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“And out of fables gret wysdom men may take”:

Middle English Animal Fables as Vehicles of Moral Instruction

by

Mohammad Hadi Kamyabee

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

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ان امول البيوت لبيت العنكبوت
Abstract

Mohammad Hadi Kamyabie
PhD Dissertation, 1997
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

"And out of fables gret wysdom men may take":

Middle English Animal Fables as Vehicles of Moral Instruction

This study is a re-examination of Middle English animal fables as teaching vehicles. For each fable, four governing pedagogical questions are raised and certain suggestions proposed. First, what lesson(s) does the fable teach? Does it encourage a virtue or warn against a vice? Second, who is the teacher: the poet, the narrator, or the anthropomorph? Third, to whom the lesson is addressed? Though it is often next to impossible to identify the historical audience of the fable, the imagined audience of the poet is often suggested. Fourth, how the lesson is offered? Surprise, reward, and punishment are among the most frequent didactic strategies that fables employ.

"The Introduction" establishes the background of the genre and the related traditions as well as their historical applications. Fables served as a convenient tool to teach grammar, rhetoric, and translation both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. They were also used in sermons for purposes of edification. "Chapter II" discusses Henryson's use of fable as a vehicle of social criticism. "Chapter III" discusses Chaucer's NPT and Manti and the manipulation of the genre in the greater picture of Canterbury Tales. The use and abuse of language are the main issue of Chaucerian fables. "Chapter IV" discusses Gower's "Phesus and Cornide" and "Adrian and Bardus," which expound lessons to be learned from silence and justice. "Chapter V" discusses Langland's
“Belling the Cat” and its political implications. “Chapter VI” discusses Lydgate’s *Isopes Fabules, Churl, and Debate*, that teach not only practical wisdom, but also nationalism and integrity. “Chapter VII” discusses *The Owl and the Nightingale* as an animal fable with its emphasis on justice, honesty, and above all on winning.

In their different ways, medieval English animal fables teach their prospective audiences not only what to think, but more urgently how to think. This study attempts to contribute to a better understanding of Middle English animal fables in general, and of their pedagogical perspective in particular.
Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor David Klausner, not only for his vigilance and erudition which have saved me from so many errors, but also for his endless patience and encouragement in reading successive drafts of this study. Professors Joanna Dutka and Professor David Townsend read the first draft of every chapter of this project. I am deeply grateful for their invaluable advice and suggestions. I would also like to thank professors Patricia J. Eberle and John Leyerle, who first introduced me to Middle English Literature and taught me how to appreciate its seriousness. I owe Professor Michael Sidnell, the Director of Graduate Studies in English, an especial debt of gratitude for his unfailing support and encouragement.

Finally, it is with pleasure to acknowledge the generous financial support I received from Shiraz University over the past four years and a half, and the assistance which the University of Toronto made possible to me in the final stages of my thesis work. I am sincerely grateful to both.
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"And out of fables gret wysdom men may take":
English Medieval Animal Fables as Vehicles of Moral Instruction

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I. INTRODUCTION

Middle English animal fables are amongst the most delightful and the most intrinsically didactic of the literary texts of the Middle Ages. In fact, the Horatian dictum that a good poet both delights and instructs -- "omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci" (De Arte Poetica. 343)¹ -- is never lost on any of the medieval fabulists. Nonetheless, although it is generally taken for granted that "fabula docet" and although much has been written on medieval fables in other contexts, a comprehensive study of the medieval English fables and their didacticism is lacking. The purpose of this study, then, is twofold: to provide a frame of reference for the literary fables of the Middle Ages and to formulate certain pedagogical questions so as to explore their didactic possibilities individually.

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF BEAST NARRATIVE

The history of the fable is as old as history itself. The animal story appears to have begun with primitive man's perception of living with the beasts which hunted him and those which he hunted. He began to paint on the walls of his caves his experience of the wild -- both the deer and the tiger, the fish and the python. He painted his desires and his concerns, his understanding of the world and his superstitions about it. Moreover, these paintings paradoxically reflect both man's need for his kill and his sorrow over it; they depict both his fear of the wild and his respect for it.² When he acquired the art of


telling stories, animals provided him with his earliest themes of hunting and escape as well as victory and defeat. Although early man did use his imagination in many ways, his first stories were likely down-to-earth accounts of his real experience and hence they were, more than anything else, life-like and convincing. At a later stage, when man had to deal with serious problems of life regarding his family and neighbours, these stories served him to make a moral point. In these tales, the beasts were no more the real creatures of the wild; rather they turned into types of obvious virtues and vices for the edification of his offspring. This is, most probably, how the first moral fables came into being.

From the very beginning man was conscious of the various traits of the animals around him. His true -- though perhaps crude -- observation of different species supplied him with their simplest, most immediate, and most memorable characteristics. The ant and the bee were industrious, the dog and the horse faithful, the lion majestic, the tiger fearless, the fox crafty, and the wolf rapacious. In literature, then, the same characteristics paved the way for the stock characters of the cunning fox, the greedy wolf, and the conceited rooster. Moreover, according to many religions man is the reason and purpose of creation, and animals are always below him in the great chain of being. As Beryl Rowland puts it, "while animals shared in the Fall they had no part in the great plan of Redemption: their purpose was to provide moral lessons that would assist in man's regeneration."³ Thus, not only does man depend on animals for his sustenance and

transportation, but also he is advised to take note of their unfailing traits, such as the fidelity of the dog and the stupidity of the loadbearing ass. The Bible directly invites man to take his lessons from the beasts, where Job says: "But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you" (Job. 12. 7).

Sympathy and charm are probably the two most immediate reasons why animals appeal to man in general and to the literary-oriented in particular. Not only is man often conscious of great resemblances between himself and the dumb creatures, but also he readily identifies himself with them in anthropomorphic situations. Literary identification is usually followed by sympathy. Man sympathizes with them because they are conditioned to the same fate and the same destiny as he is. Moreover, man loves animals, at times, in the same way he loves his most loved ones. The dog or the cat is, in fact, a member of so many human families. The shepherd and his dog are the closest friends. To the farmer, the lamb, the cow, and the chicken are not simply commodities as pieces of furniture are. In most cases, man cares about his livestock as if they were his children. The old warriors were more attached to their horses than to their comrades.

Apart from the fact that animals and man are more alike than distinct, and that they are charming and playful, emotions attributed to animals are of universal appeal. Unlike those of man which are unique in that they are circumstantial and often ambivalent, in an animal such emotions are understood and interpreted the same all the world over. Furthermore, whereas in man there is always the risk of self-justification and lame excuses for his wrongdoing, the same vice in an animal is seen without any such problems. In a man the reader is always conscious of the man before his crime, in an
animal the mistake comes first because that is what matters after all. The moral, then, in relation to an animal, makes it all the more meaningful because the narrative, the plot, the character, and even the discourse are all there to serve the very didactic purpose of the fable.

Children and animals often seem to have more in common than adults, and this is another reason that animal fables are more at home with children than with grown-ups. Like animals, a human child has not much changed over centuries. The fable has survived thanks to the child in all of us on the one hand, and to our schools and schooling on the other. Jan M. Ziolkowski asserts that, "the especial appeal of animals to children was recognized already in antiquity by teachers who used beast fables to smooth the transition to grammatical or rhetorical training from nursery rhymes, animal folktales, and bedtime stories — all of which went under the name of ‘old wives’ tales (fabulae animales) in Classical Latin."4

Finally, man has always needed to get his feelings across to animals and to understand them, despite the fact that more often than not such a quest has led to the fortification of man’s desire for his own sake rather than for the benefit of the animals. The bridge is never built and the rift is never healed. Since animals cannot object to any office bestowed upon them, they have been used as scapegoats both literally and metaphorically. Animals have served as sacrifices at the temples of ancient deities, in Judeo-Christianity, and in Islam. They have been slaughtered, cooked, and eaten both in

bridal and burial festivities, both when celebrating and mourning. In literature, animals never became important in themselves or for themselves until very late, probably as late as the nineteenth century with the publication of Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877). Rather, animal stories have always been used allegorically and satirically to indirectly criticise those in power. Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), for instance, satirize targeted communities and the establishment under cover.

Both the oppressed and the oppressor find in the fable a convenient means to show their protest or dissatisfaction; the people of the court need the kind of education the fable provides as much as the peasantry — king and subjects, master and servant, father and children may benefit by the moral of the fable. Although Ben Edwin Perry rules out any relation between censor and the fable, the history of many countries with despotic regimes and tyrannic rulers as well as corrupt administrators bears testimony to the inevitability of all kinds of metaphoric commentaries both in literature and folklore in such countries. Hence, since a fable can obviously make its point without directly offending anyone (especially those in power), it has been a perfect solution to the problem for centuries. “The Fable,” says Joseph Jacobs, “is most effective as a literary or oratorical weapon under despotic governments allowing no free speech.” Nonetheless,

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targeting the type and not the society at large, the fable is not necessarily satiric, though an element of satire can be detected in many a fable.

Although there are countless animal stories, anecdotes, and proverbs in every language and every culture, it must be noted that not every animal story is a fable. According to Perry, an animal story has to meet at least three conditions to be a fable: 1- "it must be obviously and deliberately fictitious"; 2- "it must purport to a particular action, series of actions, or an utterance that took place once in the past time through the agency of particular characters"; 3- "it must be told, at least ostensibly, not for its own sake as a story ... but for the sake of a point that is moral ... or personal." Should the moral of the fable prove to be unclear to its audience, or if more than one moral can be deducted from the same fable, "the fable," says Perry, "has not achieved its purpose but has the effect of a story told for its own interest." Fables have always provided philosophers, orators, clergymen, lawyers, and educators with some of their best tools.

From the first century onwards the rhetoricians, as Perry suggests, defined the fable as: ""λόγος ψευδής εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν," "a fictitious story picturing a truth." Though Perry agrees that "this is the best definition of Aesopic fable that can be given," he points out that unlike the Greek and the ancient Oriental fables, "the majority of the fables do not teach moral truths, but matters of worldly wisdom and shrewdness."
Etymologically, "fable" derives from the Latin "fābula," narration; or the alternative English 'apologue" is from Latin "apologus," from Greek "ἀπόλογος," a moral story. In Arabic it is "مَثَل" (mathal) or likeness, and in Persian "افسانه" (aFSaneh) or a charming fiction. Hence, a fable is basically a metaphor. It shares some of the characteristics of parable, allegory, allusion, simile, and wisdom literature. Moreover, although most fables teach us practical things such as how to succeed in everyday life and how to deal with everyday problems, they do not always teach moral truths. Fables teach us, amongst other things, how the hunter falls prey to the hunted, how an act of kindness may provoke insult, and how idle it is to expect respect for rightful claims in the absence of the power to enforce it.

Briefly an animal fable is an account of a single fictional event in the past with at least one animal character in the narrative and an explicit moral either at its outset or the end. Whereas a reasonably sophisticated audience may easily find the meaning of a fable, a less educated audience may need some help to decipher its theme. Nonetheless, while lack of moral interpretation in a story is associated with sophistication, its presence does not necessarily mean that the fable is addressed to the common folk. Moreover, there are fables with no tagged moral, such as "Belling the Cat" in Piers Plowman (PP), or the Owl and the Nightingale (O&N). Furthermore, the moral of a fable sometimes adds to its ambiguity and complexity rather than solving any problem or giving a straightforward

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12Greek "παράβολη" and English "simile".

13For a list of most frequent moral lessons in fables, see H.J. Blackham The Fable as Literature (London: Athlone, 1985) 8-9.
lesson. This is particularly true in Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale (NPT)*. Finally, the moral of a fable is not the only lesson it teaches; in many cases the narrative, too, presents several lessons. Take Chaucer’s *Manciple’s Tale (ManT)*, for example, which offers a number of ideas including prudence, faithfulness, justice, amongst others, well before the final invitation to silence.

The Sumerians of the third millennium BC were probably the first to introduce the fable.\(^{14}\) The Greeks inherited their fabular “narrative substance” from the Babylonians and Assyrians and their fabular “traditional form-pattern” from the Semites, both by way of the Sumerian Culture. According to Perry, it was ultimately the Greeks who gave the fable to “the literature of the medieval times, in both the East and the West.”\(^{15}\) However, although the fable reached its peak in Greece, “beast fable, as a form, along with the literary debate, was cultivated in the wisdom literature of the Near East for centuries before there was any Greek literature.”\(^{16}\) Besides, “early fables,” Perry contends, “are found only in a context of some kind to which they are subordinated and, so long as the controlling context is one of ethical or philosophical instruction, as it almost always was in the old Orient, the fable tends to remain true to its original character. In these early fables the point or moral stands foremost, and the narrative, which may be at times no more than a sentence or two, never takes the form of a story


\(^{15}\)Perry, “Fable” 80.

\(^{16}\)Perry, “Fable” 81.
told for its own sake, however witty or entertaining it may be in itself."

Finally, "one of the best attested and oldest fable traditions," as Robert S. Falkowitz believes, "is found amongst the school texts of Old Babylonian ... Mesopotamia. These fables and related forms of discourse were part of the Old Babylonian school curricula for teaching the learned Sumerian language to students coming from Semitic vernacular context. To these same schools we owe the majority of the extant Sumerian literature."

Fables have long been used to teach the reality of human society in terms of animals. Both in the pre-Islamic Persian literary heritage and the Islamic legacy there exists a body of animal fables which address pedagogical issues deemed to be inherent in these stories. These stories follow certain patterns; they address certain questions; they assume certain audiences; and they create certain generic expectations. Their narrative framework, their debate form, and their indirect mode of edification have all received attention in the native land of these stories. However, in the West, they are either totally neglected, or have been casually mentioned with considerable lack of interest. It is at the expense of this tradition that Aesopic fables have enjoyed universal credit. W.A. Clouston believes, "by far the greater number of apologues and stories which are common to all Europe have been current in Asia from a very remote period." These stories were then transmitted to the West through commerce, literature, religion, and war

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17Perry, "Fable" 85.

18Falkowitz 2.

19W.A. Clouston, Popular Tales and Fictions: Their Migrations and Transformations, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1887) 1.
from the early ages of Christianity down to the fifteenth century, though specially during the Crusades.²⁰

_Pancatantra_ (the five books) is the oldest Oriental repertoire of animal fables, written originally in Sanskrit and at the request of a king in India by his philosopher Bidpai for the benefit of the princes who were to learn how to serve their country and how to rule over it, and above all, how to think rigorously. Very soon the book began to travel all around the world. First it appeared in Old Persian well before AD 570, when it was rendered into Syriac by a priest called Bud and later in AD 750 into Arabic by Abdullah Ibn-Moqaffa, “a Zoroastrian convert to Islam.”²¹ Although both the original Sanskrit and the Old Persian versions were lost early on, the Arabic version, _Kalilah and Dimnah_, was soon translated into Modern Persian, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, Spanish, French, and English well before the invention of printing. Most of the European recensions bear the title of _The Fables of Bidpai_. Later translations may also be found under the titles _Anwar-i Suheili_ or _Ayyar-i Danesh_ after their Persian originals.²² In _Kalilah and Dimnah_, the two jackals named in the title draw their materials from _Jataka Tales_ -- a collection of stories about the Buddha’s nativity and incarnations, some in non-human forms. Hence the book assumed the form of a ‘Mirror of Princes’ which

²⁰Clouston 1: 6.


²²For more on the history of this book and its translations, see I.G.N. Keith-Falconer, trans., _Kalilah and Dimnah or The Fables of Bidpai_ (Cambridge, 1885) xiii-lxxxvi.
entertained the Anglo-Norman courts as it originally did in its native land, much the same way as the Seven Sages and Speculum Stultorum (Mirror of the Fools) did in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, Kalilah and Dimnah, according to Blackham, "was said by an English translator in the late nineteenth century to have had probably more readers than any other [book] except the Bible, a remark which could apply only to Christendom; but the book was as popular throughout Islam." Finally, Kalilah and Dimnah, in Blackham's words, "could be regarded as a compendium of ancient wisdom, offensive to none and a valued vademecum of all in the conduct of life, especially when translated not only into the language but also into the cultural inheritance of the people for whom it was prepared. Here in good form, and with the sanction of antiquity, was the combination of entertainment and instruction which made fable as acceptable."

Unlike The Arabian Nights (c. 900) which is basically a book of entertainment, Saadi's Persian Gulistan (The Rose Garden) and Bustan (The Scented Garden) (1260), which were Persian primers for centuries, offer a number of animal fables dealing with social life of the community. There is also another popular Persian collection of some forty animal fables, Tuti-nameh (The Book of the Parrot) (1300), which focuses

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24 Blackham 15.

