

R

eynard

the Fox

The Triumph of the Individual in a Beast Epic

Reynard the Fox (Van den vos reynaerde) was written around 1260 by a certain Willem, part of it being an extremely free version of a French tale. Around 1400 this text was reworked and provided with a sequel, under the title *Reynard's History* (Reynaerts historie). Scholars refer to these as *Reynard I* and *Reynard II* respectively.

Reynard is charged before King Noble's court with the most villainous crimes. First Bruin the bear and then Tybert the tomcat are sent to bring him before the court, but he is able to fool both of them with the prospect of an irresistible feast. They fall into the trap and barely escape with their lives. Reynard does finally accompany his nephew Grimbart to court. He is sentenced to death, but with the noose already round his neck he succeeds in deceiving the King and Queen with a tale of conspiracy and buried treasure. As a result he goes free, while his opponents are severely punished. *Reynard II* goes through the whole case again, expanded with a number of new anecdotes and a sequel in which a duel between the fox and

Even if Reynard the Fox is portrayed as a ruthless villain, it is actually inconceivable that he should ever be regarded as anything but the waggish rogue who above all exposes a thoroughly rotten society rooted in authority and power. Does he not demonstrate the age-old truth that evil can only be countered with evil? One after another he makes a mockery of court procedures and conventions in high society. These are seen to be only a veneer on the meanest egotism. And all this is presented in the manner of a mordant parody of the courtly literature of the time, which, while entertaining the courtiers, also provides them with a firm historical basis for their lofty status.

Right at the start, in the prologue, all the typical conventions of chivalric literature are so thrown off balance that the listener realises straight away that he has entered the upside-down world of the animal kingdom. An author's name is submitted – Willem – presumably known to the public since it is said that he wrote *Madoc*. That text has not survived, but there are somewhat mysterious references to it in a number of other medieval texts. Apparently it is a Celtic tale about a seafaring prince, ruler of an equally topsy-turvy world of heresy and superstition. In the earliest surviving manuscript with this passage the copyist (or his master) has decided to remove this dubious commendation by scratching the ink off the parchment. In the space this left, he then wrote the anodyne '*vele bouke*' ('many books'), thus turning Willem into a garrulous hack instead of the consummate satirist who turns the established order upside down.

A little later in the prologue, a second author makes his appearance, a certain Aernout, who has apparently only described some of the fox's escapades. This provides Willem's main motive. He intends to complete the job, by searching out anew the '*vijte*' (the 'hagiography'!) of Reynard in French sources and presenting this in its entirety in (Middle) Dutch. Two authors in the given combination, French models, scholarly accuracy and the credibility of the life of a saint provide the accepted opening of chivalric literature. In addition the author must give his professional assurance that he has sacrificed endless nights' sleep for the sake of his irrepressible poetic drive.

the wolf Isengrim determines which of them is in the right. Reynard is victorious and his whole family is rehabilitated. These Middle Dutch versions of the animal stories involving the crafty fox stimulated the dissemination and popularity of Reynard texts throughout the world. William Caxton's 1481 English translation and the Low German translation of 1498 played a key role in this. Willem's text provides a judgment of traditional court-centred power as entertaining as it is sharp, exposing its basis of self-seeking greed. Such an approach strikes a chord with the new spirited attitude of the urban nobility and patricians, with its emphasis on the intelligence of the individual rather than the brute force of hereditary power. This infectious vision enabled the text to conquer the world.

(Tr. Tanis Guest)

As part of this parodied setting, we also have an attack, typical of this kind of epic, against dolts and other rustic trash, who will understand nothing of the tale and who had better stay away. Just so long as they never dream of messing up the text with their wrongheadedness. As a parting shot comes the lady of rank who has persuaded the authors to write this verse-tale full of obscene derision of life at the court. This lady 'accustomed to invest / All that she does with courtesy' inevitably becomes a voluptuous creature now that she stands four square in the ranks of a palace society that Willem exposes so ruthlessly.

Anyone familiar with medieval chivalric literature can guess what to expect after this prologue. Is that not reinforced straight away, by the little dog Cortois that can only yap in French? In his name and behaviour he is the embodiment of the brainless courtier full of arrogant airs. No sooner has the wolf Isengrim made his serious accusation – Reynard has raped his wife and blinded his children by urinating on them – than the lapdog comes up with the ridiculous complaint that the fox has stolen a sausage from him, his only possession. This sausage, it later transpires, actually belongs to Tybert the tomcat, who in his turn had stolen it from a miller. At the court everyone lies and cheats. And in this nasty world homosexuality too is in its element. This was considered in the Middle Ages to be a lascivious bent inspired by the devil, that could only be referred to in covert terms, as it is here. At the end of the tale another such pansy little dog appears, a certain Rine. Reynard is undoubtedly taking him off when he, lamenting, recalls him as 'Sweet Rine, Dear companion, nobly-bred harrier'.

