crippled and defective in his speech, whose lively wit and imagination in storytelling allowed him to escape disaster in the direst of circumstances"[11].[12]

In Europe, as in other societies, fables were used to impart common wisdoms. They combined insight into human nature with a recognition of the characteristics commonly

11 *Gopen, p.6.*

12 *This paragraph depends heavily on Gopen, pp.5-6.*

associated with certain animals, domesticated such as dogs or poultry, or wild such as the fox and the wolf. The choice of animal was often dependent on the purpose or message of the tale. The fox, known for his guile, often appeared as the successful protagonist in tales warning against gullibility. Such is the relationship between the fox and the wolf in Henryson's tale of "*The Fox, the Wolf and the Cadger*". As familiarity with the animal was necessary to an understanding of the fable, animals chosen were common throughout Europe, or at least well known[13]. Exotic species did not appear as major characters. In fact, Henryson may be unique in his use of a catalogue of fantastic beasts within the context of the fable, a form usually too succinct to allow for such scope.

In formal education, fables were widely used for the teaching of rhetorical exercises. Gopen elaborates: "Given a fable, a student might be asked to deduce a moral; given a moral, he might have to create a fable to fit it; given both fable and moral, he might have to write another fable to dispute the moral of the first or write an argument showing how the first moral was improperly applied"[14].

13 *The animals in question need not, of course, be indigenous so long as they and their characteristics are well known. One cannot help but think that tales of the evil and deceit of snakes, for example, would be particularly effective in Ireland where the beasts had attained an almost mythical status by virtue of their absence.*

14 *Gopen, p.7.*

Although formalised in this manner, the fable was not restricted to the schoolroom, but was widely used for example and reproof among people of various classes in their daily lives. In the early Thirteenth Century, for example, Richard the Lion Heart used the fable of the Man the Lion and the Snake to admonish his nobles[15]. The concept of wisdom embodied in a simple animal tale was widely entrenched, and was rarely questioned.

2.2 Henryson's choice of the Fable Genre

Before embarking on a detailed study of the *Fables* as presented by Henryson, it is necessary to examine the motives behind his selection of this particular literary form. By examining the Prologue to the *Fables* with this end in view, it is possible to glean a clearer idea of Henryson's understanding of the purpose of the fable, and of its uses. From this can be developed a perception of Henryson's intentions in using fables as his basis for the composition of this work.

The Fable as a Tool of Reproof

Already in the first stanza of the Prologue, Henryson states that fables were first written as tools of reproof, setting examples against evil living through the deeds of animals. In this way, Henryson makes it quite clear that he too intends to deliver instruction through his adaptation of these works of reproof. This essay will examine the many adaptations which he makes in the light of the instructive intent of the work.

15 *Gopen, p.6.*

Although Henryson's animals become more sophisticated than those of his original, exhibiting extensive knowledge of matters astrological, ecclesiastical and legal, their primary purpose as characters of his *Fables*, is to provide examples of evil living of the sort which should be avoided, and of the distress which it causes in society.

Examples of Moral Instruction in "The Two Mice"

An example of this intention to teach and reprove can be found in the tale of "The Two Mice". The country mouse is lured into the city by the tales of wealth which her sister presents. Although cautious at first, she soon begins to indulge freely in the many extravagant foods, until she is jolted back to her senses by being put into danger, first from the man, and then from the cat which almost succeeds in catching her. She realises that she has almost paid very dearly for her feasting, and returns to the country a little wiser. The message, strengthened in the Moralitas, is that the individual can improve his lot here and in the next world through restraint and moral living. This is the same basic framework, and ultimately the same moral message, as that presented by the fable in its earlier forms. Henryson has simply carried through the intention of his original in his own style and as an integral part of this work.

Examples of Moral Instruction in "The Sheep and the Dog"

Henryson recognises also that it is not always the evil who suffer for evil deeds, and so he advocates not only that the individual live an exemplary life, but also attempts to point out to the individual reader that there is a need for reform in society as a whole. His desire for such general reform is seen in the tale of "The Sheep and the Dog", when we witness the

distress of the sheep, brought on by the wrongful claim of the dog, and the unjust forwarding of that claim by the Consistory court. Although the tale shows the sheep as honest and good, it suffers because of the injustice which is seen to permeate its society. The dog's evil nature causes the sheep's misery. The message here is twofold - first that there is a need for a more general morality, and secondly, the more pessimistic message that good living alone is no guarantee for a good life.

Although this complex moral requires a more complex tale, the original story of the fable provides an adequate basis for expansion. The reproof which the tale contains is expected because of the work's origin in the fable tradition, and is therefore more apparent than if the example were simply presented as a story. In addition, the fable format provides for a Moralitas, which Henryson expands into an analysis of the tale, explaining his intention to his reader in a fashion which does not allow for any misinterpretation of the primary message - that the tale parallels a corrupt society in which the innocent can get no satisfaction from the courts. The availability of this facility, namely the inclusion of a Moral, makes the fable format an ideal vehicle for Henryson's message.

Entertainment as an Inducement to Learning

As his Prologue continues, Henryson next proceeds to explain how a moral message may be effectively contained within a pleasant tale. The importance of a moral message having already been established, the emphasis here must lie with the softening of that message by means of a pleasant or diverting tale. This was a common practice, traceable back even to the classical period. Nevertheless, Henryson's insistence on the point makes it worthy of

mention. The necessity for the reduction of severity by the introduction of less serious material is repeated several times in different ways, and through various images. In ll.19-21, Henryson mentions the use of "*merie sport*"[16] as a means of making the learning experience more pleasant for the student. To invert Henryson's own metaphor, the fable is the tasty flesh which encourages man to tackle the hard shell of the nut. Henryson is aware that only an already pious audience will study a purely didactic work, but in order to reach those who are in real need of edification, the lessons need to be contained among more entertaining matter.

Entertainment and the fable

It is easy to see that the requirement of entertainment is met by the traditional fable as appropriately as was the need for a vehicle for moral teaching. Nevertheless, a certain degree of expansion and adaptation allows for an even better fulfillment of this requirement. As Henryson's additions allow for more complex messages, so also they provide an arena for far greater entertainment. This is exemplified in the tale of "The Trial of the Fox" by the list of exotic animals which attend the court convened by the Lion. This addition can have no moral purpose, and serves purely as classical embellishment to the tale, both capturing the attention of the classical student, and enchanting the simpler listener who is unaquainted with such magical beasts. In this way, many additions are made which call to mind other literary forms, or which incorporate Henryson's talent for humour,

16 *All quotations from the Fables are taken from Fox's edition, and line numbers are given accordingly.*

and which serve the purpose of education mainly by providing entertainment which will hold the attention of the reader.

The Wide Appeal of the Fable

In the final stanza of the Prologue, Henryson records Aesop's desire not to "*Lak the disdane off hie, nor low estate*"[17]. From this it may be inferred that Henryson, too, wishes to criticise both the high and the low with his *Fables*. He does indeed succeed in doing so. In fact it may be argued that much of his adaptation concentrates on the introduction of criticisms of those in varying degrees of authority, adding these criticisms to the existing simple morals which may be helpful to common folk. This will be discussed in further detail with reference to the various levels on which Henryson is commenting. If Henryson intends to criticise both the "high" and the "low", it is obvious that he intends both groups to be included in his audience. The fable format is ideally suited to this desire.