25 Blackham 16-17.

26 Tuti-nameh was written about 1320 after an earlier Persian work, which was made from a Sanskrit book, both lost now; the Suka Saptati or "Seventy Tales of a Parrot" has its roots in the Sanskrit book. See Clouston 2: 197.
primarily on familial issues, especially women's infidelity. More influential than all these, however, are Attar's Persian *Mantiq-o-Teir* (The Conference of Birds) (1300) and Rumi's *Masnavi Masnavi* (The Religious Couplets) (1320). Attar's book is a collection of edifying stories -- animal fables and otherwise -- told by the hoopoe, the leading bird, to her twenty-nine co-flying pilgrims on the ascent towards "Simorq" (phoenix). Here, the birds learn lessons of piety, prudence, contentment and sacrifice from these tales. By the time they reach their destination they merge into one single "Simorq" -- literally thirty-birds. Hence they experience unification with the ultimate Truth. Rumi's book is a monumental Persian collection of closely intertwined stories (sixty of which are animal fables) all of which deal with the subtle and delicate things about the human soul and other complexities of Islamic mysticism. Here allegorical interpretation of animal traits according to the Islamic traditions -- much like the *Physiologus* -- as well as the fabular topics serve to teach the reader-pilgrim to prepare himself for his final unification with the ultimate Truth. Both *Mantiq-o-Teir* and *Masnavi* offer many animal fables advocating mysticism and the divine Love. Whereas *Marzuban-nameh* (AD 1210-25), another collection of tales, is primarily a 'Prince Book' which highlights "the high principles

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30*Marzuban-nameh* is another collection of stories -- animal fables and otherwise -- told by a prince providing moral lessons combined with practical wisdom in an entertaining way.
requisite in a ruler." Zakani’s *Moush va Gorbeh* (Mouse and Cat) is a political satire written by a dissident criticising both the state and the clergy. \(^{32}\)

*Kalileh and Dimnah, Tutinameh, Mantiq-ot-Teir, and Masnavi* all share certain characteristics. Their individual stories are all interrelated and are all embedded within the frame story. Their characters quote gnomic verses from all kinds of sources freely and frequently. Their didacticism is not at all mono-dimensional: while they all teach worldly wisdom, political tactics, social and familial conduct; their ethical and religious teaching are their prime concerns. In the East, most of these fables, especially *Kalileh and Dimnah*, started with Buddhism, were enriched by Zoroastrianism, were redefined by Islam, and even later adopted much from Judeo-Christianity. Thanks to all these stages of assimilation, they no longer appear to belong to any single people or time. They started in India and ended up in Europe through the Persian and Arabic speaking world. The main purpose of these animal fables in the East is to train men of integrity and valour to be able to take the responsibility of ruling over a household, to be good spouses and parents, to learn to be better children for their parents and good citizens for their country, to exercise honesty and contentment, and above all to give their love to others unsparingly. Some of these fables also address the duties of the rulers, even of the king himself, who must be efficient, persevering, of great ambition, good at battle, quick at solving problems, ready to sacrifice his life for his subjects, willing to protect the poor and the

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down-trodden, and above all appreciative of the help and advice of his counsellors.

The first appearance of a beast fable as we know it is "The Hawk and the Nightingale" in the *Works and Days* (202-12) of Hesiod, who may have lived as early as the eighth century before Christ. However, from the sixth century BC onwards the fable becomes associated with the name Aesop, who is generally known as the father of the fable. Despite all sorts of legendary accounts of his life as a wise but cunning slave, little is known about Aesop. Moreover, although Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, among others, make references to the man and his fables, there is no indication that Aesop ever wrote down his fables. They were preserved only by word of mouth until 300 BC, when the now-lost first prose collection of these fables was produced by Demetrius Phalerus. The earliest extant collection of some of these fables is a versified Latin version by Phaedrus, who lived around the first century AD. These Greek fables are best represented by the verse collection of Babrius made about AD 200. Then about AD 400 Avianus translated forty-two of Babrius’s fables into Latin verse. These fables were used as pedagogical devices teaching the rules of rhetoric and ethics to young students. An extensive repertory of Aesopic fables grew; Perry’s *Aesopica* provides 579 fables, "the most extensive and reliable collection of Greek and Latin Aesopic texts ever assembled." In the Middle Ages collections of *exempla* and fables like the *Summa*


34Blackham 7.

Praedicantium of Bromyard or the Narrationes of Odo of Cheriton which were made for the use of preachers make reference to a little-known writer called Romulus. Apart from Romulus, whose name became familiar in the eleventh century, in the twelfth century first Walter of England, Alexander Neckham, and then Marie de France became very popular as fabulists.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANIMAL NARRATIVE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The animal stories of the Middle Ages fall into three main categories: the encyclopaedic and allegorical bestiary (Physiologus), the satirical beast epic or cycle of stories, especially those around the figure of Reynard the Fox, and the didactic animal or beast fable (the Aesopic fable). Needless to say, there are other literary and non-literary works in the Middle Ages with animal imagery and animal characters such as animal lore, heraldry books, hunting tracts, ornithological works, and the like.

A bestiary entry commonly gives the description of an animal, real or imaginary, and then offers some allegorical significance of its traits in the context of Christianity. Whereas the fable has its origin in wisdom literature, the bestiary is ultimately derived from the Greek Physiologus (the naturalist) of the second century AD, which was first translated into Latin in the fourth or fifth century and then into many other languages. Physiologus, as Bruce Ross observes, "was, after the Bible, the most widely read book in the early Middle Ages. It also became a source of symbolic types for later medieval

36 See Perry, "Fable" 85-87.

37 Beryl Rowland, Blind Beasts (Kent: Kent State UP, 1971) 2.
It was first translated into Middle English in the thirteenth century from a Latin version made by Theobaldus in Italy in the eleventh century. The Exeter Book, however, gives the earliest English Physiologus which comprises “Panther,” “Whale,” and a fragment of “Partridge.”

Aristotle’s *Historia animalium*, Pliny’s *Naturalis historia*, Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*, Bartholomew’s *De proprietatibus rerum*, and Alexander Neckham’s *De naturis rerum* are amongst the most important and most popular sources of the bestiaries in the Middle Ages. However, whereas they provide the pseudo-scientific and quasi-natural history of the animals and their traits, it is always the biblical exegesis which gives the bestiaries their final shape and meaning. According to Michael J. Curley, “with a deft application of hermeneutics, an ancient legend is transformed into a Christian fable. Since the details of the ancient legend are left largely intact in Physiologus, we can properly speak of the allegory in this case being appended to a pagan model.” All in all,

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38 Bruce Ross, *The Inheritance of Animal Symbols in Modern Literature and World Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988) 43.

39 T.H. White’s popular *The Book of Beasts* (1954 London: Jonathan Cape, 1969) is a translation of a twelfth century Latin bestiary, different from that of Theobaldus; Michael J. Curley’s *Physiologus* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1979) is a modern translation of the Latin *Physiologus*.


42 Curley xxiii.
the bestiaries tended to be sources of inspiration, information, but above all edification.
The explicitly didactic nature of the bestiaries made them popular with preachers of the
Middle Ages. G.R. Owst shows how bestiary material is commonly used in sermons —
Latin and vernacular alike — which suggests that such tales could indeed incite a
congregation to virtue. ⁴³ Klingender, too, points out that "many collections of Latin
parables and sermons, for use of popular preachers, which appeared in the thirteenth and
fourteenth centuries drew largely from both traditions [folklore and bestiaries]." ⁴⁴

The beast epic, in essence, is a systematic satire of human society. It borrows its
animal characters from the tradition of the animal fable and its episodic structure from
the medieval romance. The tales of the feud between the fox and the wolf were the work
of many hands — most probably clerics — and were first produced in c 1170-1250. The
first collection of such tales, however, is the Roman de Renart in 27 chapters compiled in
France in the late twelfth century. Soon this book was translated into other European
languages. The author of the Middle English "Vox and Wolf," Marie de France, Chaucer,
and Henryson must all have been familiar with these stories, if in fact they did not have
access to the entire book. Caxton's edition of Reynard the Fox appeared in 1481. ⁴⁵ The
Roman is the story of Reynard the Fox, symbol of a cunning man, and his adventures,

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⁴⁴ Klingender 360.

especially the feud between him and Isingrimus, the Wolf.46

The English native "Vox and Wolf" is a relatively short poem of 295 lines which has survived in a single Bodleian MS and which was probably composed around 1250-75.47 It roughly corresponds with branch iv of the French Roman de Renart and comprises three of the fox’s adventures: 1- the fox and the cock (Cf. Chaucer’s NPT and Henryson’s fable # 2), 2- the confession of the wolf (Cf. Henryson’s fable # 4), and 3- the fox and the wolf in the well-buckets (Cf. Henryson’s fable # 10). The three episodes are tightly strung together while no moral is specified. More than anything else, the poem comments on the monastic life.48 It is a tale about deceit and how one must be wary of it. Finally, the medieval poem “A Song on the Times” of about 200 lines, completed around the early fourteenth century, is a much less known animal story.49 It is, nonetheless, an important text since, as Blake puts it, it comes “midway between The Fox and the Wolf and the Nun’s Priest’s Tale.”50 It is the story of the lion and his companions -- the wolf,


49The poem is preserved in a MS from British Museum Harl. 913 and is edited in T. Wright, The Political Songs of England from the Reign of John to That of Edward II (London, 1839) 195-205.

50Blake 57.
the fox, and the ass — modelled after Aesop. Its main theme is "the perversion of justice through bribery and influence."51

Although the fable, the bestiary, and the beast epic may occasionally share the same characteristics, especially as regards the fox’s trickery, they are distinct genres and each serves a special purpose.52 Whereas the animals in the fable are fictitious, the animal characters talk, and the moral teaches how to succeed in the world, the bestiary presumes dealing with real animals which do not talk, and its allegorical lesson is always of religious significance. Whereas in both the fable and the beast epic the animals act and talk like human beings, in the former they stand for human types but in the latter they represent individuals. In fact, the animals in the beast epic are so individualized that they have names much like the characters of the medieval romance. However, unlike the fable and the bestiary, the beast epic does not offer any explicit moral. Finally, whereas both the bestiary and the fable collections provide unrelated entries and tales, the feud between the fox and the wolf functions as the governing theme relating the stories of the medieval beast epic.53

In the Middle Ages, the term “fable” was used to mean more than one thing; Isidore of Seville, for example, uses the word for beast fables, myths, and comedies.54 In

51 Blake 57.

52 See Hartung 9: 3139.


fact, the term “fable” was often indiscriminately applied to any kind of invention or fictitious tale. Both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine, along with many other medieval theologians, were sceptical of the usefulness of the “fable.” 55 The Parson’s reluctance, in The Canterbury Tales (CT), to tell a fable and hence to satisfy Harry Bailly’s demand: “‘Telle us a fable anon, for cokkes bones!’”56 (X. 29) should not surprise us. The Parson is positive that

“Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,
For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse
And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.” (X. 31-34)

Obviously, the fables, as Ziolkowski notes, have to do with both talking and lying -- fantasy and fiction.57 A fable never pretends to be true, rather it strives to convey some truth by manipulating fiction. Whereas this truth may not always be evident, it is as much a constant ingredient of the fable’s structure as is fantasy.

The medieval English fables, as we have them, borrow from classical fables, bestiaries, and the beast epics. Besides, since they are not all products of the same time and region, they may not initially appear to fall under the same umbrella. They are written over a span of 300 years from 1200 to 1500. They differ in both matter and


57Ziolkowski 16.
manner. Whereas Lydgate's "Hound & Cheese", for instance, is only 27 lines long, the
O&N is 1794 lines long. Whereas Chaucer's NPT and six of Henryson's fables ultimately
derive from the beast epic, both Henryson's other fables and Lydgate's Isopes Fabules
are Aesopic. Whereas Gower's "Adrian and Bardus" and Langland's "Belling the Cat"
are Oriental in origin, the rest of the fables are traceable to Greco-Roman sources.
Whereas both the NPT and the O&N obviously manipulate the animal traits and their
allegorical significance much like the bestiaries, "Belling the Cat" is free from such
flavour. Although debate between animals in the fable is a common practice, the O&N
and Lydgate's Churl and the Bird (Churl) and Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep
(Debate) are primarily debate poems. Moreover, medieval English fables vary greatly in
terms of their didactic subjects and pedagogical strategies. Whereas Lydgate is pedantic
and Gower moralistic, Henryson is almost always humorous and Chaucer often ironic.
Earlier fables, such as the O&N and "Belling the Cat" address general topics, whereas
later fables, especially those of Lydgate and Henryson, are much more specific. 58 Finally
as Ziolkowski argues, "the beast poems were created for many occasions and audiences.
Not all of them were written by bookish pedants and intended solely to be pored over in
the library. Some of them were composed to be read aloud, sung, and staged. Their
audiences were sometimes as grand as imperial and episcopal courts." 59

58 See Arnold Clayton Henderson, "Animal Fables as Vehicles of Social Protest
and Satire: Twelfth Century to Henryson," Proceedings of the Third International Beast
Epic, Fable and Fabliau Colloquium, ed. Jan Gossens and Timothy Sodmann (Köln:

59 Ziolkowski 5.
In England medieval animal fable begins with Marie de France’s *Fables*, a collection of 104 fables written in Anglo-Norman around 1160-90 of which at least 23 manuscripts produced from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries have survived. They are apparently translations from the Latin *Romulus* and some lost Old English versions, allegedly by King Alfred,\(^6^0\) as well as her own compositions. Mary Lou Martin maintains that “Marie mirrors faithfully the reality of twelfth-century society and holds it up to the individual for reflection, for it is ultimately the individual who must cope with a shifting social and ethical foundation.”\(^6^1\) Not all of Marie’s tales are animal fables; only one third of them conveniently comply with the Aesopic fabula conventions. Marie’s fables are addressed to a courtly audience on which she generally comments. Although she shows special interest in the economic and political conditions of her time, in many of her fables she sympathizes with women’s problems, unhappy marriages, and less fortunate human beings. One of her obsessions is the issue of justice and fairness.\(^6^2\) Marie’s fables are all relatively short narratives followed by a succinct moral. Whereas the narrative generally assumes a naive simplicity, the moral is often ironic.

If Marie is the first medieval fabulist in England, so is Caxton the last. Caxton’s translation of *Reynard the Fox* appeared in 1481. His *Aesop’s Fables* was originally assembled from *Romulus* by a German physician in the early fifteenth century for the


edification of his daughter. In 1480 an Augustinian monk turned this collection into French. It was this French version that Caxton translated into English and published first in 1484. The book was reprinted again in 1497 and yet again in 1500. It contains 167 fables, mostly — but not exclusively — animal fables. The two main sources for Caxton's fables are: the prose fables of Romulus, tales from the Latin of Phaedrus, and the verse fables of Avianus from the Greek of Babrius. However, the book includes also the fables of Alfonse and those of Poge the Florentine.\(^3\) Caxton's Aesop is didactic in many ways. "The grammar teacher," as R.T. Lenaghan observes, "probably more than anyone else, was responsible for the medieval currency of the Aesopic fable. He was actively aware of the reasons for the durability of the genre. The suitability of the fable as primer material is obvious. The lists of school authors are seldom without an Aesopic collection ... The fable was also the vehicle of the first of a series of paraphrase exercises in composition."\(^4\) Their foremost pedagogical utility rests in their simplicity and accessibility.

Although this study undertakes to cover the English fable from the O&N (c1200) through Henryson's Morall Fabillis of Esope (MF) (c1500), due to its limited scope, it does not include Marie and Caxton at the two ends of the scale. Indeed a separate study of this size would be needed for either of them. Besides, even though both Marie and Caxton did produce their works in England, they were not originally in English. Marie's

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\(^4\) Lenaghan 12.
Fables are in French and Caxton’s *Aesopic Fables* is a translation from the French.

Finally, as for their audiences, they pose another serious discrepancy. Unlike the rest of our fabulists, Marie addresses a relatively exclusive conventual audience and Caxton a wide range of readers through the dissemination of a printed text.

Hence, omitting Marie and Caxton, this study covers the *O&N*, Langland’s “Belling the Cat,” Gower’s “Adrian and Bardus” and “Phebus and Cornide,” Chaucer’s *NPT* and *ManT*, Lydgate’s *Fables*, *Churl*, and *Debate*, and finally Henryson’s *MF*.

Whereas some of these are indisputably animal fables, some only manipulate the genre. While most of them have been traditionally categorized as fables, a few of them appear under different categories in anthologies. This study is not an exhaustive one, but it does try to provide a comprehensive study of some aspects of the Middle English animal fables. A word of caution: no attempt has been made to include any of the fables which are to be found in the medieval sermons. Latin fables, in compilations or isolation, have been left out. Furthermore, no attempt has been made to manipulate any bestiary or Reynardian tale to fit the fabular argument here. However, a few words must be said about the inclusion of the debate poems in this study before attempting any cogent definition of the animal fable.

