

Henryson's The Moral Fables of Aesop are a meditation on the nature of wisdom. His art is to extract this from the potentially dreary form of the beast fable. "The Taill of Schir Chantecleir and the Foxe" is a seemingly straightforward example of the type with a well known alternative telling in "The Nun's Priest's Tale" by Chaucer. Since for good or ill, medieval literature is approached via Chaucer and his shadow crosses Henryson criticism particularly, I will use a comparison of their approaches to their source tale to highlight the Scottish poet's art, humour and ultimate subversion of the fable genre.

The Moral Fables, despite the Aesopian appellation, are an amalgam of Reynardian and Aesopian fables. Gopen notes the structure of the work as a 2:3:3:3:2 progression of alternating sets of tales from the Aesop and Reynardian corpus's respectively. "Chanticleere" is of course a fox story, ultimately deriving from sources close to Reinart Fuchs and Roman de Renart. (Macdonald, "Henryson and Chaucer" 453) Henryson's dependence on Chaucer is presumed because "Chanticleere" and the "Nun's Priest's Tale" are the first versions to include several details including the widow, a more complicated ruse by the fox, praise of the cock's beauty and extended digressions. (Macdonald, "Henryson and Chaucer" 452) This opinion is perhaps too reliant on suggestions of Henryson's debt to Chaucer in general, especially in his Testament of Cressid, and hurdles the "complex nature of medieval fabulary traditions" (Fradenburg 74) and the five other Reynard stories which suggest Henryson had access to a large tradition of such tales from which to choose.

Whether Henryson was using like materials, or the "Nun's Priest's Tale" itself, the structure of the two poems illustrates where to look for the individual poet's original contributions.

Henryson	Chaucer
Fox fools Chanticleere	Chanticleere's Dream and dispute with Pertolote
Hen's Debate	Fox fools Chanticleere
Chanticleere fools fox	Chanticleere fools fox
Moral	Moral

In the shared portion of the tale the central event is the fox fooling Chanticleere. Henryson pushes the comic invention beyond Chaucer in his handling of the core joke of the tale. While Chaucer has the fox praising the Cock's singing and hints at his parents having given the fox "greet ese"(3297) in his den, Henryson ups the ante with gruesome irony.

Your father full oft fillit hes my wame,
 And send me meit ffra midding to the muris.
 And at his end I did my besie curis,
 To hald his hied, and gif him drinkis warme,
 Syne at last the Sweit swealt in my arme. (441-445)

Having made a virtue of being in at the kill he even claims to have sung a religious service for the unfortunate bird. Henryson also stretches the tension and ridicule one notch further than Chaucer in the main ruse, giving the proud bird a further task to perform before the trap is sprung.

What the poets do not share is the nature of the digressions. In Chaucer's poem Chanticleere is troubled by dreams, then troubled by Pertelote for his cowardice. The rooster then gives a mock heroic defence of his fears with authority upon authority listed to reinforce his argument before meekly submitting behind his mistranslated "*Mulier est hominis confusio*" (3164) and the joy of sharing a narrow perch with Pertelote. The humour is in the elevated style being

applied to barnyard folk reinforces the misplaced pride upon which the original and obvious moral of the tale depends, as well as allowing the Nun's Priest to comment unfavourably upon women.

The vignette of the cock being abused by a hen is transformed by Henryson into a remarkable exchange between the three hens Pertok, Sprutok and Toppock. Pertok attempts a high style in her lament for her doomed husband. Murtagh suggests that this indicates Henryson had learned Chaucer's technique for the mock -heroic but "did not follow his practice consistently." (414) Rather, I suspect Henryson knew what he was doing and wished to heighten the reality by puncturing the elevated style just as it gets started. The eulogy's pretensions sag when Pertok lets slip caveats on the prowess of Chanticleere, and are demolished by Sprutock's denigration of his character and direct debunking of his sexual powers, along with Pertok's ready recanting. Toppock's suggestion of righteous judgment for what appears completely opposite flaws, the wasted cockerel now accused as the lecher and adulterer, completes Chanticleere's betrayal by his consorts. The speed and inconsistency of the dismissal suggests the fabulist is out of sympathy with the hens, yet the tone of the tale's moral is not at all dissimilar in its total denunciation of Chanteclere's follies. In the tale Chanteclere receives "sum gude Spirit inspyrit"(558) and lives. In the context of the whole work others aren't so lucky. The tale of "The Wolf and the Wether" has been paired with "Chanticleere" on structural grounds (Gopen 50) and because the sin of pride is involved. In this tale however, the wether's pride does leads to its death, although it could be argued that it at least had a noble cause.