The wealthier classes

As an instrument of instruction, the fable was known to the educated classes, usually those in a position of wealth or power, or those attached to the church, as a part of the classical tradition they would have studied in their own education. They were accustomed to reading fables, and to their serious purpose of edification. It is possible that their intimate

17 *l.60.*

acquaintance with some of Henryson's originals would have made his adaptations more apparent to them, so highlighting his criticism of the powerful.

The common folk

The poorer classes, too, were familiar with the fable format. Originally in the more succinct form favoured by Henryson's predecessors, fables were easily memorised and passed on from generation to generation. It is almost certain, in fact, that the fable originated in an oral format. It is known to continue as such in many of today's more isolated cultures[18]. Its continued use as an oral medium in Scotland was probably nothing more than a continuation of the European oral tradition. In addition to being passed on orally by parents, fables would often have been used in Church, again as media of instruction[19]. In view of this history it is not hard to imagine gatherings at which Henryson's *Fables* were read aloud for the benefit of the common folk, and understood by them as vehicles for moral instruction.

18 *Gray, pp.33-35*

19 *Gray, p.49.*

Chapter 3:
Henryson's Adaptation of the Fable Format

Henryson's adaptation of the fable takes place on several levels, and presumably with several disparate, although related, motives. His innovations take place both within the scope of the single fable, through more detailed characterisation, amplification of the simple actions of the tale, added asides, dialogue and many other narrative means, and between the fables by means of the complex structure and the treatment of similar themes in vastly different ways. It is necessary to examine all the ways in which Henryson alters the fables in order to determine more clearly the full spectrum of his didactic intentions.

3.1 Expansion Within the Single Fable

The most striking and immediately apparent aspect of Henryson's adaptation of the fables of his sources, is his expansion of them. Traditionally, fable style is brief and to the point. There is no extraneous detail, no frivolous addition to the basic core of the story. Fox uses as an example the version of the tale of "*The Cock and the Jasp*" which appears in the collection of Gualterus[20]. This version of the fable is likely to have been Henryson's immediate, although not his only, source. In Gualterus' version, the body of the fable occupies eight lines, while the moralitas requires only two more. Despite this, the message that the man who scorns wisdom is foolish is clearly and adequately presented. Henryson, who teaches the same lesson, expands the fable to fifty-six lines, and the moralitas to forty.

20 *Fox, p.194.*

It is necessary, therefore, to examine Henryson's motives in allowing for such a high degree of expansion. This essay discusses several of Henryson's expansion techniques, together with their values for the didactic intent of the work. Each technique is discussed with reference to a particular fable or fables. The discussions follow the sequence generally accorded to the fables with which they are associated.

It is not accurate to say that Henryson adds unnecessary material or mere decoration to his *Fables*. His motives are more complex than those of the early fabulists, who simply wrote a separate short tale for each message they wished to convey. Henryson, through the incorporation of greater detail, strives to make his moralities more specific. At the same time, he tries to include more than one "message" in each of his tales.

Altered conventions in "*The Cock and the Jasp*"

In the case of "*The Cock and the Jasp*", it is necessary to read the fable in conjunction with the Prologue which is attached to it. Although the Prologue may stand alone as a preface to the entire work, and the tale may stand alone as an individual fable, the two are in fact functioning together to introduce the collection, and to convey and reinforce the message that the *Fables* contain serious matter as well as entertainment, and that they will be valuable to whoever chooses to study them attentively and receptively.

This tale in its original form carries the simple message that the wise man should not scorn the wisdom concealed in barnyard fables. Gualterus, Henryson's most immediate source, adapts the moral to suggest that the stone is representative of wisdom in any form, which is

scorned by the stupid. Both these messages are conveyed by Henryson in his tale. Nevertheless, his method of conveying the moral is very different to that of his predecessors.

Henryson precedes his fable with a Prologue in which the concealment of wisdom within the fable is discussed openly. The reader has therefore already been introduced to the notion of "*ane doctrine wyse aneuch, / And full of fruit, under ane fenyeit Fabill*"[21].

Having led the reader in the direction of the *Moralitas* which will follow his first tale, Henryson now constructs the tale in such a way as to subtly divert him from this interpretive path. The cock who finds the stone is going about his normal business of procuring food for himself when he discovers this precious gem. He immediately rejects it as being inappropriate to his simple way of life and limited requirements. He declares it more suited for great lords and royal towers than for a humble cock in his dungheap. His rejection of the stone seems at first to hold no disparagement of it. His declaration of its worthlessness to him is couched in rhetoric concerning its inappropriateness to his simple needs. The jewel is presented, through the words of the cock, as an attractive frivolity, to be scorned by those more concerned with the simple business of satisfying their daily living requirements.

The result of this "deception" by Henryson is that the reader views the cock as admirable. He is seen as being content with his humble lot, and aware of his place in society. He does

21 *ll.17-18.*

not seek to further himself beyond his station or to increase his wealth beyond his simple requirements.

The reader now turns confidently to the *Moralitas*, seeking confirmation of his analysis of the tale. If he has indeed taken the words of the cock at face value, he is sorely disappointed by what he finds in that *Moralitas*. It is now revealed to him that the Jasp was representative of wisdom, the very stuff which he himself had been enjoined to seek through the medium of the Prologue. The most obvious interpretation of the fable is, in fact, inverted. The cock's preoccupation with his food is likened to a desire for worldly wealth, and his rejection of the jasp in favour of whatever crusts he may find is shown as a lack of concern for anything other than material gain.

The effect of this diversion from, and sudden return to the topic of wisdom, is to reinforce the message of the Prologue for the reader. He perceives that the *Fables* are, indeed, tough nuts to crack. It is brought home to him that their complexity far outweighs that of the fables he has been used to. He is no longer complacent about his ability to interpret fables with the ease he may remember from his schooldays, or using the formulas he has used in the past.

If he is discouraged by this, however, the *Moralitas* is designed not only to shock him, but also to reassure him. The discussion of the fable is very specific. The significance of each element is detailed: "*This gentill iasp.../Betakinnis perfite prudence and cunning...*"[22]; "*This cok...may till ane fule be peir*"[23]. The reader's misinterpretation is painstakingly corrected so that no confusion can remain. He no longer fears that he will be limited by his ability to interpret the tales correctly. He does, however, if human nature is to be trusted, resolve to read each fable far more carefully in future, in order to avoid being made to feel foolish by each new *Moralitas*. This diligence will enable him to see the multiple morals of some of the later fables, and will allow a fuller interpretation of the work as a unit than can be presented in tale-specific *Moralitas's*.

Wayside wisdoms in "*The Cock and the Jasp*"

Another aspect of Henryson's adaptation of the fable format becomes apparent in a discussion of the tale of "*The Cock and the Jasp*". This is the use of small asides as a means of conveying messages extraneous to the main thrust of the fable. This technique would have been impossible within the limited confines of the traditional fable, and is an adaptation introduced by Henryson in this work.

22 *ll.127-128.*

23 *ll.141-142.*

In the tale of "*The Cock and the Jasp*", the clearest example of this innovation is his denunciation of irresponsibility in the performance of one's duty, which he achieves through his speculation on how the chambermaids may have swept the stone from their employer's home. This discussion is clearly extraneous to the story. It has already been made clear that the stone has been mistakenly swept out of a house. The manner of this sweeping is unnecessary for the interpretation of the tale. Nor does it make any other contribution to the furtherance of the main argument presented in the tale and its Moralitas. Nevertheless, it is explained that many such girls are more preoccupied with the attention they may earn on the street as they sweep the dust forth, than with what they might be sweeping out together with the dust.