**ADAPTATIONS OF THE FABLE IN DEBATE AND *EXEMPLA***

In Conlee’s succinct observation, “Medieval debate poetry, like most medieval literary genres, resists simple definition, and the various works which are traditionally assigned to this genre are quite heterogeneous in form, style, tone, subject matter, and
authorial intentions. Yet, as Conlee himself admits, "a general intent to edify underlies most forms of dialogue as debate poetry." Hence, one would assume that any animal (or more commonly bird) debate may be an animal fable because of the presence of talking animals and the intent to edify. If so, Chaucer's *Squire's Tale, Parliament of Fouls* (*PF*), and *House of Fame* (*HF*), Clanvowe's "Cuckoo and the Nightingale," and the anonymous "Thrush and Nightingale," to give merely a few examples, could be considered fables. But they are not. In the parliamentary and debate poems, as Conlee points out, "the edification is frequently subordinated to broader satiric and comic purposes." And this is their main point of departure from the fable since in the fable, the moral is the ultimate purpose of telling the story in the first place. Therefore, when there is an explicit intent to teach in a debate, one may make a case for its being a fable. The *O&N* and Lydgate's *Churl* and *Debate* meet such a prerequisite. Also, while it is possible to consider Chaucer's *NPT* and some of Henryson's tales as debate because in them animals are involved in an engaging dialogue, they are primarily fables because of their intent to teach -- they are not told for their own sake, but as a means to some other end. Most of the medieval debates, as Conlee suggests, draw "their inspiration as well as their authority from such diverse sources as the native histories of Pliny and Alexander Neckham, bestiary lore, classical and early medieval fable literature, passages in certain

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66 Conlee xx.

67 Conlee xx.
influential works such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and various passages from the scriptures (e.g. Ecclesiastes 10: 20).  

The talking animals in most of the medieval debates are used as a device to express "a variety of human attitudes toward love and for commenting on them." Although this application holds true in the *O&N* and to some extent in the *NPT*, unlike *PF* or "The Cuckoo and the Nightingale," for instance, where the whole debate is about "courtly love," there are more immediate concerns at stake in these poems than the expression of love.

One of the main characteristics of a debate poem is that it raises certain expectations in its audience, especially as regards the final resolution. The contestants in the debates are invariably equals; neither party is obviously superior to the other(s), especially in terms of their arguments. Nonetheless, whereas in some debates the final resolution is spelled out, in others there is no such satisfying conclusion. Although the open-ended type of argument between rival animals, especially birds, was known since antiquity, in the Middle Ages Abelard's *Sic et Non* was a very influential book in this connection. Abelardian debate is not interested in the result of the debate as much as in the act of dialogue itself. Such a debate is often meant to teach the audience "how" and not "what" to think. While it is crucial to argue well, to make a case, and to build up plausible reasons, it makes no difference whether one wins the day or not. Although the contestants enter the game of disputation in order to win, losing is the least of their concerns provided that they can keep up with the race to the end. As such the dialectic

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*Conlee xxii.

*Conlee xxii.*
approach to the understanding of a problem is the final goal of such debates. There is no convincing resolution in either the O&N or Lydgate’s Debate.

A closer look at both Chaucer’s and Henryson’s fables reveals more of the Abelardian nature of their use of dialogue in much less suspected tales. In Chauntecleer’s palace the significance of dreams remains unclear, nor is it ever resolved amongst the pilgrims what the fable of the cock and the fox is supposed to mean. The Priest’s advice to go and find the moral does not help much. Neither Chaucer the narrator nor Chaucer the poet has anything to add. In Henryson’s case, too, although there is always some specific moralitas tagged to every fable, the audience is urged to crack the nut and find the kernel for themselves. Thomas Reed justly argues that although there is no indication that Henryson was ever ordained, “as schoolmaster of Dunfermline, one of his prime concerns would have been initially to lead his students to clear moral insight and subsequently to encourage their own autonomous moral judgement.” Reed also reminds us that, “Lydgate’s Mummering at Hertford ... represents a potential model for the Scots poet but also (and perhaps more importantly) offers evidence that an even more dogged moralist than Henryson had occasional resort to unresolved debate poetry as a means of relaxing the deliberative bow.”

Preachers and academics frequently used animal stories as exempla to illustrate their sermons. Besides the Greek Physiologus, as early as the beginning of the thirteenth

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71 Reed 18.
century, as Owst suggests, Alexander Neckham in his *De Naturis Rerum* and the Cistercian fabulist Odo of Cheriton had already produced many examples of fables for the use of popular preachers.\(^{72}\) Moreover, as Klingender observes "beast tales abound in the writings of the Dominican, Robert Holcot, who died in 1349, and of the Franciscan, Nicholas Bozon, who wrote a collection of fables in French about 1320."\(^{73}\) One of the most popular of such *exempla* collections was the anonymous *Gesta Romanorum*, compiled before 1342, of which 100 manuscripts have survived.\(^{74}\) It is an amazing mixture of all kinds of serious and humorous narratives, hence a great asset to all medieval educators.\(^{75}\) Such animal *exempla* were also scattered in sermon collections, such as Bromyard's *Summa Praedicanuntium*, in which the fable is very frequent\(^{76}\) and Felton's *Sermones Dominicales* on which popular preachers could conveniently draw.\(^{77}\)

"Other collectors," as Frederick R. Whitesell, estimates, "use as much as 20% of fable material in their exempla, while a few -- a very few -- use little or none at all."\(^{78}\)

Although the literary animal fable and the fable *exemplum* are similar in that both

\(^{72}\)Owst, *Preaching* 300.

\(^{73}\)Klingender 364.

\(^{74}\)Klingender 365. There are 181 stories in this collection more than 20 of which are animal tales.


\(^{78}\)Whitesell 350.
of them are short didactic narratives with anthropomorphic animals as their characters, as well as relying on “the simple device of beast allegory,” they are different, as A. Paul Shallers observes, “in respect to the kinds of truths they teach. A fabulist instructs us about the practical, temporal world while the exemplum writer continually reminds us of the link between the material world below and the immaterial, spiritual world beyond.”

Larry Scanlon distinguishes three differences between two kinds of *exempla*: the sermon *exemplum* and the public *exemplum*. First, unlike the hagiographical and ecclesiological sermon the public form is “classicizing and political” addressing “issues of lay authority.” Second, whereas the sermon *exemplum* tends “toward the benevolent example” the public *exemplum* has “a propensity toward the evil example.” Third, “the development of the public exemplum is intertwined with the Fürstenspiegel, or Mirror of Princes.”

Scanlon shows that the “Chaucerian exemplum” draws on all these three characteristics of the public *exemplum*.

The medieval clergy did not use the fable only as an *exemplum*, but as Owst contends, to provide the common folk with “first lessons in general knowledge” as well. However, although the fable was used as a tool in teaching grammar and rhetoric to students, it is highly unlikely that the medieval clergy ever undertook the task of

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81 Scanlon 81.

82 Owst, *Lit. & Pulpit* 186.
teaching "literacy to the half-literate via ancient tales." At least the majority of them, "themselves often too illiterate, too contemptuous of lay-folk, or else too jealous of their own privileged 'cunning'" did not welcome the task. Moreover, as Owst suggests, having exhausted "the wisdom and solemn fantasy of Bestiary-lore" the medieval clergy looked for "yet a further contribution to preaching from the animal world in the shape of not instruction in natural history, but of entertainment once again by means of semi-humorous fiction, namely, the animal fable." Owst quotes Courthope, speaking in his History of English Poetry "of the love of stories about beasts and birds, which the Teutonic races perhaps brought with them from their old homes in the East." Owst emphasizes that "whether or not the appetite for such fables was strong and indigenous, at all events the comparative rarity of the animal fiction in English sermons suggests that it remained, with few exceptions, as it had begun the particular entertainment of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy. Nevertheless, England produced at least one leading moral fabulist of the Middle Ages in the person of Odo [of] Cheriton, and two subsequent preachers who made rich use of this same material." Thus the exemplum, as Wilson suggests, "provides a moral in an acceptable and entertaining way and helped to keep the

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Owst, Lit. & Pulpit 185.

Owst, Lit. & Pulpit 185.

Owst, Lit. & Pulpit 204.

Owst, Lit. & Pulpit 204.

Owst, Lit. & Pulpit 204.
attention of the audience by the variety of its subjects." Though the task was not all that easy, "despite the objections of Wyclif's 'poor preachers' who pleaded for a simple expounding of the scriptural text," the exemplum flourished and "maintained its popularity up to the end of the Middle Ages."89

While it is common sense that animal stories have always been used to educate and entertain, it is not quite clear what the medieval writers were after in their use of animal figures. Why should a medieval poet, for instance, pick on a fox or a rooster to make a point? Though there may never be a single definitive solution to the question, it is worth entertaining some viable options. Man and beast have more in common that one is ready to admit. Animals are born, live, and die like we do. They eat, drink, sleep, and regenerate as we do. They fight, reconcile, and play as we do. Man and beast live together on the same earth sharing the same divine bounty. They both depend on each other, though this was more true in the past than it is now. Their distinctions, too, mark yet a higher level of analogy with more similarities in mind. The animals' lack of speech, for example, makes man all the more curious to communicate with them. To give another example, man has always wondered whether or not animals have a soul with the capability of salvation. What do animals think of man? Do they or do they not really think? Morton W. Bloomfield argues that, "the animal fable is one of the most widespread of the forms of wisdom literature. It attempts to teach wisdom usually most explicitly, through animal adventures and dialogues ... One of its great attractions rests

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88Wilson, *Early ME Lit.* 231.

89Wilson, *Early ME Lit.* 231.
on the general curiosity that man has always felt towards animals.\textsuperscript{90}

THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

What the medieval English fables are particularly interested in are lessons in exercising contentment (Henryson and Lydgate), avoiding pride (Chaucer, Henryson), the consequences of deceit (Chaucer, Henryson, Lydgate), naiveté (Lydgate, Henryson, Chaucer), man’s ingratitude (Gower), leaving one’s status quo (Langland), women’s unfaithfulness (Chaucer, Gower) free will and predestination (Chaucer and Henryson).

Yet, if there is one single subject that all our medieval English fabulists give voice to it is the injustice done to the weak and the less fortunate. Though by way of implication, Henryson shows his frustrations with both the ecclesiastical and the state courts in “The Trial of the Fox,” “The Sheep and the Dog,” and “The Fox, the Wolf, and the Farmer.”\textsuperscript{91}

The talking birds in Chaucer and Gower are ill-rewarded for their unwise truthfulness,\textsuperscript{92} as if both poets cherish the “injunction to silence.”\textsuperscript{93} The confrontation of the Owl and the Nightingale, too, is sometimes associated with “historical developments like the struggle between Henry II and his renegade archbishop, Thomas à Becket.”\textsuperscript{94}


\textsuperscript{91}See Reed 15.


\textsuperscript{93}Patterson 49.

\textsuperscript{94}Reed 219.
One of the difficult questions that the medieval animal fable raises is that of its teaching voice. Who is it after all who tries to educate and edify? In the narrative, usually the anthropomorph assumes this office and manages to get its message across. The explicit moral of the fable, however, does not always reveal the identity of the teacher. Although it usually comes from an unidentifiable narrator, the voice may well be that of the poet. It always assumes authenticity because, after all, the medieval writer is least concerned with originality. He would rather come up with a make-believe source than create his own story, let alone spell out his beliefs. That is why the same story is repeated over and over again in medieval literature and few original stories, if any, are produced. This must explain why Chaucer, Henryson, and Lydgate, for instance, tell the same story of the fox and the rooster. Nevertheless, unlike other medieval literary genres, the fable rarely if ever attributes its moral to a well-known and well-established author, such as Boethius, Cato, or even Aesop.

Effort has been made to identify the teaching voice(s) in each fable in this study. Where applicable, layers of narrative with distinct teaching voices are carefully scrutinized. It is conventionally taken for granted that animals do speak human language and, by way of extension, do not find it difficult to understand. Nonetheless, the teaching animal of the narrative generally necessitates an animal audience, while the human narrator of the moral directly addresses a human audience. Hence while the moral is the final statement of the quasi-teacher, the indirect lessons of the narrative may come from any quarter. Unlike the classical short and simple fables, the medieval animal fables are

95 For more on the narrative authority, see Scanlon 3-54, 209-46, 282-97.
often longer and more sophisticated. Generally there are more ideas in the narrative to contemplate than the one lesson which the moral offers. Different teaching voices necessarily address themselves to different audiences and hence deal with different issues. Nevertheless, the medieval animal fable, as a whole, is much more personalized than any traditional fable. That is to say, unlike almost all other previous fables which could easily be collected in a single volume and treated as if they were all Aesopic, a Chaucerian fable and a Lydgatean fable have little in common. Each poet has his unique voice and his particular agendas. Each poet is a different observer and a different teacher. Finally, the reader is expected to look for all kinds of clues to track down the teaching voice as much as the lesson itself, because of the deliberate elements of irony, humour and burlesque in most of medieval English fables. It is one thing to teach a lesson, but it is always a more interesting question how it is taught.

Another serious question in relation to the didactic animal fable is that of its audience. Although today we tend to think of animal fables as children’s literature, they were not so intended originally. Horace’s “the Country Mouse and the Town Mouse” (Satires 2. 4),\textsuperscript{96} for instance, is a very simple story on the surface the plot of which may well be understood by a half-literate audience. However, behind its mask of simplicity, there lies the cultivation of a kind of Roman virtue in the aristocratic class. Neither children nor the peasantry could possibly be the immediate audience of Horace.\textsuperscript{97} The


\textsuperscript{97}See Ziolkowski 5.
question of audience in the medieval animal fables may only be addressed speculatively. One has to distinguish several possible types of audiences in any case: the fictional audience, the historical audience, the assumed or implied audience, and the imagined or intended audience. Whereas the fictional audience, the one which is there in the narrative, poses little difficulty of identification, it is often next to impossible to identify any specific historical audience for our fables. One may come across a few hints in the narrative and even find some concrete clues to contemplate some courtly atmosphere or otherwise, but that is about all. Although sometimes such internal evidence may lead the reader to some assumed class or an implied type of audience, the historical audience of medieval literature in general, and that of the fable in particular, may never come to light. What may be reasonably deduced from both the internal and external evidence in a fable is its intended audience. Although it may not solve the problem, it certainly narrows down the range of the spectrum of the potential audience. Furthermore, it definitely rules out certain types of audience as improbable if not altogether impossible. Chaucer’s NPT, for instance, could not have been addressed to a church congregation, nor Gower’s “Phebus and Cornide” to the peasantry.

Then who actually read the medieval English fables? In the absence of TV, radio, daily papers, and the kind of fiction readers have access to today, it may reasonably be surmised that primarily the literate middle-class man would read a fable to pass his while. He might have even tried to entertain his whole family by reading it aloud. In that case, the servant of the house too may have been expected to sit on the porch and listen. However, since not many manuscripts were available and not many could afford them,
the accessibility of these fables was highly limited. This must have naturally necessitated group listeners of some sort, not only a courtly audience, but also less prestigious gatherings. In fact, although these fables do not single out any special category of readers, they do not exclude anyone either. Despite the fact that the fable was part of the school curriculum, there is no proof that Chaucer or Gower, for instance, were ever taught at schools.\(^8\) Nonetheless, although children's literature, as we understand it, did not exist in the Middle Ages, children may well have enjoyed the medieval fables one way or another. "When Caxton began printing in England in 1476," Sheila Egoff argues, "the child was still looked upon as a miniature of the adult and was merged into the adult world. With the gradual realization that the child's natural carefree ways were a barrier between adult and child, adults hastened to teach the child 'manners', and the first books for children were books of manners and 'courtesie'. What more palatable candy coating for the traditional morals of mankind than Aesop's Fables?\(^9\) Furthermore, it is not difficult to imagine literate medieval members of the family, especially mothers who had more free time on their hands, using the fables as teaching tools both in literacy and manners. This is especially true in the later medieval period when more and more people could read and more manuscripts were available, not to mention printed material at the end of the period. J.A. Burrow maintains that "there was growing up, during Langland's lifetime, a new kind of lay public, independent, like the audience of clerks, of any

\(^8\)See Blackham 11.

specific locality -- the original, it might be said, of the modern Reading Public. This public was recruited from the growing class of men, outside the Church, who had enough money to buy manuscripts, and enough education to read them -- such men as members of the rising 'bourgeoisie'. By the Fifteenth Century, vernacular manuscripts to satisfy the demands of this public were being produced on a large scale."  

Whereas this study does not concern itself with the specifics of medieval literary reception and the reader response of the period, it has made extensive use of the work of scholars in the field and their scholarly observations on the problem of the fabular audience. Most significantly, however, Walter J. Ong's "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," Gray Steinley's "Introductory Remarks on Narratology," Ruth Crosby's "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," and "Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery," Edmund Reiss's "Chaucer and His Audience," Paul Strohm's "Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual," and Jane Gottschalk's "The Owl and the Nightingale: Lay Preachers to a Lay Audience," have been particularly useful and frequent references will be made to them. Furthermore, both Judith Ferster and Larry Scanlon emphasize the use of fables as a convenient way of making a point in the form of a 'Mirror for Princes'.  