Henryson's additions to a simple fable and moral cast doubt on the degree of truth to which the moral is entitled. Discrepancies between tale and moral have been explored in other tales where the problem is more obvious.(Kratzmann 65) The first tale has the sensible and well spoken Cock who realises his limitations

and is happy with them, represented as a fool in the moral. If the Cock should have aspired for higher learning and wisdom, then what of the country mouse who is wise for being content with her lot. The wether too is in trouble for overreaching itself, the crime which the Cock avoids by his rejection of the jasp. As Benson suggests, “the moralites alert us to the moral seriousness of the Fables but they do not themselves entirely contain it, for Henryson is no dispenser of easy platitudes.” (217)

We are enjoined to “seik the Jasp”(161) or wisdom in Henryson’s poetry but what is found is ambiguous, contradictory and, like life, unfair. By creating tension between his fables and his morals, Henryson is playing in the gaps between proverbial commonplaces which link moral correctness to good fortune, and the experience of life which must qualify this. This is not, as has been suggested, foisting a “modern despair” (Benson 217) upon Henryson; indeed there are ancient sources for this kind of thought abounding within the extensive biblical wisdom tradition. Henryson meditating on wisdom and fortune might agree with Proverbs 1:32.

For the errors of the ignorant lead to their own death,
And the complacency of fools works their own ruin;

But he would baulk at the complacency of 1:33

But whoever listens to me [ie wisdom] may live secure,
he will have quiet, fearing no mischaunce.

Henryson’s outlook is more in tune with the wisdom strain found in Ecclesiastes and Job than the glib proverbial wisdom with which the likes of Toppock will find character flaws to explain someone’s misfortune. The work contains echoes and allusions which suggest the use of this form of wisdom tradition to guide to his interpretation of the fables. He would doubtless have agreed with Quoheleth that:

More is to be had from wisdom than from folly, as from
light than from darkness; this, of course, I see:

The wise man sees ahead,
the fool walks in the dark.
No doubt! But I know, too, that one fate awaits them both.
(Eccles. 2:13-4)

In the prologue the poet speaks of man's animal nature in a passage echoing Ecclesiastes.

Na mervell is, ane man be lyke ane beist,
Quilke lufis ay carnall and foull delyte...

Syne in the mynd sa fast is Radicate,
That he in brutal beist is transformate. (50-1, 55-6)

I also thought that mankind behaves like this so that God
may show them up for what they are, and expose them for
the brute beasts they are to each other. (Eccles. 3:18)

Job's difficulties with a hypothetical trial where he is innocent but fears tyranny that "blindfolds the judges" (9:24) and calls on God to pass judgment on him (13:22) are echoed in miniature in "The Sheep and the Dog" with the innocent sheep reacting to the trial's injustice with, "Lord God, why sleep You so long? / Awake, and pass judgment on my cause." (187-8)

Henryson is a master of detail and realism and his changes to the sources for "Chanticleer" enhance our enjoyment of the jokes and add the earthy humour of the hens debate. While he explicitly rejects the light touch of Chaucer's mock-heroic tale, he achieves a greater depth by his additions within the tale undermining the tone of the moral, and by its placement in a selection of tales where there is no consistency in the fates of the perpetrators of like crimes. He has achieved what the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes tried to do in response to the oversimplistic worldview of Proverbs, by reinventing his simple fables and making them question the assumptions of pious and judgmental attitudes.

Works Consulted

- Benson, C. David. "O Moral Henryson." Fifteenth Century Studies: Recent Essays. Ed. Robert F. Yeager. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1984. 215-35.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Riverside Chaucer. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Oxford: Oxford U P, 1987.
- Clark, George. "Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transformed." ELH 43 (1976): 1-18.
- Fox, Denton. "Henryson's 'Fables'." ELH 29 (1962): 337-56.
- Fradenburg, Louise O. "Henryson Scholarship: The Recent Decades." Fifteenth Century Studies: Recent Essays. Ed. Robert F. Yeager. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1984. 65-92.
- Gopen, George, D. "The Essential Seriousness of Robert Henryson's Moral Fables: A Study in Structure." Studies in Philology 82 (1985): 42-59.
- Gray, Douglas. Robert Henryson. Leiden: Brill, 1979.
- Greentree, Rosemary. Reader, Teller and Teacher: The Narrator in Robert Henryson's Moral Fables. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993.
- Henryson, Robert. The Moral Fables of Aesop. Ed. George D. Gopen. Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1987.
- Jerusalem Bible. Ed. Alexander Jones. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966.
- Kindrick, Robert L. Robert Henryson. Boston: Twayne, 1979.
- Kratzmann, Gregory. "Henryson's 'Fables': 'the subtle dyte of poetry'." Studies in Scottish Literature 20 (1985): 49-70.
- Macdonald, Donald. "Chaucer's influence on Henryson's 'Fables': The Use of Proverbs and Sententiae." Medium Aevium 39 (1970): 21-7.
- Macdonald, Donald. "Henryson and Chaucer: Cock and Fox." Texas Studies in Language and Literature 8 (1966-7): 451-61.

MacQueen, John. Robert Henryson: A Study of the Major Narrative Poems.

London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1967.

Murtaugh, Daniel M. "Henryson's Animals." Texas Studies in Literature and

Language 14 (1972-3): 405-21.