This aside is an example of an inclusion which is not explained in the *Moralitas* of the tale, and which must be interpreted by the reader himself. As a dungheap is clearly not an appropriate place for a precious jewel, and as the narrator is clearly disparaging in his assessment of the chambermaids concerned, this interpretation is not difficult. It is a condemnation of careless workers of any kind.

If the reader is careful in his interpretation, he will further note that the work of the chambermaids has the appearance of having been done well, in that the floor is described as clean. Clearly then, the stanza, which could otherwise have been omitted from the work completely, is criticising those who appear to be carrying out their work dutifully, but who are in fact doing only the minimum required in order for them to retain their employment

Taken further, the stanza may even be construed as a warning against false appearances. This interpretation, reached on a second reading, would be extremely ironical in view of the apparent significance of the fable, contrasted with its real significance as revealed in the *Moralitas*.

Finally, the lines in question perform another function. By introducing women into the cock's monologue, the section serves to move the action from an animal to a human sphere. This is an intimation of the close connection between the two worlds which will emerge time and again as the *Fables* progress. This connection is discussed more closely in the section dealing with the tale of "*The Fox and the Wolf*" below.

Aspects of Animal Characterisation which Link the Human and Animal Worlds in "*The Fox and the Wolf*"

Because of the scope of Henryson's *Fables*, he is able to include in them a far greater degree of character development than was to be found in his originals. Henryson's use of characterisation can be discussed with reference to the tale of "*The Fox and the Wolf*", in which the fox realises his own sinfulness, and approaches the wolf to make confession.

Aspects of characterisation which Henryson uses include the adoption of the conventions of his originals with regard to the nature of each animal type, use of specialist knowledge by animals, their adoption of human institutions, the use of dialogue and the exhibition of human emotions.

The fox which appears in the tale of "*The Fox and the Wolf*" is the same one which attempted to capture Chantecleir the Cock in the preceding tale. The reader is therefore already familiar with his trickery, and with his perfectly natural taste for animal flesh. When the reader joins him in this new tale, he is showing his cowardice and treacherous nature by hiding in wait for the cover of darkness.

Human learning among animals

The narrator of this fable embarks on a lengthy description of the relative positions of the stars, and of the astrological significance of these positions. It is made clear that the fox is familiar with this field of human learning, and that he is examining the skies for details of his own future[24]. He is, in fact, credited with having shared his astrological knowledge with the narrator - "*as Lowrence leirnit me*"[25].

This type of knowledge, although "*off nature*"[26], seems unlikely in a fox. Its use here is twofold. Firstly, it is used in order to motivate the fox's realisation of his need to reform. In other words, it aids the development of the story. Secondly, it is used in order to humanise the fox to a degree through his possession of human knowledge. This characteristic forms

24 *This style is not unique to Henryson, but may be seen, for example, in the astrological knowledge of Chanticlere in Chaucer's* Nun's Priest's Tale.

25 *l.634.*

26 *l.643.*

a link between the animal and the man, making the tale more relevant to the human world of the reader.

The *Fables* are filled with this type of subtle reminder that the animal characters are in fact representative of humans. Although the animals exhibit animal characteristics, such as is exemplified by the fox's hunting, they mingle these with human characteristics, such as the exhibition of conscience by the fox, or the scientific nature of his education.

Human institutions in animal society

Another example of Henryson's technique of linking the animal and human worlds through his animal characters is found in the use of human institutions such as the church as part of the animal world. This technique is exemplified here through the use of the wolf's character. He is presented as both Doctor of Divinity and Friar. He seems in the fox's description to wear the clothing of the conventional Friar of the time:

> *"3our bair feit and 3our russet coull of gray,*
> *3our lene cheik, 3our paill and pietious face,*
> *Shawis to me 3our perfite halines;"*
>
> (ll.679-681.)[27]

This description presents the wolf as dressed in the clothing of a Friar, a human church official, and therefore as human to a degree. At the same time, the characteristics described

27 *Owing to the limitations of the typeface available to me, I have chosen to user 3 and* 3 *respectively to represent capital and small "yogh".*

are perfectly suited to a wolf, who wears a coarse grey pelt, goes unshod and is by nature lean and pale-faced. This dichotomy exemplifies the ambivalent nature of the animals of the *Fables*. They are neither entirely animal nor entirely human, but combine characteristics of both.

This ambivalence is important for the didactic intent of the tales. In the expanded *Fables*, the wider canvas leads to more detailed characterisation, and therefore to closer identification with the characters. It is for this reason that the emphasis of animal characteristics is necessary in order to distance the events from the reader so that he may judge them objectively. At the same time, the human traits exhibited by the animals ensure that he never becomes too distanced to apply the lessons taught by these events to his own life and experience.

Animal personalities representing types of men

The greatest insight into the fox's character afforded within the scope of this fable, is found in the making of his confession. The fox, although concerned for his own welfare to the extent that he confesses his murderous nature, is unable to regret his misdeeds, to promise to forego such behaviour in the future, or even to agree to any but the mildest of penances. Further, once the fox has accepted the conditions for his penance as laid out by the wolf, he is unable or unwilling to keep to those conditions, and abuses the rite of baptism in order to convince himself that the kid he is eating is lawfully a salmon. It is extremely unfortunate for the fox that the goatherd does not share his conviction in this regard.

The representation of the fox as a habitual sinner whose confession is empty of real meaning or sincerity is an example of those human-animal parallels in the *Fables* which hold specific lessons for the reader/listener. Although the fox's behaviour is perfectly natural and acceptable for a fox, it is likened to murder among humans, and becomes a sin for which the fox should seek absolution. The manner of the fox's confession, and the intent with which it is carried out, points to many sorts of men. Included in the compass of the comparison are those men who observe religious forms simply because it is expected of them, without any degree of sincerity; those who confess their sins merely to protect themselves from divine justice but who feel no remorse for their misdeeds, or any need to refrain from them permanently so long as the confessional remains open to them; and those who feel safe in setting religion aside until such time as they anticipate death.

The judgement visited on the fox when he is unexpectedly killed by the goatherd parallels the divine justice which will be visited on those men who can be likened to the fox. It is made clear that his type of confession is ineffective in protecting the confessor from the consequences of his misdeeds. As animal actions are used in traditional fables to warn against certain types of behaviour among humans, so their character traits are used in Henryson's *Fables* to warn against the adoption of certain attitudes.

Criticism of Legal Institutions in "*The Sheep and the Dog*" and "*The Trial of the Fox*"

Henryson's *Fables* quite clearly criticise a number of human failings such as selfishness, preoccupation with material goods, pride and dishonesty. These are all presented as failings of the individual, and are portrayed using specific animal characters who illustrate both the

specific moral failing to be examined, and the negative consequences which it may have. The preoccupation with material luxuries, for example, is illustrated in the tale of "*The Two Mice*" in which the country sister is almost killed when she allows herself to be temporarily seduced by the opulence of her sister's lifestyle.

Henryson's criticism does not stop at the failings of the individual, however. He is also concerned with corruption and degeneration in the institutions which man has designed. Most prominent among the institutions which he tackles are the Church and the courts. Henryson's own background is particularly suited to a criticism of the legal system in that he seems himself to have been educated in that field[28].