Hence the greater spectrum of audience would be a pyramid

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with the royalty at its peak and the common folk at its base. However, as with any other medieval genre, it is difficult to make sure of any specific audience. There is no reason to believe that any of our fables were addressed directly to any king or other royalty. Likewise, there is no indication whatsoever in our fables that they were meant to be read to the peasantry and the labourers, let alone to be read by them since they were generally illiterate. Nevertheless, according to Ferster, among others, "the idea of a middle-class audience seems inescapable, but not exclusive ... for much of the poetry produced in the court for a courtly audience ... was written with a wider public in mind."\textsuperscript{102} Anne Middleton, too, is resolved that, although Gower's \textit{Confessio Amantis} (CA) was originally dedicated to the king, the poet had a wider range of audience in mind: "The king is not the main imagined audience, but an occasion for gathering and formulating what is on the common mind."\textsuperscript{103}

Whether the audience accepts it or rejects it, the animal fable, like any other didactic text, is meant to teach. Sometimes the lesson is learned and sometimes not. The animal fable provides both text and context. The anthropomorphic animals sometimes prove to be reluctant to take the lesson and, of course, get themselves into trouble. However, the lessons are not always simple and direct to follow. Although there are texts which are not necessarily meant to teach yet from which lessons are learned, the animal fable is specifically didactic. The fable communicates several types of lessons: mild and

\textsuperscript{102}Ferster 180.

indirect, yet clear enough like Lydgate's *Fables*; ironic and even satiric like Chaucer's and Henryson's fables; inferable and deductible like Gower's fables. The fable employs several ways to get its message across to the audience: overt and direct as in Aesop, Marie, or Lydgate; covert and indirect as in Langland or Chaucer; inconclusive as the *O&N*.

If anything, 'comparison' is the key word to a better understanding of the fable. In an allusion to animals -- though not in a fabular manner -- Langland, in *PP*, has his dreamer meet with Nature who leads him to a high mountain where he may learn to love Nature through each of her creatures (Passus XI. 319-400). The dreamer sees, among other things, worms, birds, and man and his mate. He sees that all animals follow reason; they observe moderation in everything, in acting, in drinking, and, especially, in procreating. To his amazement, however, he discovers that, unlike inconsiderate man, after conception the cow does not bellow after the bull, nor does the boar pursue the sow, nor horses and hounds their mates. The comparison between man and the beast here, as in the animal fable, is one of the oldest pedagogical strategies -- specular methodology. In the beast man can see himself, not only as a likeness, but even the very beast in himself too. It is as if the human audience is constantly reminded that if he follows what the beast does, he is like the beast. He is constantly urged to check his behaviour not to make the same mistakes. He is always reminded that it is what one does and says which matters, not who performs it. Man is what he makes of himself, after all.

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The animal fable alerts its reader to the consequences of vice and virtue by exemplification. The reader is invited to see himself in the same position as the fabular beast. He is warned against the outcome of his conduct in terms of what the beast encounters. He is encouraged to cherish the result of the good behaviour of the animal characters for himself. As such, reward and punishment tactics are amongst the most commonly recurrent strategies that the animal fable employs. This is particularly the case in the Henrysonian and Lydgatean fables. With some modification the same tactics are present in both Chaucer and Gower. Incidentally, the punishment strategy is closely related to the Aristotelian notion of catharsis. The reader may well identify himself with one or the other anthropomorphs and find himself purged through the beast’s punishment. This is more than simply learning from the animal; it is, rather, experiencing the same process of rise and fall all along with the beast character psychologically. As such, the moral at the end of most of Henryson’s fables, for instance, can be seen not only as what is to be learnt, but also as the account of a whole life lived, much as the commentator would part with the audience at the end of a classical tragedy.

Another common strategy employed by our fabulists is that of surprise. Arnold Clayton Henderson goes further and suggests that surprise is not only a manner of teaching, but also its matter. According to Henderson, from animal fables the reader learns not only the moral it offers, but even more, he learns to expect the unexpected. We learn that fables may surprise us, “that we cannot quite predict the meaning until we see it. ... We can catalog options known to be open to our authors, but we cannot predict their
choices among options."¹⁰⁵ One of the best examples of medieval animal fables which is rich in the surprise motif is Chaucer's *NPT.*

Yet a different strategy employed by most of our fabulists is that of playfulness. The debate format not only of the *O&N*, but of most other fables in this study, is an excellent way of hammering an idea home to many and various readers. For one thing, the form may be playful and engaging rather than pedantic and inflexible. Secondly, its dialogic form necessitates a dialectic progression with all kinds of pros and cons. Thirdly, the format does not deprive the learner of his liberty to pick up what interests him the most. Finally, the Abelardian debates in our study go beyond this target and instead of focusing on any specific resolution, they sharpen the reader’s wit by challenging him to learn how to think.

Entertainment is part of both the matter and manner of any animal fable. It is a way of sugar-coating the bitter lesson and it is a challenging invitation to crack the nut for its kernel. Animals of the fable make us laugh not necessarily at them, but rather with them. Our amusement at the cunning fox, the conceited rooster, and the talkative crow is more than a pastime; rather it provides us with the building blocks of a better understanding of others and also more poignantly of ourselves. The child in us may laugh at the greedy wolf or the witty mouse, yet the same laughter may also intrigue us to halt for a moment to reevaluate our sense of growth and achievement.

Finally, our fabulists are almost always persuasive one way or another. They

frequently refer to their work as an "ensample" or an example to persuade the reader to find appropriate role models. The Koran suggests that "There is a good example in God’s apostle for those of you who look to God and the Last Day and remember God always" (33. 21). So do clerical writers describe Christ "as an exemplum." It is in keeping with the same notion that Chaucer’s Parson is described as an “ensample” three times in the portrait in the General Prologue (496, 505, 520). Scanlon, who suggests that the entire CT is like a fable with the closing tale as its moral statement, emphasizes the Parson’s exemplarity in that he teaches by his doing. Employing the same term “ensample” in his CA (V. 1827), Gower too “uses the same rhetorical strategy, defining the ideal role of the cleric as an exemplary one.” Reason in PP gives more “ensemples” to show his point (IV. 136). Both the Owl and the Nightingale agree that Master Nicholas is a fine example of a wise and cautious man (1.191). Though the exemplary strategy is not always explicit in the medieval English fables, it is never lost on our fabulists.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS STUDY

This “Introduction” has established the background of the English fables in the context of medieval literature as a whole. It is followed by six chapters which share common features. Each chapter opens with a biographical sketch of the poet in question and a brief account of the relevant manuscripts. Fables are treated individually because

107 Scanlon 9.
108 Scanlon 6.
109 Scanlon 8.
of the raison d'être of the genre. Although no attempt has been made to give an analysis of the poet's work as a whole, where applicable, the fables are put in the context of the work in which they appear in a passing way. In each case, the discussion proper begins with the question: "what does the fable teach?" Here, the poem, and not the fable alone, is analysed. Thus the discussion does not limit itself to the moral of the fable -- stated or not. The second question addressed in each case is: "who is teaching the lesson(s)?" Here, different voices of the teaching character, narrator, or poet are closely examined. However, the question of narratology per se is not raised because this study concerns itself with the educational aspects of the fables throughout and not their rhetorical merits. The third question is: "who is being taught?" Once more, although in each case the potential audience -- imagined, intended, and even historical -- is suggested, this study does not pretend to solve the general question of the medieval audience in any way. The last question: "how does the lesson get across to its audience?" and the pedagogical approaches employed bring each discussion to its end.

This study opens with a chapter on Henryson's fables. Although chronologically Henryson is the last poet in question, his fables present the least difficulty when tackling the four governing questions laid out above. For one thing, Henryson's MF is the most straightforward collection of animal fables in that they are exclusively animal fables; they are of the same relatively short length; they are all by the same author. Furthermore, they mark some of the best of their kind and the peak of medieval English fable. With a glance at the bestiary tradition, Henryson manipulates not only the Aesopic fables, but also the Reynardian cycles, both to give voice to his criticism of society at large and to
show ways to improve it.

The third chapter discusses Chaucer's *NPT* and *ManT*. These are generally regarded as the most sophisticated and controversial fables in the English language. In this chapter, different layers of narrative in each case are separately discussed. Although both fables are examined in the larger context of the *CT*, this study does not pretend to have exhausted Chaucerian scholarship on either the fables or on the entire work. Set next to Henryson's fables, however, it is hoped that Chaucer's fables show how far the limits of the genre may be stretched.

The fourth chapter concerns itself with Gower's "Adrian and Bardus" and "Phebus and Cornide" from *A.* Gower's second fable is originally an Ovidian story, of which Chaucer's *ManT* is another version. Although the identity of the source story in both cases has been an excuse to bring Gower into contrast with Chaucer, the two poets were almost contemporaneous but had different agendas and different attitudes. Gower's first fable, however, is originally an Eastern story from the *Kalilah and Dimnah* tradition. Although no comparative or cross-cultural approach has been employed, the discussion sheds light on the possibility not only of similarity in matter, but also of manner of education as regards the fable.

The fifth chapter deals with Langland's isolated animal fable of "Belling the Cat." This relatively short chapter focuses on a historically important fable dealing with political dilemmas of the time. Following Gower's drawing on an Oriental story to compose his fable, Langland's fable too is likened -- though again no exhaustive comparison is admitted -- to another Eastern tradition almost of the same nature and with
the same ulterior motifs in producing a fable.

The sixth chapter is on Lydgate's *Fables, Churl,* and *Debate.* Lydgate's influence on Henryson gives a good reason to set his fables against those of the Scottish poet. Lydgate, who was, in fact, extremely popular in his own time, in later ages has been much less fortunate. He is, however, an essential link in the development of the medieval English fable in that he retains much of the classical Aesopic fables and foreshadows the more sophisticated Henrysonian ones. His two non-Aesopic fables which may easily fall into the debate category are crucial to a better understanding of fable in general.

The seventh and final chapter of this study focuses on the *Ode.* Although this poem is generally regarded as a bird debate poem, a case can be made for its fabular form in addition to the fact that it includes a few mini-fables as well. The Abelardian dialectics used in this poem, especially in its open-ended way of teaching, shed light on previous fables in retrospect. Though chronologically the poem is the earliest in this study and though it is the first English poem of its kind, it is placed at the end because it is not a canonical fable. However, its debate form links it to Lydgate's non-Aesopic fables discussed in the previous chapter.

Despite their dissimilarities, the English medieval fables all share the basics of any didactic or pedagogical work to justify this collection. Moreover, individual as they may be, these animal fables have the same roots, the same history, and in many cases are closely interconnected. For example, the same motifs of greed and injustice are central to the fables of Gower, Lydgate, and Henryson. Both Chaucer and Henryson draw on the conceited Cock and the flattering Fox. The same tale of the Cock and the Jewel recurs in
Lydgate and Henryson emphasising the importance of knowledge and the need to seek it. Although there is no lack of scholarship on the medieval animal fables, few scholars, if any, deal with their didactic and pedagogical uses. What this study attempts to achieve is to raise some questions related to the pedagogy and didacticism in the medieval English fables. It is also hoped that by pulling together these apparently heterogeneous texts by different hands under the same umbrella may contribute to a better understanding of the animal fable in general, and its English exemplars in particular. Finally, it is hoped that such a work may encourage others to carry on with what is left unfinished and what is here proposed in a provisional manner.
II. HENRYSON & THE FABLE

Little is known about Robert Henryson's life. The only reliable facts about his biography are that he was a poet who lived in Dunfermline and died before 1505. The rubrics of Henryson's manuscripts as well as his early printed editions indicate that he must have held a Master of Arts degree. It is also likely that he taught in the Grammar School of the Benedictine Abbey at Dunfermline. His poems, however, show that he was a fine moralist with a great sense of humour, a didactic rhetorician with a store of wise saws and proverbs, and that he was trained at a university, studied Law, and was familiar with Logic, Music, Astrology, and was well read in Aristotle, Boethius, and the Church Fathers.

Both the subject matter and the treatment of *Morall Fabbilis of Esope* (MF) suggest that these fables were expected to be pedagogically appealing to their historical audience. It is the intention of the author not only to delight but also to "repri[ef] the of thi misleuing, / O man" by creating a genuine dialogue between the audience and the text on the one hand, and between the world of the animals and that of man on the other. The fables concern themselves with the failure of both the individual and society. They

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3 Denton Fox, ed., *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 3. All references to Henryson's fables will be from this text and hereafter only the line numbers of each citation will be provided parenthetically within the text.

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moralize the individual and satirize social, political, and ecclesiastical institutions. They expose human errors of many kinds, especially arrogance, injustice, and lack of restraint, prudence, and clear perception. They make their moral point in a variety of ways, condemning the breakdown of morality especially in the individual. Whereas the foolish and the deceived are simply reproached, the cunning and the deceiving are seriously punished. Nonetheless, those institutions that fail to protect the innocent receive the greatest criticism.

As with any other literary didactic work, there are certain questions related to Henryson's edifying techniques which must be addressed. For example, one may ask who it is that assumes the role of the instructor: Henryson, the speaker of the poem, or a fictitious narrator, and then in what capacity: as a preacher, a teacher, an entertainer, or a commentator. Is it some classical well-established authority who is summoned to rehearse an old story about human foibles or a timid Scottish observer dealing with contemporary social dilemmas? After all, is it the anthropomorphized animal of the tale or the human interpreter of the Moralitas whose teaching matters?

Next is the question of audience. Whom are these fables meant to educate? Were they originally intended to educate the pupils of the Grammar School at Dunfermline, or were they primarily addressed to the court and court people, or perhaps the church and the church-goers? The country men, the town men, the merchants, any and all could have been potentially the most immediate audience of these tales. In the absence of any concrete data as to who the real historical audience of these fables was, one can only surmise the identity of the intended or imagined audience of each fable. Moreover, one
may also talk of different aspects of the same audience in different fables.

Third is the nature of the lessons to be taught. What themes are conveyed and how practical are they? What is it that the fables try to present to their audience: justice, prudence, contentment, or repentance? Are the fables meant to teach general ideas like the Aesopic morals, or do they address more specific subjects which have to do with the social problems of late fifteenth century Scotland? Are the fables similar to the allegorical and symbolic bestiaries, or to the social and satiric beast-epics?

Furthermore, and probably more important than the other questions, we must enquire about the didactic strategies employed in these fables. At times the audience is encouraged to behave in a certain way so as to enjoy some promised reward; at other times, it is warned against some other behaviour in order to avoid a punishment. The instructor is sometimes clear and to the point, but more often he is ambiguous and demanding of interpretation. Usually he takes his audience by surprise, but there are times when he is quite predictable. Although occasionally a lesson to be learned is exclusively finite and is stated clearly in the Moralitas, there are many other lessons, explicit and implicit, in both the Moralitas and the narrative which are repeated over and again. Moreover, although the instructor frequently makes his point and expects his students to follow his well-laid instruction, he also strives to train them to make personal judgements. Yet this remains only a partial list of the pedagogical tactics the fables employ.

The purpose of this chapter is to address primarily these four issues: who teaches what to whom and how? Three premises are taken for granted at the outset: first, no
matter what Henryson’s sources may have been, in these tales anthropomorphized animals conventionally have human faculties, especially that of rational discourse; second, the fables are related to each other in the order that they appear in sources (as in Fox’s edition); third, that the Moralitas of each story is not an after-thought or an irrelevant appendage to the fable as some critics have argued; rather it is integral to the story and follows from it.

In general it is safe to assume that for the better part of the collection, if not all of it, the narrator of the poems speaks for Robert Henryson, school-master of the Abbey School at Dunfermline. Although Aesopic fables were generally used as exercises in Latin translation by the students, one may never be sure of the true identity or any other specifics of the poet’s students. Besides, while animal stories are more often considered to be children’s literature, there is neither historical nor textual evidence to suggest that children were the author’s intended audience. On the other hand, due to the level of sophistication of these fables as well as their highly stylized rhetoric, it is much safer to assume that they were meant to be read by adults.

The narrator of the poems plays a variety of roles. He tells the tales and comments on them; he teaches and preaches; he claims that he is merely a translator; he dreams of Aesop, the ancient authority and engages him in dialogue; he reads the minds of the beasts and encourages his audience to contemplate both the realism of the


narrative and the didactic messages of the *Moralitas*. He coaches the reader; sometimes he teases him; he is ironic, indeed sarcastic, and sometimes he is simply a fellow-traveller with the reader on the same journey. Above all, he keeps the reader on the alert not to miss the point and if he appears to -- which is generally the case -- Henryson makes sure not only to correct but also to provide sufficient repetition, signals, and clues for a better appreciation. Although he does not state it, he expects from his audience some familiarity with the Bible and Christianity, the Aesopic tradition and the beast-epic cycles, and of course the history of Scotland of the late fifteenth century. There are many surprises here and there, but what is common throughout the collection is Henryson's sympathy for all, even the sinful. The narrator is keen to provide his audience with both an abundance of entertainment and a great deal of moral instruction.