However you look at it, the Flemish court could feel itself very exposed and attacked. In the thirteenth century it was entirely Gallicised and included in its patronage the poet of Arthurian tales, Chrétien de Troyes, who can be seen in both Cortois and Rine. But these are only incidental jabs that cannot conceal the fact that *Reynard the Fox* (Van den vos reynaerde) in reality attacks the whole ethos of the court, using the weapon of their own favourite literature. The only difference is that the knights and ladies are now animals which never abandon their profiteering natures although they have human names. Reynard is even introduced as if he were the hero of a chivalric tale: 'The fierce one with the ruddy beard' which reminds us of other epic characters such as Ferguut, 'the knight with the white shield' or Walewein, 'the father of ventures'.

Yet this scenario of a roguish fox exposing the nobility throws up a number of problems in view of its date of origin. The text must have been written about 1260 in the north east of Flanders, partly as a creative adaptation of a French text and thereafter continued in an equally individualistic way. At that time literature in the vernacular was normally patronised by the higher aristocracy, and just occasionally by the Church. Both these estates and their institutions, however, come in for such a drubbing that it is almost inconceivable that they sponsored such a fierce chastisement.

Another problem is that the fox at that time was by no means the crafty and also amusing animal that we like to see in him. For people in the Middle Ages he is a ruthless thief and murderer, very much feared in the countryside because of his limitless decimation of their poultry. The terms 'fierce' and 'roguish' denote these dreadful characteristics, and in the Middle Ages carry none of the crafty and enterprising connotations that we nowadays

associate with these attributes. It would have been quite impossible to identify oneself with such a blackguard, since even his revelations of the evil in others were as nothing compared with his own savagery. In the thirteenth century that would not have been its primary purpose. Does the text then only show that everyone starts acting bestially as soon as he loses control of his Christian thinking or whatever makes him human, distinguishing him from the animals? Inevitably then, the tale must address the theoretical structure of the three traditional estates on earth, whose representatives so often fail in practice: nobility, clergy, commoners. But the question remains: at whose expense and for which audience or readers was this text written in the first place? And above all, by what kind of a poet? And now it's high time to return to the work itself ...

Anton Damen's Reynard monument (1938) in Hulst (Zeeland Flanders).



At a court hearing the absent Reynard is accused of all kinds of crimes. Only his uncle, Grimbert the badger, speaks in his defence. During this very defence a cock and chickens appear with the funeral procession of the hen Coppe, whose head has just been bitten off by the accused. Bruin, the bear, is ordered to go and summon Reynard. Reynard lures him to a tree containing honey in which Bruin gets trapped, only to be thrashed by the furious villagers. Tybert the tomcat is then sent out on the same mission. He too is easily duped, this time with the promise of tasty mice in the pastor's house. But he likewise ends up in a trap and is roughly treated by the reverend's whole family. Like Bruin he only escapes by the skin of his teeth. The third one to fetch Reynard is Grimbert, and the fox does go along with this member of his family. On the way he confesses his misdeeds. At the court, further accusations ensue, after which he is sentenced to the gallows. With the noose round his neck he is allowed to make a public confession. He concocts a conspiracy against King Noble involving Bruin and Isengrim as well as his uncle Grimbert and his father. The huge treasure that financed the plot was stolen by him and buried in a secret place. As soon as Reynard reveals this, Noble and his wife become very interested. In exchange for the treasure, Reynard may go free. The others will set off to collect it, but without the fox since he must first do penance with a long pilgrimage. Bruin and Isengrim are severely punished. Reynard escapes to his family, where he murders his travelling companion Coward the hare to provide supper, saddling the ram, Beline, with the blame for that.

About one and a half centuries later, around 1400, this text was revised and extended with a sequel under the title of *Reynard's History* (Reynaerts historie). This longer version is really little more than a repetition, amplified with new anecdotes. Bruin and Isengrim are rehabilitated, further charges are brought against Reynard. He is again summoned, but this time a duel with Isengrim must settle the issue. Reynard wins, and this means that his and his family's name is cleared. This sequel also is partly derived from one of the many branches of the French *Roman de Renard*.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, in about 1475, this second Reynard text was rewritten by a certain Heinric van Alcmaer in four books and seventy-four chapters, accompanied by headings and moralising explanations. Only fragments of one single copy have survived, in an edition of 1487 printed by Gerard Leeu in Antwerp. But we have a complete version of it in the Low German translation, *Reynke de Vos*, printed at Lübeck in 1498. In

1479, in Gouda, Leeu published Van Alcmaer's version reduced to forty-four chapters and without headings and glosses, as *The History of Reynard the Fox* (*Die hystorie van Reynaert die vos*). This printed text has been the source of numerous reprints, adaptations and translations, including those in Latin, German, English, Danish, Swedish and Icelandic, down to the present day.