It is in "*The Trial of the Fox*" that we first see a court represented in the *Fables*. The court of this fable is a royal court, which has jurisdiction over all the animals and is presided over by the regal Lion. In the tale of "*The Sheep and the Dog*" which follows it, the composition and operation of the Consistory Court, traditionally the court of the poor, is presented. Finally, arbitration of a legal dispute by a third party is shown in the tale of "*The Fox, Wolf and Husbandman*". The corruption illustrated in this tale, however, is specific to the fox rather than to the process of arbitration. It is therefore adequate for the purpose of determining Henryson's attitude to the legal system, to study the first and second of these tales. They will be examined in reverse order.

28 *The possibilty that Henryson had studied Canon Law and/or served as a notary public in Dunfermline is discussed in Chapter 1 above.*

The Consistory Court of "The Sheep and the Dog"

In "*The Sheep and the Dog*", the sheep is called to court by a dog who alleges that it owes him payment for a certain loaf of bread. He calls the sheep to the consistory court, the court provided by the Church for the poor, because he is aware of the sheep's poverty. Despite the sheep's objections both to the judge and to the illegal constitution of the court, the proceedings are not halted. The sheep is wrongfully convicted and forced to sell his wool to make the payment demanded.

The outcome of the case, presented by Henryson as being extremely unfair, indicates Henryson's condemnation of what he sees as the malpractices of the consistory courts. This dissatisfaction is made abundantly clear in the course of the fable, even to a reader who has no legal knowledge at all.

In his presentation of the story of "*The Sheep and the Dog*", Henryson leaves very little to the opinion of the reader or listener. He states unequivocally that the court which he presents is corrupt, that all its members are mortal enemies of the sheep, and that the sheep is so afraid of the court that he dares not even stop to eat before answering its summons. He states further that the judge is fraudulent, and the charge false. Of all the tales in the *Fables*, this one is probably the most overtly biased in the telling.

Although the tale is peppered with legal terminology, this is peripheral to the interpretation of the tale. Most of it is on an uncomplicated level, easily observable from attendance in the courts, and has very little to say about the justice or injustice of the proceedings.

It has been suggested that this is indicative of the possibility that Henryson had only a layman's knowledge of the law[29]. This is not necessarily the case. The greater part of Henryson's audience would have had little or no knowledge of legal practice. For this reason, and given the care which Henryson takes to ensure that his work is entertaining as well as instructive, it seems unlikely that he would include a broad sweep of legal detail. Such inclusion, as well as being less than entertaining in itself, would necessitate lengthy and detailed explanation in order to make it comprehensible to the lay reader. This would mean that the reader, in his struggle to understand the arguments presented, would be less able to devote attention to the intended moral message of the tale. He would also be far more likely to find the difficulty in cracking the nut out of all proportion to the sweetness of the kernel, and to abandon the struggle.

The tale makes the point that the courts of the church are open to corruption. This message is strengthened by the use of *the Moralitas* in which Henryson parallels the animal characters with their human counterparts. He indicates also, through the plight of the sheep, the misery which is caused among the poor by the practice of such corruption. This indicates, too, how this type of corruption works against society. This is particularly significant when noted in regard to an institution which is designed ostensibly to lessen the burden of the poor.

29 *Corke, in his unpublished essay on legal theory in Henryson's Moral Fables.*

In the telling of his tale, and the conveying of the above message, Henryson has remembered, in his avoidance of legal detail, that in order for the audience to identify with the tale sufficiently to allow them to learn from it, it is necessary that its content be familiar to them as far as is possible. It is particularly important to be careful of adherence to this principle in a tale which deals with less familiar legal issues rather than with the everyday businesses of housekeeping, farming or fowling.

For those involved in the running of the courts, however, the thrust of the tale is far more pointed. These men, with their intimate knowledge of the law do not need to have the injustices embodied in the court proceedings portrayed in the tale spelled out to them. They are aware, for example, that the sheep is entitled to free legal counsel[30], and can draw their own conclusions as to why he does not seek it, the most obvious of these being that he is more likely to state his own case fairly than is an appointee of this corrupt court. This type of omission would be readily apparent to a contemporary lawyer, and would perhaps be more effective than a brief mention of the sheep's fear of asking for counsel. Such a mention might have little impact following the intimation that the sheep is so afraid of the court that he does not dare stop to eat before appearing.

30 *Corke, l.6.*

The belief that Henryson expects those with legal knowledge to form their own opinions in regard to those parts of his tale pertaining to legality, is confirmed in his words: "*On clerkis I do it, gif this sentence wes leill*"[31]. This line, while confirming by implication that it was not, in fact, a just decree, urges scholars of the law to examine the tale in the light of their specialist knowledge before drawing their own conclusions.

Whereas the tale preaches to the lay person against greed, injustice and the practice of bribery, the message for the lawyer is far stronger. He is accused of participating in, or at least of tolerating, legal abuses of the type described. In inviting him to examine the events of the fable, Henryson is also inviting him to examine his own position in the picture of the courts as presented by Henryson.

The Royal Court of "The Trial of the Fox"

Henryson's presentation of royal justice is quite different to the picture he has given us of the consistory courts. This may be clearly seen from an examination of "*The Trial of the Fox*", in which the fox is clearly guilty, and is fairly executed.

"*The Trial of the Fox*" is a highly stylised fable in which literary tradition is called upon, for example in the listing of mythical beasts who attend the proceedings. The relevant core of

31 *l.1229.*

the story is that the fox, having been sent on an errand by the court, breaks the peace proclaimed by the king, and is tried and convicted for his crime.

The fable begins by illustrating the fox's glee at the personal advancement he may expect from his father's death. In this way, it is made quite clear from the first that this fox has no discernable virtues, and is every bit as sinful as his father.

The court, on the other hand, is presented as honourable throughout. The noble unicorn calls the animals to assemble for the court, which is to be presided over by the regal lion. Once the impressive array of mythical, exotic and common beasts have appeared, and all are bowed before the lion, then the lion speaks plainly of his mercy, which he promises to exercise over all of them so long as they continue to show proper respect for his might.

This provides an indication of Henryson's opinion of the role appropriate to the king, as well as of his attitude to the justice of the royal court. He appears to favour royal omnipotence, so long as this power is tempered with mercy. This is a lesson which he again teaches in the later tale, "*The Lion and the Mouse*".

In further confirmation of the moral bankruptcy of the fox, Henryson then describes how he skulks through the crowd of beasts, attempting to hide himself. He recognises his many crimes and believes that he cannot possibly escape a harsh judgement, but is afraid to stay away from the court, as this, too, bears a penalty. Although he is, in his own opinion, in an impossible position, his predicament is clearly seen to be wholly of his own making.

Nevertheless, when the lion finally does turn his attention to the fox, it is to send him on an errand, not to persecute him for his crimes.

After some prevarication, the fox eventually sets off in the company of the wolf to carry out the lion's errand. It is while undertaking this task that he finds himself alone in the presence of some lambs, and takes the opportunity to violate the king's peace by killing and eating one of them. Even his self-proclaimed fear of the lion's wrath cannot overcome his villainous nature.

The next step, naturally, is for the fox to be brought to justice. The poor sheep whose lamb has been killed appears unafraid before the king, and states her case. Evidence - the bloody muzzle of the fox - is examined, and a judgement is made. Although very little legal terminology is used in the development of this course of action, proceedings are seen by the reader or listener to take a logical course, as he would expect them to. Justice is clearly seen to have been served.

In the course of this tale, in contrast to the tale of "*The Sheep and the Dog*" above in which the focus was far narrower, the relevant law is proclaimed, the villain is seen to break that law, and judgement follows. The reader or listener to the tale is able to follow the whole process in person. This clearly obviates the need for greater legal detail than the smattering provided.