Henryson the author may conceal his identity behind the mask of an impartial narrator. The narrator, however, though different from the rest of the characters, is a creation of the author, and hence he is subject to many changes including partiality. He is there to relate the stories of fictitious animals and to comment on the tales to his imaginary audience, who, in the course of the story, may interact with him in different ways. He is there to entertain and to educate the audience, and it is with that imaginary audience that we identify ourselves. We become the narrator’s audience.

In the capacity of teacher, the narrator tells old stories to his audience, and again as a teacher he gives himself the liberty to modify, abridge, or amplify these stories to suit best his intended audience. Moreover, he never fails to bring each story to an end with a clearly stated moral lesson for the edification of his audience. One should always
bear in mind that there is no guarantee that this is the only intended message of the tale the narrator wants to imprint on his audience’s minds. Rather, it is a challenge to the audience, which is encouraged to train itself to be able to deduce moral lessons from almost every detail of the story.

The narrator himself changes along with the stories. In “The Prologue” he is a conventional story-teller drawing on familiar Aesopic fables. In “The Cock and the Jasp” he establishes a dynamic relationship with his audience but remains almost detached from his animal protagonist. In the following fables he gradually tends to sympathize with and show his feelings towards both his animal and human characters and what they represent. In his moralization, however, he is primarily concerned with man in general. Whether he admires one and scolds the other, whether he shows pity to one and scorns the other, whether he is optimistic about man’s future as in his earlier stories or sceptical about any real improvement on the part of man in this world as in the later fables, the narrator never passes any harsh judgement on him. The narrator’s optimism along with his sense of humour increases only up to “The Lion and the Mouse,” where he is positive that justice in this world is in fact possible and that people may indeed give and take advice freely and act accordingly. However, in the following fables his pessimism gradually increases and his humour subsides. By the end of the book, man is left at the mercy of blind chance. Nevertheless, in all cases the narrator persistently invites the reader’s sympathy with the victims of his tales and what they represent.

As for the titles of all tales as well as “The Prologue” I am following Fox’s convention.
"THE PROLOGUE"

"The Prologue" lays bare the rationale of writing fables and alerts the audience to the narrator's rhetorical strategies, engaging the audience in a tense dialogue. His interest in the dialectic approach to the old saws is clear from the very start:

Thocht feinȝeit fabils of ald poetre
Be not al grunded vpon truth, ȝit than,
Thair polite termes of sweit rhetore
Richt plesand ar vnto the eir of man;
And als the caus quhy thay first began
Wes to repreif the thi misleuing,
O man, be figure of a̅n̄e vther thing. (1-7)

Although animal fables are both fictional and non-Christian, they are pleasing and, more importantly, their original purpose is to reprove men's evil ways by their figural truths. The narrator thus follows the literary convention that poetry is delightful and instructive. However, he also challenges the audience to contemplate how something which is grounded in fiction can reveal any truth; or how what is pleasing to the ear is supposed to reform man morally and socially.

The second stanza further invites the diligent audience to the metaphoric message of the poems that the narrator is about to offer. By attending wisely to these fables the audience, like the farmer working on a rough field, will find both the flowers of delight and the nourishing wheat of instruction. Hence the narrator promises that his "subtell dyte of poetry" (13) will be not only "hailsum and gude" (11) but also "sweit" (12) —
both useful and delightful. Nonetheless it is “subtell”; it may readily please the ear but not necessarily or easily the mind. Since there is no invocation or any divine guidance, as one may find in Lydgate for instance, the audience, according to Gregory Kratzman, is deprived of “the illusion that there might be a final and ultimate authority for what he is to read.” Thus the narrator demands that the audience make every effort possible to use its imagination with the fullest power, like the farmer who tills the ground and ploughs and irrigates it so as to get the flowers and the grain.

The end of the second stanza, “to gude purpois, quha culd it weill apply” (14), suggests that only if the audience tries to combine theory and practice -- learning the doctrine and applying it to their evil-living -- is it possible really to enjoy not only the poetry proper but also the end-result of its instruction. Later on, the narrator will provide instances where his characters do actually implement their intellectual findings in their day-to-day affairs and are literally saved as in “The Lion and the Mouse.” He will also introduce cases in which due to either ignorance or lack of restraint his characters perish, as the birds are killed in “The Preaching of the Swallow.”

The third stanza opens with another traditional allegory of the “nuttis schell” (15). It may be difficult to appreciate the real meaning of poetry at first but that is its primary function, i.e., to educate. Unlike the flowers and grain of the previous stanza which were “hailsum” to enjoy, the “nuttis schell” here is only “hard and teuch” (15) worthless in itself. Yet since it is “gude to mannis sustenence” (11), within this hard shell

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there lies a sweet kernel. Likewise, within the “hard and teuch” shell of “ane fenȝeit fabill” (18) one may find the “kirnell” of “ane doctrine wyse aneuch” (17). Hence the shell is the fable, hard yet delightful to crack, and the kernel its sentence, “delectabill” (16) and useful if appreciated and applied wisely.  

In the fourth stanza, the narrator, like almost every other medieval man of letters, justifies his poetry in terms of the Horatian combination of seriousness and mirth. Poetry must be not only useful but delightful as well: “Dulcius arrident seria picta iociis” (28). In the fifth and sixth stanzas the narrator assumes the role of a mere translator who at the “requeist and precept of ane lord” (34) — most probably a fictitious one — has undertaken to render the Latin Aesop — in fact Gualterus Anglicus — into English. Here he addresses his audience in terms of his “maisteris” (29) and begs their “reuerence” (39) to correct his shortcomings through his “negligence” (40) by their “willis gratious” (42).

While the audience is already engaged in some more serious issues than the “eloquence” (37) and “rethorike” (38) of poetry, the narrator is quick to demonstrate his unalterable commitment to the edification of man by telling tales. His modest tone quickly changes to that of approbation. He reminds his audience that in the world of

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8See Stephan Khiony, “Tale-Moral Relationship in Henryson’s Moral Fables,” SSI. 17 (1982): 101, where he argues that Henryson intended not only the common metaphoric interpretation of the nutshell, but also “the more mystical interpretation,” where Jesus Christ is the nut and his word, the kernel. Khiony concludes that “in Aesop’s classical and pagan world, natural moral law, which is apprehensible, lies beneath the unpromising exterior of pure fiction; while for the Christian medieval poet, spiritual truth inaccessible to the unaided intellect is hidden in the things of this world.”

fiction, animals may be made to speak, act, and reason like men; regrettably enough, in the real world, as his examples will show, many men behave like animals.

In the eighth stanza the narrator advises his apparently surprised audience not to marvel at his analogy of man to beast when men habitually live carnal and sinful lives which are ungoverned by a capacity for shame. When unchecked, "Syne in the mynd sa fast is radicate / That he in brutal beist is transformate" (55-56). Brutalization then becomes synonymous with the metamorphosis of man to dumb beast. Here the voice of the servant-like translator pleading fallibility to his "maisteris" changes to the authoritative voice of the preacher blaming his congregation for its indulgence in covetousness and its lack of restraint. In the final stanza of "The Prologue" the narrator leaves his defiant tone and reflects on the Aesopic tradition with its conventional purposes: delightful to some "in gay metir" (58) and instruction to others "be figure" (59) written. By the "hie" and "low" (60) the narrator tries to reach out to the widest audience possible.

"The Prologue" leaves no room for any doubt as to the narrator's intentions: he is first of all serious in what he is talking about, and his primary purpose in telling his tales is to edify his readers in a world deprived of genuine spirituality. While the audience is expected to make every effort not to miss the basic moral lessons of what is to follow, the narrator does promise to provide entertainment as well. Entertainment aside, he aims at two distinct pedagogical objectives: to train his audience to interpret poetry composed metaphorically and to teach it to lead a morally proper life.

I. "THE COCK AND THE JASP"
"The Cock and the Jasp" is traditionally the opening fable of almost all Aesopic collections. One of the major differences between this tale and the following twelve tales is that its protagonist is neither encouraged nor threatened to behave other than what he ignorantly does. Unlike other protagonists, the cock does not learn a lesson and he does not come any nearer to the significance of the jewel he finds in the dung. The lesson comes only in the Moralitas. The narrator, on the other hand, generalizes the cock's ignorance to man, and thus by giving a long sermon takes his audience by surprise.

The audience is, on the one hand, expected to be aware of the Aesopic tradition with the expectation of a tagged straight-forward and day-to-day practical moral, and on the other hand it is embarrassed by its own similarity to the cock because it was unaware of the figurative interpretation of the tale as a story of man's ignorance. Moreover, the lost jewel provides a strategic device for the teacher; he is not going to tell his audience where the jewel, the truth, is. What he does say is that it is hidden beneath the insignificant objects of the world and now it is the responsibility of each individual to make every effort possible to find it.\(^\text{10}\)

The reasons why the cock rejects the jewel are those of a natural bird that is seeking its natural food and for whom a precious stone and a piece of dirt are the same. However, if the jewel represents truth and knowledge, so does the cock stand for fallen man. While the tale seems to stimulate sympathy for a hungry creature, the Moralitas apparently ridicules the unobservant audience which has missed the intended message of

\(^\text{10}\text{Cf. Chaucer's } NPT \text{ (VII. 3438-43).}\)
the fable. In this connection, Stephan Khiony’s suggestion that “we may feel cheated”\(^{11}\) may at first seem appropriate. But after all this is part of the teaching strategy that the narrator employs. It seems as if he reminds his audience to make sure not to be deceived again, nor to make the same mistake of going by appearances.

Whereas “The Prologue” established a mixed relationship between the story-teller and the audience, in “The Cock and the Jasp” and its Moralitas the narrator secures his audience’s dependence on his choice and taste, his matter and manner. Here he is the translator, the scribe, the teller, the preacher, the entertainer, and above all, the teacher. He begins as a conventionalist and ends up taking his audience by surprise and manipulating its general knowledge to anticipate any interpretation. Indeed he expects nothing less than the total dependence of his audience on his guidance and judgement.

Although there is little hope of reconstructing any specific audience for “The Cock and the Jasp,” its tone implies the relaxed aspect of a body of listeners rather than the solemn tone of a congregation. After all, the narrator is not delivering a sermon with an exemplum; neither is he providing a translation drill for a group of young pupils. He is trying to sharpen the minds of a friendly assembly in a witty fashion.

The protagonist of “The Cock and the Jasp” is a cock whose character is split equally between that of a natural bird and a reasoning anthropomorph. He looks like a bird, acts like a bird, but reasons like a human being though again with an animal’s level of discernment. The narrator equates the cock and the housemaids in that the jewel is lost to both of them. The servants are careless to sweep away the jewel; and the cock is

\(^{11}\)Khiony 102.
unaware of its true value. The servants are careless and insolent and pay little attention when they sweep in the house; the cock comes upon the jewel by chance and recognizes that it is a jewel fit for “ane lord or king” (81) and resolves that it “gains not for” (80) him, confirming his preference for something to fill his stomach. Unlike most other animal protagonists of the collection, the cock does not try to be anything more than a natural bird with natural needs to satisfy, but neither is he a pure bird pushing the jewel away as he would any other stone, nor does he act like a man picking up the jewel to sell it for profit.

The last stanza of the fable makes the case more of a mystery where the narrator draws on the unique characteristics of the jewel — all at the expense of the cock and surely to his dismay. It is in this transition stanza that the narrator alerts his audience to his own indispensable guidance. Insofar as the cock is a bird, his reasons to give up the jewel for “small wormis, or snaillis” (94) are cogent enough. But the cock is meant to represent man and hence his argument is totally a failure. Though he is lucky to find the valuable jewel, his imperfect perception makes a fool out of him because he sees and understands only a part of the lessons of the world around him and remains content with his own needs. As for the audience, now that its lack of discernment is exposed because it could not immediately grasp the message of the story, it may yet try to participate in the development of the fable cycle more attentively. The audience is expected to be more involved.

“The Cock and the Jasp” and its Moralitas provide a clear outline of the methodology of these stories. Whereas the unaided audience may be at a loss how to
respond appropriately in the beginning, it will appreciate its lesson more vigorously when
the symbolic meanings of both the cock and the jewel are clear in the context of a
medieval fable as such. The jewel represents wisdom and the cock stands for imprudent
man. Furthermore, as Khiony observes, the jewel “even stands for the type of poetry
which Moral Fables represents: the allegory which seems to have different kinds of
meanings to different kinds of readers, but leads all of them eventually towards
heaven.”

One of the techniques that the narrator uses in this fable is to project human
follies -- both the individual’s ignorance and societal poverty -- on a cock in such a way
that they can be detected only with great diligence. So far as the cock remains a natural
cock, he may win the audience’s sympathy. However, there are brief moments of self-
betrayal on the part of the cock such as his humorous preference for worms over the
jewel. Also condemnable is his confession that “I lufe fer better thing of les auaill, / As
draf, or corne, to fill my tume intrail” (90-91). But his real folly is exposed in the
Moralitas where the materialistic values symbolized by the cock are juxtaposed against
the intellectual values symbolized by the jewel (127 ff.).

While both the jewel and the cock transcend natural object and beast to become
something perceived symbolically, the audience, in turn, is enlightened at the expense of
the cock. It is here that the narrator compels his audience to return to the tale to find out
why and how the cock may be compared to a fool:

This cok, desyrand mair the sempill corne

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12Khiony 103.
Than ony iasp, may till ane fule be peir,

Qhilk at science makis bot ane moik and scorne,

And na gude can; als lytill will he leir. (141-44)

Thus the narrator challenges the audience to "Ga seik the iasp, quha will, for thair it lay" (161). John MacQueen is content that the jasp which is scorned by the cock, "Betakinnis perfite prudence and cunning, / Ornate with mony deidis of vertew" (128-29) and has an obvious biblical referent. He argues that the "science" praised in the Moralitas is the knowledge of the way to salvation.¹³

The challenge of the poem goes far beyond the tension between the literal and allegorical readings of the Moralitas. It involves yet another kind of experience in reading poetry, or in Kratzmann's words "the rhetorical strategy is one of deliberate misleading."¹⁴ The unexpected Moralitas is in sharp contrast with what the audience is led to anticipate. Douglas Gray believes that Henryson has in this fable "set a careful, hidden pattern of irony at the expense of the cock, and surreptitiously and wittily has operated the same pattern against us, his readers."¹⁵ Kratzmann suggests that "the Moralitas is startling nevertheless, and there is every reason for the reader to feel that he is deceived, probably consciously, by a narrative which has never given an indication that the jewel is meant to be seen as anything other than a jewel."¹⁶

¹³MacQueen 100-105.

¹⁴Kratzmann 59.


¹⁶Kratzmann 61.
The cock's dilemma is twofold: on the one hand he is hungry and needs something (not the jewel) to fill his stomach; on the other hand he fails to appreciate the value of the jewel that he would give for the basest of meals. By analogy this is typical of the individual who unwisely chooses to satisfy bodily needs rather than spiritual and intellectual ones. Although it is utterly impossible for the hungry stomach to appreciate art and beauty, without knowledge man's life is worth nothing. All in all the narrator has made his point about poverty and its devaluing effects on man's life. Yet still he would not make any specific recommendation other than encouraging his audience to search for a solution itself.

The audience is led to believe that to satisfy bodily needs is a priority. The audience is also led to believe that the cock is sensible enough to perceive and regret that he is unable to make use of the jewel he has found, and the irony that it should come to his coop rather than the court of a king. Yet what the audience misses is that both the narrator (in the final stanza of the story) and the cock recognize the value of the jewel, which must alert the audience to something beyond the ordinary. The audience is also teased because it has concluded that the cock made the right decision on the ground of the appearance of the situation, i.e., the audience, like the cock, has proved to be imperceptive and imprudent.

The stone is in fact "science" (137), wisdom or education, which "is eternall meit" (140) to the human soul, and by extension this is what the narrator has undertaken to provide his audience with. The cock leaves the food of the soul for the food of his stomach; hence the jewel of reason is lost. Like the cock who looks for worms, men look
for riches and ignore wisdom. As such “The Cock and Jasp” is not only an introductory
tale to persuade the audience to ‘look for the jewel’ in each of the following twelve
fables, but it also provides a general guide to how to read them.

II. “THE TWO MICE”

“The Two Mice” is originally the old Horatian tale of the country and the town
mice found in almost all Aesopian collections. Although there is no clear evidence to
support this wishful thinking, one has a vague feeling that the town mouse, having heard
of the lost jewel of “The Cock and the Jasp,” embarks on a search back to the poverty-
stricken country-side where not only her poor sister dwells, but also the wretched cock
lives. Also it is here that Chantecleir and the poor widow of the following tale reside.

The narrator of “The Cock and the Jasp” monitors the cock’s dramatic
monologue. In “The Two Mice,” however, he directs the dramatic dialogue between the
two mice. Though the narrator does not elaborate on the setting very much, he does
provide necessary clues to the locale, time, and especially characters. The town mouse
and the country mouse represent the rich life of the city-dweller and the poor life of the
peasant respectively. Moreover, they cannot get away from the Wheel of Fortune unless
they learn to be content with “small possessioun” (396).