An important member of this group is the English translation, made by William Caxton, the first English printer, who published his text at Westminster in 1481. This was frequently reprinted by himself and others. Because of his years of activity in Bruges and Cologne as printer and diplomat in the King of England's service, he had an excellent command of Dutch. That he included so many Dutch words in his translation should not therefore be attributed to his ignorance, but rather to the fairly extensive spread of Dutch in England due to the intensive mutual trade. Nor do the mistakes indicate a lack of knowledge, but merely (excessive) haste and carelessness. When, in his *The History of Reynard the Fox*, he translates '*Segt ons Bellijn*' as '*Says on Bellyn*' he is simply not looking properly, because of course Caxton knows perfectly well what '*ons*' ('our') means in Dutch.

We may reasonably assume that even in the Middle Ages various Reynard versions were written to appeal to the shifting questions and expectations of different social strata. Where Willem's text predominantly parodies chivalric literature and court life in general, this gradually dissipates in later versions, until it is scarcely visible in the prose editions. Meanwhile the moralising tendency takes over, thus emphasising the human characteristics of the animals.

Nevertheless in all these versions the instructive and amusing basis of these beast epics remains paramount. This was the function, too, of the fables from the animal world in the earliest cultures. They presented an inverted world in which an amusing display was made of what happens in the real world when people abandon basic human values and virtues. Classical traditions surrounding Aesop meet up with early German traditions in the Middle Ages. The tales about a fox appear to have their origins in his clashes with the wolf, whose power and strength can only be mastered by the fox's guile. This all starts with the anecdote about the sick lion. The wolf accuses the fox of wilfully neglecting the king on his sickbed. The fox admits this, but gives the reason that he was searching for a remedy for the lion. This he has now found. They have to wrap the king in a wolf's hide, and the warmth will cure the king. That is what happens, and the king recovers entirely while the wolf stands wretchedly in the cold. Since then wolf and fox have been implacable enemies. In both Latin and French this encounter is further embroidered with various anecdotes in which they are both the protagonists among an increasing number of other animals.

Undoubtedly the substantial Middle Dutch beast epic which Willem created stands supreme among these animal tales. That is clearly evident from all the many derived versions, and no less so from the numerous laudatory references to it in other medieval texts. The fox has acquired a remarkable leading role and appears unaided to defy every authority and even the organised animal kingdom in its entirety. His main weapon is his tongue that conveys his utter lack of scruples, recognising only his own advantage and that of his wife and children.

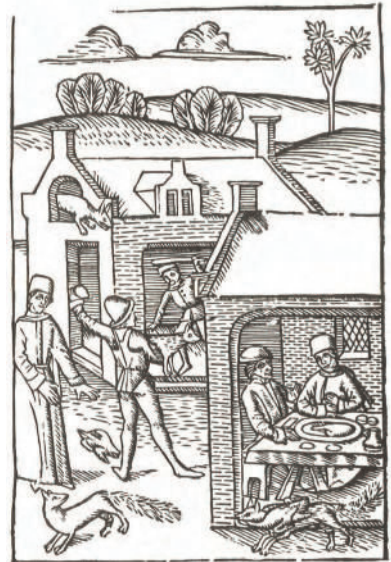
But who on earth could have enjoyed this ruthless humiliation of the tra-

Title page of the chapbook
About Reynard the Fox
(*Van Reynaert die Vos*),
published in Delft in 1589.

: Van Reynaert :
Die Vos / eē leer geneoethlijcke
ende bezaemelijcke Historie / met haer
Moralisatie ende korte uitlegginghen
voeg die Capittel gebeit / van nieuw
overleēn ende verbeteret.
Met schoone Figuren ghelect.



Tot Delft/ by Wapen Hartmans Schijckel
wonen aent Meer-belt. Anno 1589.