It is important to take into account the fact that the legal process is by no means the primary focus of the tale. The tale carries numerous messages, among them that justice will always prevail in the end, that appearances - the wolf's red cap - are not to be relied upon, and the somewhat strained message of the *Moralitas* stating that the pious man should avoid sensuality and the attraction of the world.

Another interpretation is also possible. Henryson makes it clear in this and in other tales that he believes in the overriding authority of royalty. As such, he would not presume to criticise the king's justice. Similarly, Divine justice cannot be questioned by mortal man. In this way, the court of the lion may well be likened to that of God, to which all are called, and where justice is tempered with mercy. This parallel is strengthened by the lion's initial speech that he will exercise benevolence towards each creature which prostrates itself to him, and shows him the respect which is his due. This echoes strongly the concept of the fear of God.

It can be seen in this fable how the concept of the royal court has been used to forward a number of didactic ends. It teaches the many lessons specified above, placing them within a human context, and, more specifically, within a frame of reference which would have been respected without question by Henryson's contemporaries. Legal reference in this tale, carries no message which is designed specifically for legal practitioners. Rather the legal framework is used to carry a far wider framework of instruction.

The Presentation of Aesop in "*The Lion and the Mouse*"

Although Henryson has mentioned his indebtedness to Aesop throughout the *Fables*, it is not until the seventh tale that he presents Aesop in person. This fable contains a Prologue in which the narrator himself appears, speaking of himself in the first person. The narrator is fortunate enough to meet the famous Aesop while sleeping under a hedge of hawthorn.

The narrator of the fables takes a walk into the country on a beautiful spring morning. The description of radiant nature and the gentle season contrasts strongly with the miserable season in which we have just left the newly-shorn sheep[32] of the previous tale. In this peaceful setting, the reader is led to expect an idyllic tale such as has not yet been encountered in the course of the *Fables*, a fable of peace, and of harmony between the elements of nature.

Henryson's presentation of Aesop as a noble figure in fine clothing is in line with this expectation. This presentation diverges widely from the convention of the time. Henryson's Aesop is not a disfigured slave whose gift for storytelling compensates for his lack of physical stature and social position. Instead, he is well built with awe-inspiring features. His great age is represented by his white beard. He is well, and richly, dressed, and carries the tools of his trade:

32 "*The Sheep and the Dog*".

"Ane Roll off paper in his hand he bair;
Ane swannis pen stikand under his eir;
Ane Inkhorne, with ane prettie gilt Pennair,
Ane bag off silk, all at his belt can beir;"

(ll.1356-1359.)

In addition to his good physical appearance, Aesop declares himself to be "*off gentill blude*"[33], a Roman of some education, particularly in Civil Law. None of this is in line with the tradition of the eloquent slave which had developed around Aesop.

This glorious presentation of the handsome, gentle scholar looks forward to Henryson's confirmation of the value of the study of Physiognomy which appears in "*The Paddock and the Mouse*". Henryson may feel that Aesop's physical imperfections need not follow him beyond death, and that in heaven, his physical appearance might be modified to reflect his true nature. In the light of the biographical adaptations which he makes, however, this interpretation seems unlikely. It is far more probable that Henryson recognises the value of a physical appearance and personal history which correspond with the wisdom traditionally attributed to Aesop, in the establishment of a consistent mood for the presentation of Aesop's own fable.

In addition to furthering the desired mood, by linking Aesop with the aristocracy and the educated classes, Henryson is providing an example of the ideal state for this section of society. He presents a picture in which the powerful need not be corrupt, and in which they

33 *l.1370.*

can exercise wisdom and reason for the benefit of others, an aspiration which Aesop achieves through his teaching of important moral lessons through simple tales. This purpose is directly in line with the purpose of the tale of "*The Lion and the Mouse*" in which the lion learns that even the powerful may come to value the loyalty of the weak, and that it is worthwhile to foster this loyalty through just but merciful government.

Despite the glorious day and the lighthearted mood of the narrator, this tale does contain a note of pessimism. Aesop is quoted as feeling that "*now my taillis may lyttil succour mak*"[34] because of the level of degeneration of spirituality in the world.

The ten lines in which Aesop laments the state of sinfulness into which the world has fallen are crucial to this tale. They fall between the narrator's description of perfect nature in which all the parts of God's creation are in harmony and where man can be happy, and the world of the fable where a humble mouse can persuade the mighty lion to exercise mercy upon those over whom he has power of life or death, and where reason may prevail to the advantage of all. Aesop's ten-line lament pulls the reader sharply back to reality, presenting a view of the actual world, possibly a little pessimistic but not entirely inaccurate. It is made clear that the imaginary world of the fable is to be striven for among men. The presentation of nature in accord in the real world serves to indicate that the attainment of a society of reason among men is not unattainable, no matter how unlikely it may seem.

34 *l.1397.*

Finally, the appearance of Aesop, the accredited originator of all the fables of the work, lends a special credibility to this central tale. Special attention is drawn to its portrayal of an idyllic society in which the authority of kingship is inviolate, and mercy prevails.

The Use of Humour and other means of Entertainment in "*The Paddock and the Mouse*"

The use of humour would be easier to discuss with reference to the earlier, less sombre tales of this collection, in which it features more prominently. Nevertheless, it is perhaps important to note that it remains important enough to Henryson that his tales hold the interest of the lay reader, that he includes humour and other means of entertainment in even the darker fables of the latter part of his work.

Much of the humour in this tale is achieved through the use of incongruity or inappropriateness. The first example of incongruity is to be found in the image of a mouse riding on a horse. This mode of transport would be totally out of place for a mouse. It is likely that a horse would pose her at least as great a danger as the frog. Nevertheless, her lack of a horse is mentioned as though her possession of one would have been quite appropriate to her.

This technique of incongruity is continued in the mouse's declaration to the frog that there is no mariner on the river, and that she would not have the wherewithal to pay for passage if there were one. The question arises as to whether a boatman would notice the presence of a tiny mouse on his vessel at all. It is even less likely that if he did spot her, he would ask

her to pay passage, being far more likely to simply chase her off, or, less pleasantly, to step on her.

These examples are representative of Henryson's continued application of human attributes to his animal characters. However, here we do not have a wolf in a grey cowl, or a fox exercising guile in order to deceive a wolf for his own material advantage[35]. In these examples, the similarity between certain human characteristics and the corresponding wolf and fox characteristics is being exploited. In the case of the mouse, however, the parallels are made completely inappropriate by the sheer lack of size of the mouse. She is being compared to man in the first instance on the purely physical level of being able to maintain control over so large a beast as a horse, and in the second instance, on the likelihood of her being noticed while proffering vastly disproportionate coins to a mariner in order to obtain passage on his boat. These images serve to provide humorous diversion far more than they could possibly serve to allow identification of the mouse with human weakness.

Inappropriateness, too, is used to humorous advantage. The mouse's distress in finding that she is unable to cross the river is totally disproportionate to the soon-disclosed reason for which she is seeking to do so. The oath "*For Goddis lufe*"[36] is totally out of proportion to the situation. It becomes clear already from this point in the tale that the mouse will allow her

35 *"The Fox and the Wolf" and " The Fox, Wolf and Cadger" respectively.*

36 *l.2785.*

"hunger", or more accurately, her desire for fine foods, to hold sway over her better judgement. It is human recognition of this fact, and perhaps human nervousness provoked by the familiarity of her attitude, which gives rise to the humour here. This humorous insert serves not only the purpose of maintaining the interest of the reader/listener, but serves also to draw attention to a specific part of the lesson of this fable - the ease with which one may allow greed to dominate actions when the use of restraint and common sense would serve both the physical and the spiritual man far better.