The narrator puts human reasoning in the mouths of the mice; nevertheless, they
scarcely cease to be like mice throughout the story. Though the town mouse “Was gild
brother and made ane fre burges” (172)\textsuperscript{17} and sets out in pilgrim’s guise, she can only

\textsuperscript{17}Here, ‘brother’ simply means member; both the town and country mice are
female.
speak like a mouse and expects to hear a "peip" (187) from her sister. Though the landscape she traverses is that of stark poverty, it is the most natural habitat of a mouse. Though the country mouse's diet would break the teeth of the anthropomorphized town-mouse — indicating the peasants' poor conditions as opposed to the relatively rich and free town people — it is what one expects the mice to feed on. Even fate and the threat of death appear in the form of the most natural enemies of the mice: the steward and the cat.

"The Two Mice" expands the realm of social verisimilitude with its literal portrayals of the rural home and the burgess house, as well as its gentle satire of social pretensions. The Moralitas recommends withdrawal from the world; yet it does not state or even suggest any practical alternative. The country mouse is portrayed as a poor tenant, reminding her sister that:

"I keip the ryte and custome off my dame,
And off my syre, I levand in pouertie,
For landis haue we nane in propertie." (215-17)

and the little house into which she leads the visiting burgess mouse is "Withoutin fyre or candill birnand bricht" (202). She also lives as outlaws do by what they can pilfer from others:

Richt soliter, quhyle vnder busk and breir,

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18 Khiony, p. 104.

19 Khiony, p. 104.

20 Despite the fact that the two mice are female, all MSS give the masculine "burgess."
Yet she is extremely generous and hospitable to her visiting sister. In contrast the town mouse is a citizen of property and influence who lives in a "vorthie vane" (260) in the town. More importantly, she is a member of the Guild Merchants and exempt from taxation (172-75). She is over-impressed with herself when she takes it into her head to visit her sister where she herself was born. She scorns every bit of her trip and every minute of her expedition. She cannot appreciate the situation or the overwhelming generosity of her sister. She can only advise her sister to follow her to the city.

Though they have plenty of fun and more to eat, their merriment is cut short by the arrival of first the steward and then a cat. This misfortune shows yet another aspect of the difference between the two life styles. The world of the city mouse has its own risks and hazards, but the city mouse is accustomed to all these. She believes that the dangers of the city life are by no means less than those of the country life but they are different, and she has managed to learn how to react quickly in the face of these dangers. When the steward or the cat arrives she is quick to take refuge in a nearby hole, but the vulnerable country mouse, unaware of such tactics, faints on the spot. After the departure of the steward life returns to normal for the city mouse, because in her philosophy of life when the peril is over she should not worry any more. For the country mouse, of course, things are not that simple. She finds her poor rented house "als warme as woll" (359) and the narrator suggests that of the two, the country mouse, though she has little to enjoy, since she knows peace, leads a better life. Moreover, the narrator implies that a city mouse is
unfortunate because she has left her appointed place in society among the common folk and her kin only for material gain:

O wantoun man that vsis for to feid
Thy wambe, and makis it a god to be;
Luke to thy self, I warne the weill on deid.
The cat cummis and to the mous hes ee;
Quhat is avale thy feist and royaltie,
With dreidfull hart and tribulatioun?
Thairfoir, best thing in eird, I say for me,
Is merry hart with small possessioun. (381-88)

This tale quite naturally addresses the grim socio-economic circumstances of the late fifteenth-century Scottish peasantry and then, by extension, all the lower and lower middle classes. It is concerned first with the tenants and then with the new bourgeoisie. As such, the tale encompasses both the poor and the rich. The poor are reminded in a rather Buddhist manner that the most fortunate man is he who desires nothing and is happy with the minimal necessities. The more one desires, the more miserable his life. The one with the least possessions is the happiest since there is no joy in worldly possessions. The miseries of the rich, the narrator concludes, are no less painful than poverty. The rich become more and more covetous. They forget who they really are to the extent that they even ignore death hovering over their heads. While both school

students and church goers can mutually enjoy the "sentence" of the tale -- and as a matter of fact, the *Moralitas* is applicable to all human beings of all times -- it is the rural Scottish poor and the petty bourgeoisie of Scotland town people in the late fifteenth century that comprise the imaginary audience of this tale.

One of the major themes in "The Cock and the Jasp" is to illustrate how the individual may be forced to worry only about his physical rather than spiritual needs. The same theme is further exploited in "The Two Mice," where the narrator praises the simple life and its virtues and warns against the world of materialism. The fact that the mice represent two distinct social classes, though they are sisters, makes the contrast more pointed. This in particular enables the narrator to comment on those individuals who leave their humble social class and "clymmis vp maist hie"22 (371). Although it seems that the narrator is more or less in favour of the country mouse, representing the lower class, he does not hesitate to express his contempt for her because she too is tempted to follow her sister, the social climber, and her life style.

On the literal level, the audience, along with the two mice, learns that one can avoid all perils by coping with the inconveniences of life. In the *Moralitas*, the narrator elaborates on the theme of contentment and concludes that although man's life is always at stake because of all kinds of dangers, the life of a social climber is always at a greater risk. Furthermore, on the symbolic level, "the narrator," as Evelyn S. Newlyn observes, "warns the gluttonous man who makes a god of his stomach ... [and] concludes his

*Moralitas* by reiterating his belief that a simple and unmaterialistic life is the best way to achieve earthly happiness.  

Beside advocating the humble way of life, the narrator draws on the theme of pride in the social climbers who even deny their background. This is yet another strong link between not only this fable and the preceding one, but also the one which is to follow as well as many other stories in the collection. The city mouse, the cock of the previous tale and Chantecleir are all proud, and because of their pride they are in serious trouble. Most of all, they lack true peace of mind no matter whether or not they attain physical comfort.

Note that although the narrator is the same, he assumes different roles: translator, reader, commentator, dreamer, and entertainer. Such is the case with the audience. The real and historical audience of the book does not change. One should not think that each fable was meant to be read by a different audience. Yet the imagined audience of the narrator changes from story to story. Based on the text, style, language, and manner of address, one may infer that each fable addresses a different aspect of the same audience.

There are certain pedagogical techniques pertinent to “The Two Mice.” First is the link between this tale and the previous one. The city mouse goes to her rustic rural origin where the cock has lost the jewel. She is appalled by the miserable life of her sister. She returns to the city of jewels this time along with her sister who is tempted to accompany her. The country mouse leaves (though temporarily) her modest life for the adventure-filled city, only to be dismayed at the lack of any security. She comes back this  

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21Newlyn 113.
time resolved, convinced that the best mode of life is the familiar one. Unlike the previous fable there is no surprise revelation. The Moralitas is straightforward and perhaps predictable. The audience of this tale is alert to every single tip that the narrator provides, and is now comforted to realize that it has not missed the point this time, as it did in the previous fable. The Moralitas of the tale provides the necessary theatrical conflict. The issue at hand is which life-style is better. The audience has before it both the pros and cons not only in argumentative debate, but also in the action of the two mice. Finally, if the first fable makes a vague and general point and challenges the audience to go and look for the jewel of spiritual exaltation, here the audience is invited to examine the issue of social class both in the narrative and in the Moralitas.

"The Two Mice" comes to a close with a direct address by the narrator to his reader in terms of his "freind" (389), suggesting a much more relaxed relationship than either "The Prologue" or "The Cock and the Jasp." His authoritative voice this time however is Solomon, not only the wisest, but also the richest of kings, who paradoxically advocates the least possessions:

And Solomon sayis, gif that thow will reid,

"Vnder the heuin I can not better se

Than ay be blyith and leif in honestie." (391-93)

When we enter the world of "The Cock and the Fox" the narrator seems to realize that it is time he glossed the symbolic value of animal stories in general. He has both the traditional bestiaries and beast-epics in mind. In the first two tales he has drawn on Aesopic fables, with an eye to the allegorical interpretations of his tales. The satiric tone
of "The Two Mice," however, paves the way for the narrator to play a different tune. Now in three successive tales he exploits the beast-epic cycles, though he does not totally close his eyes to the allegorical significance of such tales when he comes to his Moralitas.

III. "THE COCK AND THE FOX"

"The Cock and the Fox" opens with the narrator/teacher reminding his audience of the dominant attributes of animals:

- The bair busteous, the volff, the wylde lyoun,
- The fox fen3eit, craftie and cawtelows,
- The dog to bark on nicht and keip the hows. (401-403)

The audience, familiar with beast-epic versions of the cock and the fox, may well remember Chaucer’s or Lydgate’s version with their different topoi. Moreover, to the attentive audience the poverty-stricken setting of the tale with a poor widow and a flock of poultry echoes the poor Scottish landscape of "The Two Mice" with the country mouse, her inconvenient coop and humble diet. The audience will also be able to detect in Chantecleir another foolish cock of "The Cock and the Jasp."

The narrator who was satisfied with a dramatic monologue in "The Cock and the Jasp," and a dynamic dialogue in "The Two Mice," now invites his audience to a wide panorama of animals and men. Here the old woman is a widow, implying the loss of the jewel of her life on the one hand, and foreshadowing the theft of her Chantecleir on the other. The widow is poor, swoons over the loss of her only cock, and it takes the dogs a
good while to receive the command from her to chase Lowrence. But the occasion provides enough time for the hens to reveal their real personalities. They argue — though not debating like Chaucer’s Chanticleer and Pertlote about philosophic and medical issues — about domestic matters which are more relevant to the psychological state of the widow.

Although Pertok first laments over the loss of her lover (495 ff.), her inconsistency is soon revealed (523 ff.).

"Quha sall our lemman be? Quha sall vs leid?
Quhen we ar sad quha sall vnto vs sing?
With his sweit bill he wald brek vs the breid;
In all this warld wes thair ane kynder thing?
In paramouris he wald do vs plesing,
At his power, as nature list him geif.
Now efter him, allace, how sall we leif?" (502-508)

Sprutok is more pragmatic; she knows that they will have another lecherous cock about them: "‘Be blyith in baill, for that is best remeid. / Let quik to quik, and deid ga to the deid’" (521-22). Coppok, the third hen, "lyke ane curate" (530) speaks more accusingly of the cock’s immoral life-style and the divine retribution:

"3one wes ane verray vengeance from the heuin.
He wes sa lous and sa lecherous,

24Quoting G.G. Smith, who suggests that Lowrence is a back-formation, derived from lour, hence, ‘skulker,’ Fox observes that the name may have been used “because of the amusing chime that it made with lour and lurk.” Fox, Poetry of Henryson 213.
Seis coud he nocht with kittokis ma than seuin,
Bot rychteous God, haldand the balandis euin,
Smytis rycht sair, thocht he be patient,
Adulteraris that list thame not repent.” (531-36)

According to Coppok, Chantecleir’s hasty departure is God’s punishment for his many sins. While these hens condemn the cock, especially for his lustfulness, only second to the sin of covetousness — one of the major motifs of “The Cock and the Jasp” — the narrator with a more forgiving spirit allows the cock to learn his lesson from the events.

The narrator of this tale is a stage director, a commentator and a preacher. He demonstrates, amongst other things, how different people act differently under different circumstances, changing their minds easily. Most of the time they are hypocrites and fools, deceitful and gullible at the same time, and above all they are blind. In fact, the theme of blindness is a recurrent topos throughout this collection of fables. In The “Cock and the Jasp,” the cock does not recognize the spiritual value of the jewel; in “The Two Mice,” the two mice do not see the importance of contentment; and here in “The Cock and the Fox,” Chantecleir literally closes his eyes to potential dangers only to open them when he is already caught in the mouth of the fox.

The narrator also demonstrates the interaction between the animal world and that of man. While the fox and the cock as well as the hens reason like human beings for the better part of the roles they play, they remain real animals throughout the narrative. However, the allegorical interpretation of the natural act of stealth, the rapid escape, and the debate amongst the hens, brings them closer to the world of humans. The narrator
creates an on-stage audience for the main plot. The hens are made to comment on the incident of the theft in their hen-like yet human voice. The narrator’s imaginary audience is an off-stage one, which is allowed to see for itself not only the fox-cock plot but also the hens’ debate, the poor widow’s swooning, the course of the chase and finally the return of the cock. It is to this imaginary audience that the *Moralitas* is addressed. And it is “worthie folk” (586) who are invited for an arresting moment to decode the allegory.

The narrator encourages his audience that:

To our purpose this cok weill may we call
Nyse proud men, woid and vaneglorious
Of kin and blude, quhilk is presumpteous. (590-92)

The cock represents proud and foolish men.

The passionate anger of the preacher can be seen in his harsh admonishing:

Fy, puft vp pryde, thow is full poysonabill!
Quha fauoris the, on force man haif ane fall;
Thy strenth is nocht, thy stule standis vnstabill. (593-95)

He prepares his congregation so well that his symbolic interpretation, when he likens the fox to “the feyndis infernall” (596), sounds altogether natural and unquestionable. Hence he manages to provide a scriptural reading of the story which re-enacts man’s fall from Heaven due to his original sin, pride. The fox becomes the snake, Satan incarnate and his cunning, the first temptation. However, the narrator quickly switches back to the moral meaning of the story and reminds his “worthie folk” again to disdain and avoid liars and the flatterers, represented by the same fox.
"The Cock and the Fox" is not about flattery and pride alone, although these two are the only vices mentioned explicitly in the *Moralitas*. There are a number of other implied themes that the moralist expects his audience to be aware of. It is part of his educational strategy and one of his goals to make his audience appreciate what goes on between the lines in every story. One such indication is the dichotomy of truth-falsehood. The scene between Lowrence and Chantecleir provides an interesting case of pathetic irony. Lowrence manipulates the truth skilfully. He claims that he has come to serve the cock (438), that he knew the cock’s father (441), that he was with him when he died (443), that he held his head (443), that he would creep on his belly after Chantecleir in the foulest weather (457-58), and finally, that the very sight of the cock warms his heart (456). It is not that he tells any lies. Indeed it is both pathetic and ironic how manipulative the fox and how gullible Chantecleir are. Nevertheless, it is not the cunning of the fox which brings calamity to the cock; rather, his own foolishness makes it possible for the fox to snatch him so easily.

If the fox’s statements are deceptive then the audience must be on guard not to be misled even by what the *Moralitas* states. Such elaborations may well be to the point, but the challenge which began in “The Cock and the Jasp” should never come to a full stop. The audience also learns to attend to its worldly affairs with an open eye to the unexpected disaster which may well befall the individual because of his lack of perceptiveness. The cock closes his eyes when they should be wide open if he does not want to be devoured by the fox. The fox opens his mouth when it must be closed if he has a mind to fill his stomach with the cock. The audience is also led to see the aftermath
of a probable death. When the cock is gone, the very dependants of the deceased turn against him. This is the world of mutability. The hens may begin to flatter both themselves and the cock when he comes back home, but for a brief moment the audience is led to the heart of darkness of human short-sightedness, incompetence, lack of interest, and, above all, hypocrisy.

A pedagogical technique used in this tale is that of mixed threat and hope. The narrator’s message is quite clear that if one is proud or foolish -- proud to close one’s eyes when they should be open, and foolish to open one’s mouth when it should be shut -- he will lose everything. However, he ends his story with the recovery of the cock, implying that even in the fallen world we live in there is still hope for salvation. True, if the reader is gullible his life is always at stake, yet if he retains his vigilance he may even escape the greatest of threats.

IV. “THE FOX AND THE WOLF”

“The Fox and the Wolf,” the second tale of the beast epic cycles, is a natural sequel to “The Cock and the Fox.” If in previous stories social criticism was one of the narrator’s major concerns, here he introduces a yet newer subject to his audience. As with the social changes in the late fifteenth-century Scotland, the Church too experienced dramatic changes.25 Here pagan gods and astrology are called in to undercut the value of religion in general, and the concept of confession in particular. There is no more the question of looking for the jewel of salvation; neither is there any more the question of

ambition to look for a better material life, nor even of petty trickery to fill one's stomach. It is a call for serious attention to the relationship of man to his God, the pastor and his congregation, the church and the people.

The narrator in this fable, as in the previous one, is a keen observer of social traits. He is both a teacher and a preacher. He has already told his audience that the Chantecléir / Lowrence incident took place a year ago. However, the same Lowrence now decides to retreat to a monastery beyond the limits of the city's bustle. This brings the new adventure much closer to the contemporary scene. Hence, instead of generalizing, the narrator encourages the Scotsmen of the late fifteenth century to see for themselves how degraded their religious practices have become. The clergymen and the church-goers are both held accountable for the corruption of the church.