An illustration from the
edition of *Reynard's*
History (Reynaerts historie)
printed by Gerard Leeu
(Antwerp, c.1487).

ditional power of the noble courts, brought about moreover by a universally hated animal? The assumption that it expresses a kind of introspection in those circles overlooks the harshness of the satire, leaving as it does no stone standing in the foundations of feudal society and its aristocratic keystones. And is that fox really such a despicable animal? His cunning in the face of the stupid authorities and their brazen egotism was surely irresistible, certainly for the urban classes rising in society, who with their wealth and marital arrangements were striving to establish a new kind of power. It is also scarcely conceivable that a medieval text would become popular if it depended from start to finish on a negative hero with which no one would ever wish to identify himself.

This new zest in society appeared unmistakably at this time in the new aristocracy of a Flemish city like Ghent. This then consisted of a *nouveau riche* nobility amongst ambitious merchants. In this fluid situation there was no place for the old values increasingly cultivated in a vacuum by the mouldering courtly society, bolstered by a nostalgic chivalric literature that only offered emulation of a life that died with Charlemagne and King Arthur.

In contrast to this, a more pragmatic approach to life was emerging, with eyes rather on the street and everyday reality. This was nurtured on the one hand by new ways of life in the towns, based on categories of labour, capital assets and investments, and on the other hand, since the twelfth century, by a growing individualism where the emphasis lay on personal responsibility instead of unquestioned loyalty and obedience to the overlord. This zest, stimulated by the towns, could spread within and outside their walls through all the strata of society, whether it be the nobility or the clerical hierarchy, the international merchants or the guild master-craftsmen. Together they formed a new power, based on personal skill and business acumen, and there was soon open competition with the traditional authority of the sovereign powers.

In a number of places Willem refers in his text to Ghent and the bordering Waas region. This topography is so important because Ghent was the one city conspicuous among the others for its more than adequate capital, intelligence and mentality to appreciate *Reynard the Fox* as the interpreter and resonance of this new zest.

It is striking that it was in the thirteenth century that popularity shifted to texts that showed how an individual with practical ingenuity could take on the whole world and take good care of himself under all circumstances. These often comic exercises in the most inconceivable cunning have in common that the hero and protagonist cocks a snook at all the traditional values, whistles at court mores and every other kind of accepted behaviour, yet accepts them with alacrity if that is to his advantage. Reynard constantly gives stimulating examples of this. He knows the ceremonial of legal proceedings off pat, and so he can faultlessly exploit the weaknesses in the system. He remains courteous where that yields results, for instance towards King Noble and his wife Gente. It is in this way that he softens them up for his unmitigated con-tricks.

It is as if the tale of Reynard's triumphs blazed a pioneer's trail for the later picaresque tales, which, attuned to the burgeoning power of the urban elites, enjoyed an increasing popularity. Then came the ruses of hyper-individualists like Marcolphus, Aesop, the quasi-Villon, Aernout, Everaert,

Title page of the 1485 edition of *Aesop* (Esopus).