There are many other devices within the course of this fable which may be seen to fulfil the requirement of providing entertainment. Among these is the use of classical reference, or references to various branches of contemporary science. This method is used throughout the *Fables* as a means of holding the interest of the more intellectual part of the audience, as well as stimulating the imagination of the remainder. An example of this is to be found in the inclusion of astrological detail in the tale of "*The Fox and the Wolf*". Such information would have been available to the lettered classes, but would have been less familiar to the illiterate members of Henryson's audience. The wealthy would recognise the references, and follow the arguments with interest, while the poorer people with a lesser degree of education would simply enjoy the presentation of this new and exciting information.

In the present example, however, the reference is to the study of Physiognomy as a means of determining character. As such, it would also be known in principle to Henryson's unlettered contemporaries, and would provide a familiar frame of reference for them, too. It is entertaining for the reader/listener to follow the argument between the mouse and the

frog, anticipating its outcome, and the consequences thereof. Given the reader's knowledge of the mouse's desperation to reach the other side of the river, he is likely to predict events accurately, at least as far as the intervention of the hitherto unmentioned kite. Provision for such anticipation, and for the concomitant gratification felt by the reader who predicts events correctly, is a particularly useful device for maintaining the interest of the reader.

Henryson exhibits a flair for the dramatic in this tale in his description of the battle between the mouse and the frog once they are in the water. There is a swiftness and vitality to the action. Henryson uses short phrases to increase the pace of the tale at this point: "*The mous vpwart, the paddok doun can pres;/ Quhyle to, quhyle fra, quhyle doukit vp agane*"[37]. For a brief moment, this struggle attains titanic proportions, only to be immediately and graphically reduced in scale by the intervention of the kite. Again, the purpose is not purely entertainment. The importance assumed by the struggle in the mind of the reader may be paralleled with the importance he attaches to his own struggle here on earth. It, too, seems as nothing when the reality of death is contemplated.

Despite the many additional purposes achieved by the devices for entertainment used in this fable, it is clear that the purpose of entertainment alone is, for Henryson, an important one. His reliance on entertainment as a means of holding the attention of his audience in order to teach his moral messages to them is discussed in great detail in his *Prologue*. His

37 *ll.2891-2892.*

conviction that this is an important device clearly does not lessen in the course of the *Fables*. The use of humour and of light-hearted or entertaining diversions is maintained throughout the work, even extending into the more depressing tales which conclude the *Fables*.

Henryson's use of the Moralitas in his *Fables*

There is a tremendous variation of tone, intent and presentation between the fables of this collection. Coming as they do from a variety of sources, there is also variety in the types of animals depicted. Nevertheless, all the fables have in common the use of a *Moralitas* in which they are explained, interpreted and expanded. In some cases, such as in the tale of "*The Sheep and the Dog*", the tale is continued into the *Moralitas*, either before or after the analysis of its moral lesson.

The *Moralitas's* themselves vary almost as much as do the fables. There are *Moralitas's* whose interpretation coincides with the expectations raised in the tale, and those which clash diametrically with what is expected by the reader[38]. *Moralitas's* may be long or short. Some *Moralitas's* carefully link each character of the tale to his corresponding representative in the real world, while others resort to proverbial wisdom to sharpen the thrust of their teachings. Whatever their format, however, the primary objective of the *Moralitas's* is reinforcement of the lessons of the fables to which they are appended. It is worthwhile to look at the way in which examples of the different types of *Moralitas* function.

38 *An example of the second of these has already been discussed with reference to the tale of "The Cok and the Jasp".*

The strained interpretation in the Moralitas of "The Trial of the Fox"

At the beginning of the *Moralitas* to this fable, Henryson repeats the familiar message that "*vndir ane fabill figurall / Sad sentence men may seik*"[39]. This may be a subtle indication to the reader that he should by now have determined for himself a serious meaning for the tale before proceeding to the *Moralitas*. Despite this encouragement, the *Moralitas* with which Henryson continues, although explaining the tale by likening each character to something else, is not likely to resemble whatever "*sad sentence*"[40] the reader may have sought out on his own.

In the discussion of this tale above, a simple interpretation has been suggested, in which the king is representative of God, and his court of the exercise of divine justice. Equally possible, and perhaps more probable, is an interpretation of the work as simply parallelling an actual royal court, in which the king behaves in an ideal manner, exercising mercy but at the same time punishing those who have earned punishment.

Henryson, however, chooses a completely different interpretation. It can be argued that at least the second of the possibilities above will been easily discerned by a diligent reader, that the other is, in the light of the substantiating quotation provided in the original discussion above, by no means obscure, and that because of these factors, the two need not

39 *ll.1099-1100.*

40 *l.1100.*

be further discussed. By abandoning them and opting for a less usual interpretation, Henryson is doubling the efficacy of his tale. He is able to provide, in the body of his text, a moral message for the reader who is prepared to interpret the tale for himself, and then to complement it with a different message overtly stated in his *Moralitas*.

The message which Henryson conveys in his *Moralitas* is far more spiritual than that gleaned from a literal understanding of the tale. It likens the lion to the world, and those prostrating themselves to him to those enslaved by desire for worldly things. The mare, presented in the tale as breaking the law through her absence, and showing improper respect for the king by assaulting his emissary, is now an example to us, representing men of contemplation who scorn the world. The wolf and the fox, working together under the auspices of the world, represent sensuality and temptation. The mare's hoof represents the thought of death which may cause man to "*brek sensualiteis heid*"[41], so causing temptation to flee. The allegory ends at this point, ignoring the roles of the sheep and her lamb, and the passing of judgement against the fox.

The unexpectedness of this *Moralitas*, as in the case of that of "*The Cok and the Jasp*", provides not only for the presentation of two lessons within a single tale. The surprise felt by the reader as he notes the unanticipated direction which the *Moralitas* is taking, serves to hold his attention more closely while he is reading it.

41 *l.1127.*

Although a reader will always be gratified if he should receive confirmation through a *Moralitas* that he has interpreted correctly the meaning of its fable, Henryson clearly feels that it is not necessary to provide this gratification after every tale. The *Moralitas* of the first of the tales was carefully designed to unbalance the reader, and dislodge any complacency he may have felt with regard to his interpretive skills. This effort would be wasted if the reader in question was then able to interpret each of the subsequent tales "correctly"[42]. In addition to the loss of the facility for multiple messages which Henryson has used so effectively in this instance, the *Moralitas's* would lose their ability to command the attention of the reader because of their very predictability.

Continuation of the fable in the Moralitas of "The Sheep and the Dog"

The *Moralitas* of this fable is interesting in that although it begins with the expected analysis of the tale, it soon moves on from this to a monologue by one of the characters of the tale.

The analysis undertaken in the first three stanzas of the *Moralitas* assumes the familiar technique of drawing parallels between certain of the fable characters, and their existing counterparts. As is to be expected from the content of the tale, this paralleling deals with representatives of the legal profession, and the abuses which prevail among them.

42 *There is generally more that one interpretation to be derived from each fable, each with its own moral value.*

However, in the fourth stanza, the narrator declines to explain the significance of the fox[43] and the kite. This refusal recalls the lines within the tale in which the narrator exhorted those within the legal profession to draw their own conclusions concerning the fairness of the judgement.