If Freir Wolff Waitskaith abuses the institution by absolving the incorrigible Lowrence, the fox in turn mocks the idea of baptism when he drowns the kid only to pretend that it comes out as a salmon. The Wolf becomes "Ane worthie doctour of diuinitie" (666) and the fox is promoted to a baptizer: "‘Ga doun, schir Kid, cum vp, schir Salmond agane’" (751). The fox represents the cunning side of man let loose by the wolf who in turn represents the irresponsible pastor. As a result the innocent weak, represented by the kid, are left at the mercy of the ruthless strong. The fox-like strong may ingratiate when they talk of repentance and pretend to self-criticism, but in the end they simply fail to abandon their mischief. Such wrongdoers who think they can escape even the inevitable death are doomed by the same fate which they readily defy and mock by their fake confession (649-55). The fox is truly a rascal as the wolf calls him: "in
faith thou art ane schrew'" (704). Hence, the church which is supposed to protect the weak and help improve the welfare of everybody, as far as the narrator can see, simply turns into an instrument of implementing every conceivable oppression at the hand of the rich.

Although in the early fables of the collection, the dominant atmosphere is generally that of hope and salvation, in this fable the kid is killed and devoured by the fox, who in turn loses his life -- as he has already foreseen -- when he says "'Vpon this wame set wer ane bolt full meit'" (760). He resolves that "'Me think na man may speik ane word in play, / Bot now on dayis in ernist it is tane'" (770-71). The fact that the keeper takes the fox's skin is metaphorically interesting. The skin is all the outer religiosity, cunning, beauty, or whatever else which may appear to be good for a while, but at the end becomes the agent of divine retribution and the cause of self-destruction.

The audience again is addressed in terms of "'gude folke" (789) and is warned against unexpected death, especially when unconfessed: "'Be war, gude folke, and feir this suddane schoit, / Quhilk smytis sair withoutin resistence" (789-90). One immediate target of this fable is undoubtedly the contemporary friars who were unconcerned about the spiritual needs of the people whose confessions they heard. The easy absolution that the wolf grants the fox is an instance of such heedlessness. As for the teaching of the fable, however, the narrator does not wait for the after-life of damnation; rather he presents a case in which the result of this easy penance and absolution is nothing but calamity, even in this world. Thus like the beast-epic cycle, if not the overlapping later

\[^{26}\text{Friedman 550.}\]
fable tradition as well, “The Fox and the Wolf” does not deal with general issues; rather it concerns itself with the particulars of contemporary life.

The author relies again on the audience’s familiarity with the popular tradition of seeing a wolf as a friar and a fox as a penitent. Moreover, the audience’s acquaintance with the beast-epic tradition, where the enmity between the fox and the wolf is a predominant theme, is exploited. If in the Aesopic tradition the fox is mainly an opportunist and an untrustworthy individual, in the beast-epic cycle he is among other things an insincere quasi-religious rascal as well. He confesses to the wolf, to the crow, and to the cock only to deceive them and do away with them as soon as he can. The theme of “Confessio Reynardi” is common in the medieval exempla; what the narrator does here, as suggested already, is to provide a complete cycle. Unlike other familiar cases, here the fox cannot get away with his false confession.

By introducing the astrological topoi in the beginning of the fable, the narrator further challenges the audience to make a contrast between the pagan world and Christian doctrine; between fate and destiny; between free will and predestination. The fox argues that it is his natural need to be a predator and live on other animals: “Neid causis me to steill quhair euir I wend” (709); hence he denies any free will. However, he does not rule out the likelihood of evading the calamity by pretending a deliberate confession which has to have its root in free will: “Thairfoir I will ga seik sum confessour / And schryiff me clene off all sinnis to this hour” (654-655). The fox does not pay any attention to any guidance; he actually prefers the astral determinism which

\[27\]Friedman 553.
originally led him to his confessor in the first place and to the economic and social determinism which forces him to carry on with his sins. The economic and social determinism suggested here further links this fable to the earlier fables, especially "The Two Mice."

The whole idea of confession is in sharp contrast with astral fate. In the one it is the creator who forgives, in the other it is the created who blindly damns. What the narrator tries to hammer home here is that destiny or fate is what only God knows, and it is utterly beyond man's grasp. Like Lowrence, no man is ever able to see his future. The fox is condemned also because of his motivation. He does not confess because he is sorrowful for his past mischief; rather it is simply out of fear of temporal punishment (649-54). He is more worried about his body which will be "hangit be the hals" (662) than about the state of his soul, and he does not realize, nor is he informed by the wolf that contrition which would lead him to true penitence cannot spring merely from a fear of temporal punishment.²⁸

The audience is well aware of the steps of a serious forgiveness; yet it is more than clear how the animals pervert these conditions. The three stages of confession: that of the heart, that of the mouth, and that of the deed are all abused here (698-704). The fox is unrepentant of his past sins, nor is he ready to change his way in the future either, suggesting that he would rather "steill quhair euer I wend" than "thig" which he finds more shameful (709-10).

In order to reinforce a message the narrator often creates parallel circumstances

²⁸Friedman 556.
in different stories. Here, for example, besides the similarity of socio-economic backgrounds in both fables, the same flatterer fox of "The Cock and the Fox" who was trying to deceive the cock is flattering the wolf to win the divine favour:

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"3e ar the lanterne and sicker way
suld gyde sic sempill folk as me to grace;
3our bair feit and 3our russet coull off gray,
3our lene cheik, 3our paill and pietious face,
Schawis to me 3our perfite halines;
For weill wer him that anis in his lyue
Had hap to 3ow his sinnis for to schryue." (677-83)
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And like the cock of that tale, this wolf is taken in by such pleasant words.

Besides baptismal rites, the fox's fishing echoes another scriptural theme, that of the first disciples of Christ, who by abandoning their earlier life-styles became fishermen in Christ's name. Here, the fox who cannot exchange his thievery for any honest occupation is not even brave enough to catch a fish from the water. Yet, ironically, by drowning the kid he pretends that he is baptizing it. Moreover, the victimized kid brings to mind yet another scriptural image, that of the sacrificial Lamb. The irony here is that the kid does not metamorphose into a fish simply because the fox says so; likewise, the fox does not change from a sinner into a saved soul simply because the wolf ceremonially shrives him. The fox's death is the only natural and moral expectation the audience could anticipate. Furthermore, according to the Moralitas his death is a sign of divine justice rather than of human revenge: "Attend wyislie, and in 3our hartis noit. /
It is important to note that in the *Moralitas* Freir Volff Waitskaith, and by analogy the friars in general, does not receive any comment, let alone criticism. This is in part a pre-meditated strategy in that the narrator does not want to implicate his major argument. So while he is unambiguous in his admonitions concerning the sinners and advises them to be honest, repent sincerely, and seek a true confession, his criticism of the friars remains only a matter of implication.

V. "THE TRIAL OF THE FOX"

"The Trial of the Fox" is the third fable from the beast-epic cycle in the collection. Whereas so far the narrator has been preoccupied with the individual and how and why he makes mistakes, and what prospects he has if he tries to correct himself, in this fable he shifts his focus to the social realm, which is equally grim and needs a more serious assessment. Here the audience is led to the inner corners of the court, its agendas and especially its occupants.

The tone of the narrator is pessimistic in the opening of the story; he seems to transfer his distaste for the foxy way of life to his human audience. One of the first evils that the narrator finds with the son is in his discovery of the corpse of his father, which makes him happy rather than sad. He thanks God because now he is the heir and can have the whole estate to himself. He

Thankand grit God off that conclusioun,

And said, "Now sall I bruke, sen I am air,

The boundis quhair thow wes wont for to repair." (814-16)
“Couetice, vnkynd and venemous” (817) are his initial motives, which the narrator does not hesitate to condemn. Moreover, the narrator has no doubt that the son will definitely be “Dreidand na thing the samin lyfe to leid / In thift and reif as did his father befoir” (821-22).

The casting of the fox’s carcass into the river echoes Lowrence’s baptismal experience when he drowns the kid. The fox experiences both physical and spiritual deaths: his stomach becomes the target of the keeper’s arrow and his soul, implicitly represented by his bones, is bequeathed to the devil through his own son:

Syne with the corps vnto ane peitpoit gais
Off watter full, and kest him in the deip,
And to the Deuill he gaif his banis to keip. (828-30)

In the following stanza the narrator simply cannot help preaching to his congregation against ungrateful heirs, and concludes that “Fra thow be dede, done is thy deuotioun” (837). He reminds his readers that no sooner are they dead than they are utterly forgotten, especially in the prayers of the living.

Having given a clear picture of the protagonist to his human audience, the narrator focuses on the animal world proper where as an omniscient observer he hears the unicorn summoning all the beasts of the wild to the lion’s assembly. Lines 880 through 928 provide an encyclopaedic list of all kinds of animals present in the assembly. Here the narrator gives the lead to the lion to address directly the animals’ parliament. The lion, like a human king, boasts of his mercy towards the obedient and his wrath towards the dissident (922-35). He warns the beasts against pride which he will not
tolerate. He vows that he would crush even a camel-size proud person to the size of a mouse (941-42). Then he proclaims the safety of all creatures, which must be observed by all. Incidentally, his first examples of victims are the kid and the lamb, and his first example of a potential aggressor is the fox, whom the audience quickly identifies with the oppressor figure of the previous fables:

"Se neir be twentie mylis quhair I am
The kid ga saiflie be the gaittis syde,
The tod Lowrie luke not to the lam,
Na reuand beistis nouther ryn nor ryde." (943-46)

The fox thus singled out finds himself in an awkward situation; whether he stays or leaves he will be in trouble: "Thairfoir, geue I me schaw, I will be schent; / I will be socht, and I be red absent" (960-61). Here the narrator moves between the animal audience and his imaginary human audience; he seems to articulate the fox's subconscious awareness of his past crimes and his future damnation. At first the fox seems to be sorry for his wrongdoing and intends to change into a better person. Yet, judged by his deeds rather than his words, he will never truly change; he will always be a cunning fox.

As the lion has foreseen, on the way back to the court the fox leaves the wolf to take care of his broken head and manages to steal a lamb from a nearby flock. Thus the fox not only deceives the wolf, but also mocks him in the court before the lion.

29The lion here foreshadows the observant lion or the protagonist of "The Lion and the Mouse."
Moreover, he tries to deceive even the lion when he lies about the ewe’s lamb which she is bemoaning. It is here that the fox becomes the first case to be tried in the court. The wolf, who was thus far only a mock friar, a mock doctor of divinity, and the victim of the fox’s treacheries, now becomes his avenger, his judge, and his confessor. Again unlike the traditional beast fables the fox is executed, much to the relief of the innocent and the oppressed.

The theme of blindness is repeated here; when responding to the command of the lion to go to fetch the absent mare, the fox says: “‘Aa, schir, mercie! Lo, I haue bot ane ee’” (995). This is in accordance with Lowrence’s spiritual blindness to his faith and his fate in the previous tale. The fox quickly exhausts his enmity with the wolf and asks the king to send the wolf as his envoy, again in line with the previous fable. The theme of blindness is further emphasized this time by the wolf’s pride, when he tries to read the mare’s respite under her hoof: “Thocht he wes blindit with pryde, 3it he presumis / To luke doun law, quhair that her letter lay” (1020-21).

Whether the narrator deliberately postpones for pedagogical reasons relevant social interpretation to be picked up in later fables or creates a sense of unexpectedness in order to exhaust allegorical readings of the fable is not clear. What is clear, however, is that the audience is expected to be mature enough to follow his religious arguments in terms of their social manifestations. The intended audience could range from the middle class laity of a parish to the court officers of higher ranks. Both the language and the material of the narrative -- the summoning procedures, the regal setting, the legal language, the assembly, and the emissaries -- suggest that the tale is a social satire
attacking the court and the courtiers. Therefore, the audience would rightly expect a comment on the court and the legal system. Yet, instead, the Moralitas takes the audience by surprise emphasizing that “The lyoun is the warld be liklynace” (1104).

The narrator/preacher now compares the Contumex mare with “monkis and othir men of religioun” (1113), free “fra pomp and pryde, / And fra this warld in mynd ar mortyfyde” (1116-17), and her hoof is likened to “the thocht of deid” (1125). He also explains the wolf, not as a hypocrite friar this time, but as sensuality incarnate (1118) and the fox as “temptationis” (1132) besieging men of religion and crying to them “Cum to the warld agane!” (1135). Thus it becomes clear that the narrator is sharpening his audience’s wits. Here the spiritual emphasis of the Moralitas reaches its peak, to the likely astonishment of the audience.

The narrator focuses on his central lesson: remember that death is around the corner; hence, flee from sensuality:

Fle fast thairfra, gif thow will richt remord.

Than sall ressoun ryse, rax, and ring,

And for thy saull thair is na better thing. (1122-24)

Although the fable proper does not prepare the audience for such an abrupt conclusion in the Moralitas, there are several textual clues which the narrator seems to expect his audience to respond to attentively. Right in the beginning of the fable, for instance, the narrator makes it clear that Lowrence senior is a lustful adulterer, and Lowrence junior is a bastard (799-800). The ewe rightly calls the fox a “harlet huresone” (1071). By abusing religious rites the wolf too becomes a polluter of the church (1011 ff.). Hence their
condemnation is inevitable.

Technically the narrator is still monitoring the progress of his audience's ability to interpret fables. He is determined to stick to his conviction that the most important thing one should worry about is divine judgement. To do so one has to avoid the deadly sins, so he repeats themes such as pride and lechery in almost every tale. He also repeats his animal imagery as a teaching device — traditional though it may well be — for at least two clear purposes: to be able freely to criticise the evil-doings in both the individuals and the society in terms of brutes, and to avoid any serious criticism from either the clergy or the court if he were to attack any real individual or institution. In the world of the animals, however, he tries to be as consistent as possible. The fox proves to be truly damned, socially an untrustworthy creature, and practically a rogue. He is brought to a just trial and duly sentenced to capital punishment.

The audience is alerted to an idealistic system in this world, projecting if not exemplifying the narrator's utopian court and judicial system. Should the audience not take this panorama seriously because of its experience in the real world which is, of course, of a different nature, the Moralitas will transcend this level by identifying this world with a world to come. It is clear that the narrator gradually shifts his position in both the narrative and the Moralitas from worldly themes to more and more spiritual topoi, yet he never leaves the allegorical interpretation.

The Moralitas of this fable comes to an end with the narrator's reminder that "And thus endis the talking of the tod" (1145). Having exploited three beast-epic stories, the narrator turns back to the Aesopic tradition. This time he begins with another court
where the same executioner wolf is to try an oppressed sheep on the dog's false testimonies.

VI. "THE SHEEP AND THE DOG"

Although an Aesopic fable and not a beast epic, "The Sheep and the Dog" is closely related to the earlier fables in general and to "The Trial of the Fox" in particular. In the previous fables the narrator was concerned primarily with the court and the judicial system. The wolf who, although representing sensuality in the human world, in the animal world is first promoted to a mock friar and later an official confessor, now becomes the judge. The scene is the consistory and the accused is the sheep. The plaintiff is a self-styled "pure" dog (1147) who cannot afford civil court. This gives the author an excuse to comment on the civil court in the Moralitas.

The narrator vividly illustrates the official proceedings of the trial. He is clear about the necessary details, and at the same time economical. He plays the role of an indifferent reporter, though his critical remarks about the animal officials are pointed, especially when he comments on their lack of conscience: "Thocht it [the charge] wes fals, thay had na conscience" (1180).

Whereas the narrative is almost exclusively about the consistory courts, the Moralitas is pointedly about the civil courts. This seems to shoot two birds with one stone. Having exposed the lawlessness of one system by giving an example, the narrator comments on the same frauds equally applicable within the other system. Thus the narrator plays the role of a systematic reporter and critic of the ecclesiastical institutions in the narrative, and a political commentator and critic in the Moralitas. His imagined
audience is most probably both the ecclesiastical and secular judiciary as well as the poverty-stricken lower middle class of late fifteenth-century Scotland. The contemporary poor tenants and peasants, all too familiar with the injustice done to them by both judicial systems, seem to be the intended audience of this fable. The point the narrator tries to make is the conflict which may well be within himself as well as every other individual. He portrays an unjust world where neither the church nor the court cares about the poor. Moreover, in an arresting moment of despair, the narrator reports that the sheep is also critical of God, Who lets all these injustices be afflicted on the poor and the innocent.

In the narrative, he criticises the consistory system: the judge is no more than "Ane fraudfull volff" (1150), the carnivorous "Schir Corbie Rauin" is appointed "apparitour" (1160), the cunning fox is the "clerk and noter" (1174), the witnesses of the case are "the gled" and "the graip" (1175), and finally "the beir" and "the brok" (1209) become the "twa arbeteris" (1204) to settle the objection raised by the dog. In the Moralitas he ascribes all the faults he enumerates in the narrative to the civil law where the wolf represents a lawless sheriff:

This volf I likkin to ane schiref stout
Quhill byis ane forfalt at the kingis hand,
And hes with him ane cursit assyis about,
And dytis all the pure men vp on land; (1265-68)

the raven is likened to a false coroner:

Quhilk hes ane porteous of the inditement,
And passis furth befoir the iustice air,
All misdoaris to bring to iugement; (1273-75)
but who would “wryte in Will or Wat, / And swa ane bud at boith the parteis skat” (1277-78). The sheep stands for the poor commoners who are daily oppressed by tyrannous men (1259-60). Here the agonized sheep is so angry that in his distress he addresses God complainingly:

And said, “O lord, quhy sleipis thou sa lang?
Walk, and discerne my cause, groundit on richt;
Se how I am be fraud, maistrie, and slicht
Peillit full bair.” (1295-98)

At least in the mind of the sheep, God is either blind or simply unconcerned about all the oppression done to the innocent in this world. This is indeed the narrator’s frustration with the judicial system, as he and his intended audience are well aware. The world has turned into chaos, and in the absence of divine governance and human discretion, everything, no matter how cruel, has become possible.