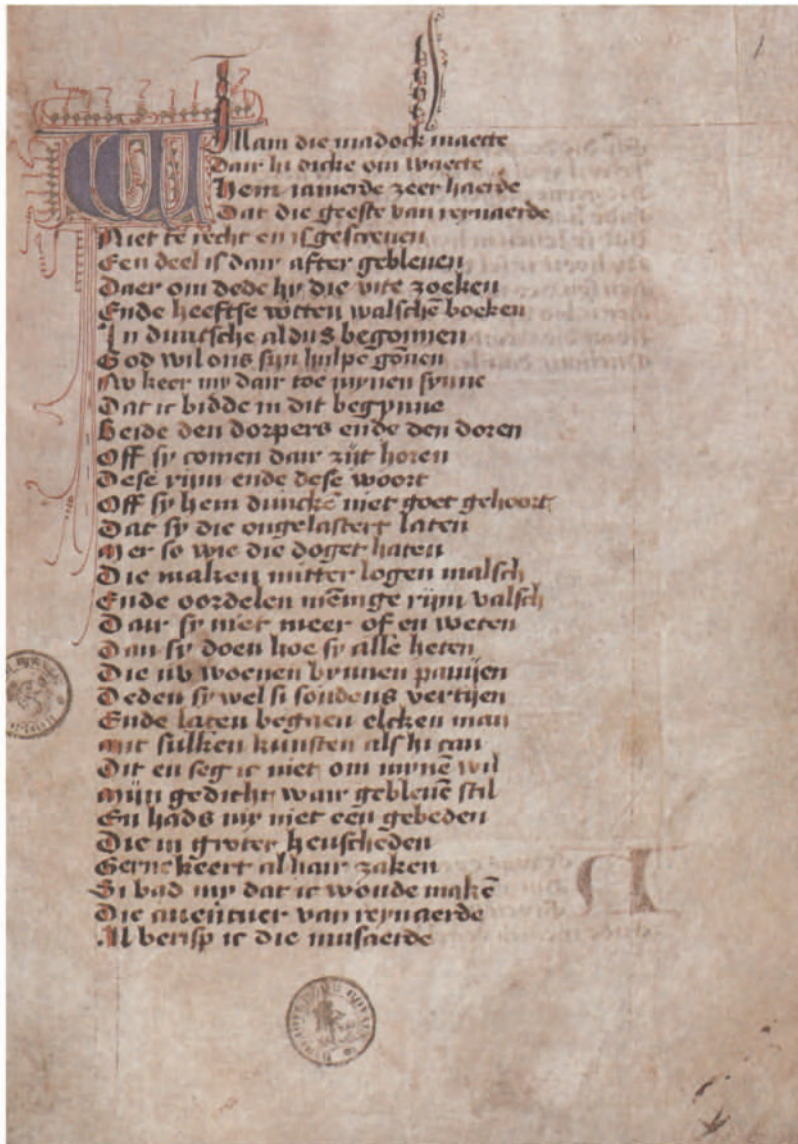


Uilenspiegel, the pastor of Kalenberg, Virgil, Heynken de Luyere and many more. The *Aesop* printed in 1485 even carries a prologue commending it as a manual of survival based on personal guile. This underlines the assumption that the animal fable had precisely that function.

If the fox in the Middle Ages, despite its infectious exposure of the stupid brutality of the leaders, should still appear offensive in the tale, there was always the justification of the animal fable. It was, after all, only literature; animals cannot speak, and identification with the protagonist could be withheld at any time. And doesn't Reynard simply act according to his nature, stealing chickens and killing a young hare to satisfy his wife and children's hunger? And all the other cruelties are brought upon the powerful creatures like the wolf, bear and tomcat by themselves, as the deserving victims of their own greed and exploitation.

Not least among the tale's qualities is the nice balance between human and animal characteristics in each animal. Reynard has a name, goes on a pilgrimage and owns a castle. But Bruin has to wait outside because he is too large to go in, so that the castle then turns back into a fox's earth.

First page of *Reynard's History* (Reynaerts historie, c. 1400).



Willem, who laboured to indite
 Madoc in many a wakeful night,
 Willem took it much to heart
 That one adventure of Reynard
 In Dutch remained as yet untold,
 Which had not been writ of by Arnold.
 For that legend he made a search
 And began to tell it in Dutch
 After the French in which it was made.
 May God grant me his aid!
 Now I would with all my heart
 Make a request at the start.
 To every fool and country clown,
 If they happen to come to town
 And hear these rhymes read in Dutch,
 Which will not benefit them much,
 That from carping they refrain –
 They're like the raven ever fain
 To croak some impertinence.
 They'll say – those verses make no sense –
 Though they know of poetry nothing at all,
 As little as I know what to call
 The folk now living in Babylon.
 'Twere well they left such things alone.
 I say this not for my own sake.
 I would not presume to make
 A poem but for the request
 Of one accustomed to invest
 All that she does with courtesy.
 She it was who persuaded me
 To tell this adventure of Reynard.
 Against carpers I'm on my guard.
 Fools and bumpkins, the whole crew.
 Rather would I be listened to
 By such as observe etiquette
 And have their minds ever set –
 Rich or poor, whichever they be –
 On behaving courteously.
 Mark my words without fail.
 Now listen how I begin my tale.

Translated by A.J. Barnouw.

Reynard makes his confession to Uncle Grimbert. But just after that he is mightily distracted by a yard full of hens, so great is the temptation that Grimbert more or less has to hold onto him. Even so he almost manages to grab a fat cock. A subtle strand running right through the text is the variation between the normal posture on four legs and the times when he stands on his hind legs like a human. Reynard operates within a similar duality, sometimes as an animal hunting for food, at other times as a mastermind capable, in the human world too, of establishing a new hegemony.

Reynard may expose a rotten status quo, but his popularity is primarily due to his display of a practical and apposite guile that in reality has a democratic bearing: anyone can acquire this if he wants, whatever his birth, wealth or status. Though the exposure of the traditional power of the overlords by means of parody is undoubtedly the main theme of Willem's original text, the infectious craftiness of a loner under attack from all sides appears to be its passport to success in later centuries – right up to the present day. And why not for ever and ever?

HERMAN PLEIJ

Translated by Peter King.

NOTE

The translations of the text are from: A.J. Barnouw and E. Colledge, *Reynard the Fox and Other Mediaeval Netherlands Secular Literature*. Leiden / London / New York, 1967.

FURTHER READING

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