Instead of continuing the allegory, the narrator reintroduces the sheep, whom he has spotted by chance. The sheep laments his position, a position made the more pathetic by the revelation that the events of the tale have unfolded in the depths of winter. Unable to receive justice on earth, the sheep makes his moan to God requesting His justice.

In his lament, the sheep lists the injustices which he sees in the world, resulting from "*this cursit syn of couetice*"[44]. The bitterness of the piteous sheep is perfectly in tune with what he has experienced. He has suffered tremendously, with no prospect of redress, and is justifiably filled with despair. This is important in that it allows for far more emotive language, and a far greater degree of antipathy toward the offenders than would be appropriate in the narrator of the tale. Henryson is able to state his case far more strongly by placing it in the mouth of the sheep.

43 *Whom he links with the foxes of the earlier tales.*

44 *l.1300.*

Despite its initial bitterness towards God, however, the sheep ends by affirming its faith by praying for a better lot in heaven. Even as Henryson allows the sheep to speak more strongly than he could, he is unable to allow it to turn completely from God in what is, with regard to the particular lessons it attempts to teach, a religious work.

The use of allegory in the interpretation of "The Fox, Wolf and Cadger"

The *Moralitas* of this tale is reasonably short, particularly when contrasted with the length of the tale itself. Nevertheless, its explanatory purpose is served within the confines of the space allotted to it.

In what has become a regular insert, if varied with regard to language, Henryson again tells the reader that "*This taill is myngit with moralitie*"[45]. Thereafter follows the interpretation of the tale according to the allegorical role of each of its major characters. The fox represents the world, the wolf parallels man, and the cadger takes the role of death, who comes to all living things. All of this information is imparted succinctly in the course of a single stanza. Four lines later, the herring is likened to gold, so completing the characterisation of the elements of the allegory fairly early in the *Moralitas*.

45 *l.2203.*

The narrator explains in the remainder of his *Moralitas* how the elements of his allegory function together to bring about the downfall of the man seduced by gold. At the same time he includes asides which provide a wider canvas for the operation of greed and the desire for worldly wealth. He says "*Richt swa the gold garris Landis and Cieteis / With weir be waistit*"[46], paralleling the sacking of cities with the misfortune suffered by the wolf in that both are caused by love of profit.

He further discusses the unexpectedness with which death approaches from behind, again likening it to the events of the fable, in which the cadger was able to approach the unwary wolf with ease, simply because the wolf was too concerned with personal gain to anticipate the obvious danger of his plan.

The use of allegory in the interpretation of fables allows both for close interpretation of the events, and for more unusual interpretations such as that of "*The Trial of the Fox*". Allegorical interpretation allows for a high degree of precision in that every detail is likened to one or more comparable situations which are familiar to the reader/ listener.

The *Moralitas* can in most cases be seen as a repetition of the tale to which it is appended. It may also include internal repetition through the comparison of the events of the tale to more than one alternative situation. This degree of repetition makes misinterpretation of

46 *ll.2215-2216.*

the *Moralitas* extremely unlikely. The lesson embodied in it is clearly conveyed. Allegory is therefore a valuable tool in the teaching of moral lessons through the *Moralitas's* of the *Fables*. This may explain Henryson's preference for allegory over a less structured discussion of the foregoing tale.

Proverbial Wisdom in the Moralitas of "The Wolf and the Wether"

In the short *Moralitas* of this tale, Henryson uses proverbial wisdom in his explanation of what may be learned from the fable. This does not mean, however, that his fondness for allegorical interpretation is overridden. Although his discussion does not follow the pattern of a strict allegorical interpretation in which a = b and c = d, the words "*Esope .../Wrait this parabole*"[47] leave the reader in no doubt that it remains an allegory.

Henryson goes on to speak of the presumption sometimes exhibited by poor men who happen to be dressed in fine clothing. This is clearly, although never overtly, paralleled with the weak sheep in its ferocious costume. An understanding of this is assumed in order to allow the discussion to flow freely from the first without the need for laborious explanation.

In the discussion which follows, proverbial sayings are used in order to further the argument. Henryson fortifies his claims regarding the dangers of false pride by quoting an ancient

47 *ll.2588-2589.*

proverb: "*Bewar in welth, for hall benkis ar rycht slidder*"[48]. He counsels that all men should know their proper station in life, his words "*knaw thame self*"[49] also smacking of the proverbial.

It can clearly be seen, then, that Henryson does not abandon the use of allegory in the interpretation of his tales, even in cases where this allegory is not overtly explained in Henryson's favoured step-by-step fashion. He is, however, not averse to complementing allegorical interpretation with the use of other devices such as the proverbial wisdom used here.

By using a traditional, and presumably ancient, saying to fortify his argument, Henryson is lending further credibility to his message. In the same way as the classical tradition of the fable genre lends credibility to works composed using this format, so the use of proverbs which have survived the ages lends credence to the message they support.

3.2 The "Moral Fables" Viewed as a Single Work

For the purposes of this discussion, it is assumed that the order of the *Fables* proposed by Fox, and other modern commentators is correct[50], and that the patterns which exist as a

48 *l.2608.*

49 *l.2610.*

50 *See Fox's discussions of the ordering of the Fables (Fox, pp.lxxv-lxxxi).*

result of this ordering are therefore intentional. This discussion depends for the delineation of the three types of symmetry on the first part of Gopen's subsection "The Significance of the Structure"[51].

Symmetry of source

The symmetry most apparent to the student of literature, although probably not to the lay reader, is that of source. In his *Prologue*, Henryson names Aesop as the composer of all the fables in his collection. He further attributes almost every fable to Aesop at some point within either the tale itself or in its *Moralitas*. Nevertheless, he was no doubt aware that not all of the fables are in fact Aesopic. Many, such as the tale of "*The Fox, Wolf and Husbandman*", in which Aesop is specifically cited as source[52], are in fact Reynardian in origin.

Gopen sets out the synthetic symmetry in tabular form as follows[53]:

51 *Gopen, pp.17-20.*

52 *"as Esope can declair", l.2231.*

53 *Although this table is take directly from Gopen, I have amended the titles of the fables to reflect those used by Fox, and to maintain consistency within this essay.*

The Synthetic Symmetry

Aesopic:	1) The Cock and the Jasp
	2) The Two Mice
Reynardian:	3) The Cock and the Fox
	4) The Fox and the Wolf
	5) The Trial of the Fox
Aesopic:	6) The Sheep and the Dog
	7) The Lion and the Mouse
	8) The Preaching of the Swallow
Reynardian:	9) The Fox, Wolf and Cadger
	10) The Fox, Wolf and Farmer
	11) The Wolf and the Wether
Aesopic:	12) The Wolf and the Lamb
	13) The Paddock and the Mouse[54]

This symmetry is synthetic in that it is imposed on the work from the outside, rather than intrinsic to it. Gopen discusses the importance which medieval poets attached to structure, and to the "building" of literary works. He states that "the Scots in particular refer to their poets as 'makars'"[55]. It is therefore important not to ignore the significance of this structural arrangement, however unimportant it may seem.

The existence of this symmetry of source, although apparently not serving any didactic purpose in itself, functions as an indicator that structural devices exist within the work. Its division of the work into five groups, with a central group of Aesopic, and two rings of first Reynardian and then Aesopic fables, suggests the possibility of a concentric design to the work. This is a clue which the reader should follow up as he studies the *Fables* more deeply.

54 *Gopen, p.17.*

55 *Gopen, p.18.*

Climactic Symmetry

The second symmetry to be discussed is what Gopen refers to as the climactic symmetry. Again, the focus is on the centre of the work. The central tale, that of "*The Lion and the Mouse*" is interesting in that it is not only central according to the numbering of the tales, which are not, after all, of equal length, but also in that it is preceded and succeeded by precisely 200 stanzas[56]. It is the precise physical centre of the work.

The climactic symmetry, which takes the form of a build-up towards the central tale, and a tapering off thereafter as the end of the work approaches, is discernible by the reader. It is in fact necessary for a good interpretation of the work in its entirety that the reader be aware of this climactic pattern.

By following this pattern from tale to tale, it is possible to discern a clear change of mood as the *Fables* progress. The first tales are relatively lighthearted, while the final ones are far more pessimistic. This change in mood does not come about suddenly. It is a gradual process which takes place step by step with each new fable. An adequate discussion of the progression, as it is reflected in the increasing misfortune of the good, and increasing fortune of the evil characters is to be found in Gopen[57].

56 *Gopen, p.18, attributed by him to Roerecke.*

57 *Gopen, p.19.*

What is noteworthy in the progression, however, is that the central fable seems to step out of the pattern. It is preceded by the tale of "*The Sheep and the Dog*", by far the gloomiest of the early fables. This is the fable in which the "good" character, the sheep, questions the presence of God in the world. This exhortation to God introduces to the *Fables* a new note of pessimism. The sheep feels that God is asleep, and no longer active in the world. The fable closes with a heart-rending picture of the naked sheep braving a harsh and barren winter.

The bleak close to the sixth fable serves to emphasise the glory of nature as it is presented at the beginning of the seventh. There has been a sharp change in focus at this point.

The ability of this fable to step out of the logical progression as it has unfolded so far is enhanced by its presentation as traditional dream-vision, experienced by the narrator. At the same time, it introduces Aesop, albeit as a clearly imaginary character, as the teller of the tale, thus lending it special significance in the mind of the reader.

Although a Utopian insert into the growing gloom of the *Fables*, this tale does not completely escape commentary on the state of degeneration in human society. Although he is eventually persuaded by the narrator to tell a moral tale, Aesop is hesitant because he feels that there is little to be gained by moral tales in a society where "*haly preiching*" is ignored. The reader is drawn sharply back to reality at this point, and is urged to study the tale closely for moral value, rather than tossing it aside as Aesop anticipates.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the central stanza of this tale, and therefore of the entire collection, deals with the tempering of justice with mercy, and presents the argument that justice without mercy is cruelty. This message, central to the *Fables* purely in the physical sense, may also be central with regard to the didactic intent of the collection. It cannot be denied that it is a recurring theme dealt with in several fables and *Moralitas's*. Although by no means definitive, this is a possibility well worth considering.

The brief interlude of social harmony provided by the tale of "*The Lion and the Mouse*" is soon brought to an end by the tragedy of the tale of "*The Preaching of the Swallow*". Although this tale, too, begins amidst the beauty of spring, it ends with the slaughter of the foolish birds in the depths of winter. The decline in hope already evidenced in the first half of the *Fables* now continues unchecked in the second part.

This decline in fortune among the good characters, and the ascendancy of the evil characters, may be seen to parallel what Henryson is perceiving, or at least commenting on, in society. This possibility, together with the possible significance of the central stanza shifts the emphasis of the collection from that of moral correction of the individual, to political commentary on society as a whole.

It is indeed arguable that this is the intention of the *Fables*. This understanding of the *Fables* would seem to suggest that the collapse of order in society during the fifteenth century in Scotland has led to greater and greater corruption among those in power, particularly in legal and ecclesiastical circles. This decline has led to greater and greater suffering by those

who have no power, hence the increased suffering of such gentle creatures as the sheep and mice of the *Fables*, contrasted with the increased success of the stronger animals.

It is important to note, however, that whatever political commentary exists in the *Fables*, it is tempered by the continued urging for moral behaviour in the individual. Social injustice is to be withstood purely by moral steadfastness. Although political institutions may be criticised, often sharply, there are constant reminders that they are still to be obeyed - the tale of the judgement against the sheep by the corrupt court is both preceded and succeeded by tales incorporating courts or judges whose judgements are just. Although Henryson does not balk at strong criticism of corrupt institutions, his emphasis is on improving one's lot in the next world if such improvement cannot be acheived in the present.

Concentric Symmetry

This symmetry, too, revolves around the central tale. It draws parallels between fables six and eight, five and nine, four and ten, three and eleven, two and twelve, and one and thirteen, thus creating a symmetry which radiates out from the central tale, tale seven. Gopen discusses this symmetry in greater detail, and with the aid of a table[58].

This symmetry is also important for the didactic intent of the work in that it can be used to re-evaluate each fable except the central one in the light of what is being said in its

58 *Gopen, pp.19-20.*

counterpart. This can be illustrated by a closer examination of the tales of "*The Cock and the Fox*" and "*The Wolf and the Wether*".

The parallels between these tales are readily apparent. In both instances, the confrontation is between a predator, here fox and wolf, and a more docile farm animal, in these cases cock and ram. In each fable, the farm animal is unafraid of the predator, one because he has been tricked into complacency, and the other because he feels safe in his own trickery. In both cases, the foolishness of the farm animal is responsible for his predicament.

There are, of course, equally obvious differences. The cock, although captured by the fox, is able to escape his captor through a clever trick, while the wether is killed by the wolf after being caught out in a trick. The fox, although not caught, is at least scared by the hounds while the wolf seemingly gets away with the killing of the sheep.

Arguably, the disparate outcomes of the tales, the escape of the cock and the death of the sheep, result more from their positions in the progression towards greater pessimism which has been recognised. It is unlikely, however, that Henryson would have included both types of symmetry unless he intended to use each to advantage. It is plain that there is very little in the fables which is not used to the fullest advantage, despite the initial appearance of long-windedness which might arise from a comparison between Henryson's fables and those of his sources.

Both of these tales hold warnings for the common man in his dealings with his more corrupt neighbours. In the first, the warning is that he should not be gullible, or endanger himself through the deceit of others. In the second, he is warned against the practice of trickery himself, and the dangers of believing his own falsehood. Through the relative positioning of the fables, it is implied that these two possibilities are opposite sides of the same coin.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant characteristics of Henryson's style in the fables is that his text is never at any time serving only one purpose. While using an example to teach against a particular human failing, or the corruption of a particular human institution, he will at the same time be providing entertainment in order to hold the interest of his audience; or including asides which may provoke a tangential train of thought illustrating the wrongness of a completely different kind of behaviour; or providing insights into many contemporary sciences - valuable both to his intended audience whose appetite for education may be whetted by it, and to the modern reader who is thankful for every snippet of information he can glean through the literature of the time.

Nevertheless, throughout the work, these diverse rhetorical paths are all followed with one primary objective in mind, and that is the education of the audience with regard to moral living. There is little, if anything at all, within the scope of the *Fables* which does not in some way, no matter what its other functions, serve that one primary end. Even the political commentary, which may be regarded as a parallel, but distinctly separate, didactic direction, is in fact used to urge man against the kinds of injustices practised by the type of people who occupy offices of power, and to defend themselves by moral living so that they may thrive in the next life if not in this one.

In short, it should be clear that, although the *Fables* contain far more material than their moralistic predecessors, they competently incorporate the messages propounded by those

predecessors while at the same time teaching further, and often more complex lessons in such a way as to make full and exhaustive use of all the additional space utilised.

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