To bring this controversial point to a close, in the final stanza of the Moralitas the narrator tries to justify God’s lack of interference with man’s suffering, so as to give him a chance to purge himself and win divine peace. The narrator invites his audience to share his revelation that:

“Thow tholis this euin for our grit offence;
Thow sendis vs troubill and plaigis soir,
As hunger, derth, grit weir, or pestilence”; (1314-16)
and prays to God to grant them all rest in Heaven. The narrator continues to deduce rather unexpected conclusions from the narrative in his *Moralitas* first to expand the perception of his audience by widening the scope of the applicability of the narrative itself, and second in order to train his readers to be able to go beyond the text and to read between the lines. He seems to warn them seriously against short-sightedness, and easy ready-made conclusions.

The narrator seems to be sympathetic to the cause of the poor, yet it is also apparent that he does not find anything substantially promising in them. While he does criticise the court he does not seem to hold anything against royalty. Likewise, although he is sceptical about the efficiency and even the honesty of the body clergy, he nurtures religion and preaches it whole-heartedly. What he is really obsessed with in this fable is that there is no justice anywhere, either in the church or the court. There is nothing but oppression and corruption in the world, and God mysteriously allows all that to happen. He wonders if there is anything good about fables and their teachings if chaos is predominant.

As Newlyn observes, although this fable is not as immediately entertaining as the other tales, it is certainly one of Henryson’s most powerful tales. The narrator’s attack not only on the corruption of both judicial systems but also of the whole world is one of his major thematic concerns. Newlyn concludes that since the narrator “questions ... the Christian paradox which justifies the slaughter of the innocent, [the fable] provides an intriguing and explicit example of the conflict in Henryson between theodicy and

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30Newlyn 114.
Although it is customary for the narrator to speak in the *Moralitas*, in this poem the narrator withdraws, claiming that he will simply repeat the sorrowful lament of the sheep he has heard passing by. His departure from the poem is not surprising because of his explicit as well as implicit criticism both in the narrative and the *Moralitas*. While it may be conceivable to condemn the church and the court alike, it is hazardous to question God’s governance.

VII. “THE LION AND THE MOUSE”

“The Lion and the Mouse” is concerned with two distinct morals: first, the traditional, i.e., compassion will be rewarded, and second, the contemporary, i.e., observance of the highest principles is a duty in a king or ruler. The narrator of this fable doubly distances himself from the world of realism. First he retreats to the traditional world of the dream vision, where the truth becomes a matter of inspiration rather than of any deliberate commentary on his part. Then by ascribing both the tale and its *Moralitas* to the traditional authority of Aesop he becomes the first-hand audience rather than poet, teacher, preacher, or even reporter. As such we have a narrator who is now a dreamer and an enthusiastic listener as well as a voracious reader.

Once more both the authoritarian Aesop and the visionary truth appear right in the heart of the collection. The wisdom which was lost to the cock of “The Cock and the Jasp” is once more raised, only this time between Aesop, the author, and the narrator/dreamer, his translator. This fable further draws on the panorama of inadequacy.

31 Newlyn 114.
the first sign of which appeared in the sheep's complaint about God's lack of interest in man's daily affairs. There, God was said to be long asleep; here the king sleeps and becomes vulnerable to all kinds of mischief among his subjects. Interestingly enough, in all three central fables, this and both the preceding and following one, the narrator is prominent. Nevertheless, whereas in the other cases he appears only as a witness, hence a reporter-like narrator, here he is the dreamer who encounters Aesop himself and asks him to tell a tale, appearing more of a trainee rather than an instructor.

Aesop appears to the narrator as the fairest man he has ever seen (1348). He is fashionably clad and everything about him is elegant. His gown, for instance, is as white as milk (1349) and his robe made of wool and silk (1350). He is sociable and friendly. The dreamer calls him "father" (1366) and "my gude maister" (1367). After all he is the arch-fabulist and the role model for the narrator. The relationship between the dreamer and Aesop quickly turns into that of student and instructor. In a friendly manner the dreamer finds occasions to know about the master's background. Aesop tells him that he is born of "gentil blude" (1370), raised in "Rome" (1371), where he has studied "ciuile law" (1373), but now is a saved soul dwelling in Heaven for eternity (1374); hence he is familiar both with justice and mercy. Moreover, Aesop is also "poet lawriate" (1377); yet he seems to cherish his knowledge of law and mercy more than poetry, especially because he is sceptical about the usefulness of preaching. When he is asked to relate an instructing fable, as he shakes his head, Aesop says:

"My sone, lat be,
For quhat is it worth to tell ane f Engel taill,
Quhen haly preiching may na thing auail?" (1388-90)

He believes that people are “deif” to “Goddis word” (1392-1393) and their hearts are as “hard as stane” (1393). He has come to the conclusion that his fables have not helped mankind to improve or change. The discussion between the dreamer and his author illustrates the narrator’s optimism about the possibilities of a rational and engaged dialogue, or in Khiony’s terms, “figural discourse, in reforming a few instructed individuals if not society as a whole.”

The immediate audience of this fable then is the narrator himself. The dream vision in which the fable appears is addressed to the imaginary audience of the fable. This audience could well be any monarch and his subjects in general, or James III and the citizenry of late fifteenth-century Scotland in particular. As such, the narrator is raised to the position of a teacher and counsellor to the king and patron of his countrymen. The old fable of the ensnared lion and the mice is thus shaped into a bold analysis of the cause of Scotland’s ills. Arguably the narrator and the poet become one, and so do the imagined and historical audiences.

As the Moralitas lays it bare, the most conspicuous teaching of the fable is that pity is an ideal virtue for the lion as the king and a practical virtue that applies to all people both high and low. Whereas on the literal level the traditional lesson of the rewards of pity is expounded, on the allegorical level, the lesson of the natural

32Khiony 108.

obligations of kingship is highlighted. The lion expects obedience from his subjects and claims even his dead skin must be revered:

“I put the cace, I had bene deid or slane,
And syne my skyn bene stoppit full off stra;
Thocht thow had found my figure layand swa,
Because it bare the prent off my persoun,
Thow suld for feir on kneis haue fallin doun. (1449-53)

This is in keeping with the traditional notion that the king’s power is a divine power bestowed upon him. The narrator indeed does seem to preach monarchy, although he does not hesitate to comment on the shortcomings of the state. In his *Moralitas* the narrator says that the lion represents “ane prince or empriour, / Ane potestate, or 3it ane king with croun” (1574-75), and argues that while he is bound to be the vigilant guide and governor of his people, he “takis na labour / To reule and steir the land, and iustice keip” (1577-78). When a ruler forgets about justice and instead lies in pleasures and “sleuth” (1579), the whole establishment will go asunder.

This theme of ‘king as a vigilant guide’ brings the fable much closer to the Eastern fables which are primarily meant to educate princes and prepare them for their later undertakings. Such fables are also meant to warn kings indirectly against the consequences of administering the country badly. While the immediate intended audience of these fables were princes, kings, and rulers, anyone could have benefited by
their teachings.\textsuperscript{34}

One of the pedagogical devices used in this story is closely related to its very form as well as its place in the whole collection. Unlike other fables it has its own "Prologue" which introduces the genre of dream vision into the collection. Aesop, who is thus far referred to only indirectly, here appears in person as an authority and adds to the impression of the objectivity of the narrator. The presence of Aesop in the context of the fable tradition provides worldly wisdom for the audience. Likewise, the dream vision convention offers other-worldly truth. Aesop guides the literal world and the dreamer elaborates on the allegorical interpretation.

The fable is not only about truth and wisdom; it is also about giving and taking advice. Unlike other fables in the collection, characters listen carefully to each other's arguments, pleas, advice, and counselling and act accordingly. This is a utopian world which the narrator envisions. The story stands right in the middle of the collection; there are exactly the same number of fables and the same number of stanzas before and after this fable.

Strikingly, the moral lesson and the story are so clearly interlocked that the audience has no difficulty grasping it all by itself. The world of this fable, however, may sound too idealistic to be true. Yet, after all it is a dream world. The audience may suspect that rationality may only be conceivable in such unrealistic settings as dreams and imagination. The narrator, however, has made his point. Whether the audience is

\textsuperscript{34}The most famous of such fables are \textit{Kalilah and Dimnah} and \textit{The Arabian Nights}.\textsuperscript{34}
ready to make the best of the possibilities or go on unchecked will remain a matter of pure conjecture.35

VIII. "THE PREACHING OF THE SWALLOW"

"The Preaching of the Swallow" is a straightforward story with an unequivocal Moralitas. Following the idealistic world in which a lion and a mouse could give each other advice and, surprisingly, take such advice, here we are thrown into a realistic world where no matter how challenging the warning is, how clearly it is presented, and how often it is repeated, there is no one who is ready to take it seriously. Here for the better part of the story the narrator is a witness, an observer, and a learner. The preaching character is a swallow who tries in vain to convince his congregation of the bleakness of their situation, of the hazards of their life and of the treacherous fiend who is in the act of preparing their death trap. Though the birds do not listen to the swallow and consequently lose their lives for the sake of their stomachs, the human narrator finds the experience exalting. In the fable proper the swallow is the teacher and the rest of the birds are his inattentive audience. The human witness to the story then is in a position to give his imagined human audience an example concerning lack of vigilance and its dreadful consequences. This imagined human audience then is expected to take the lesson more seriously, though there is no indication that it ever does so.

The story begins with a sermon-like lecture on the grace of God and His presence and perpetual participation in the act of creation. For the narrator, and by extension the

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35Lyall considers fables #7, #11, and #12 as political fables only. However arguably, #2 and #5 fall easily into the same category. See Lyall 5-29.
human world, He is neither asleep nor indifferent about the world. However, in the animal world of the birds, it seems He has left the birds to their follies and the churl to his brutal -- though natural -- schemes for trapping and killing them. To the human observer, thus, the role of the churl is equivocal, since his life depends on the birds. If the world is bleak for the birds which depend on the flax, so is it also for the churl who depends on the birds for sustenance. What is common here is that both man and birds are preoccupied with their natural bodily needs. No matter how dire the situation, the narrator argues, man must put his soul before his stomach. The allegorical meaning of the story is then by no means surprising. The swallow is the preacher; the birds are heedless humans; the churl is the fiend and death itself; the death of birds is equated with the spiritual death of human beings.

It is interesting to notice that unlike the rest of the fables, here we are dealing with a flock of birds and not a few individuals or species of animals. They come together and leave together, they reappear together and are caught together. This implies something about the human perception of birds: we generally see them as flocks. By extension we identify the birds with the poor who are also generally seen as a class lacking in individual identity. Like these birds the poverty-stricken people have no other alternative. Good words do not fill their empty stomachs, neither can they defy their betters to secure a safer future.

Unlike the dreamer of the previous fable, the narrator of this fable sets off in a real country in real time. Also unlike the dream vision of that fable, here he actually witnesses the dispute between the sparrow and the lark who speaks for the rest of the
birds. Yet similar to the previous story, the main objective of this fable is the importance of giving and taking advice. The swallow suggests that they go and scrape "3one seid anone, / And eit it vp" (1750-51) because if it grows they will all "Haue cause to weip heirefter ane and all" (1752). Unlike the lion who took the mouse's advice, these birds reject the swallow's suggestion and dismiss "hir helthsum document" (1769).

The swallow argues — though in vain — that according to the scholars "'it is nocht sufficient / To considder that is befoir thyne ee''" (1755-56); but that prudence consists of an internal process of reasoning which enables one to foresee and discriminate between vice and virtue (1757-59). At a later stage she cries — again in vain — "'Wo is him can not bewar in tyme''" (1789). She touches on one of the major themes of the collection, blindness, and relentlessly scolds the birds:

"O blind birdis, and full off negligence,

Vnmyndfull off 3our awin prosperitie,

Lift vp 3our sicht and tak gude aduertence." (1790-92)

Then later on, in a sarcastic voice she tells them "'freindes, hardilie beid; / Do as 3e will''' (1807-1808). But she is sure of a bitter end to the birds' stubbornness.

Their last meeting is an emotional scene. The little birds are near starvation and try to scrape the chaff in order to find some grains, but instead they find death in the churl's trap. The swallow tries even harder than before to scare the birds from their doom, yet they cannot and will not listen to her. Like an exhausted teacher whose advice is never taken seriously, and whose students have failed in the very course of life, the swallow bemoans the death of her congregation:
"Lo," quod scho, "thus it happinnis mony syis
On thame that will not tak counsall nor reid
Off prudent men or clerkis that ar wyis.
This grit perrell I tauld thame mair than thryis;
Now ar thay deid, and wo is me thairfoir!" (1882-86)

Thus prudence and taking counsel are the main themes of this fable. The fact that the birds neither have prudence nor take counsel and, as a result, lose their lives provides an example of negative behaviour. Moreover, while in his human world the churl’s prudence to anticipate the future and work towards it is a positive example, the small birds provide negative examples in their animal world. The narrator seems to remind his audience that time passes and brings about changes, yet often these changes are for the worse rather than the better. Unless one is equipped with prudence and is ready to follow the teachings of the wise, there is no hope for either prosperity or salvation.

One of the techniques that the swallow uses in the capacity of preacher is threat. The sum of her argument is that "if you do not take my advice, the planted seeds will grow, a net will be made and your necks will be cut." The birds' over-optimism, on the other hand, is pathetic. Their self-delusion leads them to argue that things will always change for the better (1801-1803). The wise know that the future brings sorrow. The plenty of spring and summer is naturally followed by the scarcity of winter; likewise, unchecked joy is followed by sorrow.

The narrator, as J.A. Burrow observes, gives a specifically "Christian application"
in the *Moralitas* rather than the traditional "Stoic ethics." The churl represents not a poor peasant scraping a living, but rather "the feind, quhilk fra the angelike state / Exylit is, as fals apostata" (1897-98). Here the seeds are the wicked thoughts which are sown in man’s soul and which grow into sins with which the devil ensnares him (1900 ff.). The hungry birds represent the "wretchis" (1916) who are deceived by "this warldis vane pleasance" (1917). Finally, the swallow represents "the halie preichour" (1924) who constantly tries to warn people against the devil and his nets. The narrator implies that one should never let a single day of his life go by without prudence, a sense of anticipation of the inevitable changes to come and the inevitable consequences of sins.

**IX. "THE FOX, THE WOLF, AND THE CADGER"**

"The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger" is another beast-epic story to be followed by two more of the same category. In this round of the beast-epic cycle, the narrator presents his grimmest view of man, both as an individual and as a species. In this fable, he once more sets out to read from his "authour" (1952). The better part of the fable is revealed through a dynamic dialogue and a deadly experience between the two old enemies -- the fox and the wolf. While the narrator is absent in the narrative except when he gives voice to the fictitious, omniscient "authour," he does appear in the *Moralitas* to expound the allegorical meaning of the tale. The imagined audience is first given a pseudo-classic narrative and then a contemporary analysis. This both adds to the sense of impartiality that the narrator tries to create and the sense of timelessness of the fable as a teaching device.

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Although the narrator’s remark “Quhairfoir I counsell mychtie men to haif mynd / Of the nekhering, interpreit in this kynd” (2229-30) does not define any specific audience, it is safe to infer from this and the material as well as the language of the fable that its imagined audience could well range from the senior students of the Abbey to a congregation interested in a highly humorous though violent exemplum. Moreover, the fact that the tone and the style of the fable are constant with the rest of the beast-epic tales and that the narrator is interested in social agendas such as injustice, further supports such a conjecture.

It is breath-taking when one studies the fable in retrospect how minutely, though unconsciously, the fox warns the wolf against the outcome of their cooperation. Whether the fox has any specific plans at the moment of their encounter is doubtful; yet at the end of the narrative the audience has enough clues to believe that no single excuse that the fox divines is wasted. One can only compare the fox’s excuses, when he declines to join the wolf in his predatory schemes, with his true yet deceitful statements to Chantecleir. He tells the wolf that because of his red coat all the beasts will scatter from him (1976-78). And it is this very red coat in which the cadger is interested and that the wolf cannot comprehend. He argues that the prey will “eschaip” even if he “suld sleipand find thame” (1983-85). Again it is only when he pretends he is dead that he is able to throw the cadger’s herring down for the wolf to gather.

The theme of blindness appears ironically. The fox assures the wolf “‘that beist 3e mycht call blind / That micht not eschaip than fra me ane myle’” (1988-89). Nevertheless, the spiritually blind wolf cannot read any literal truth into that statement,
until he virtually loses his eyes because of the cadger’s blows and literally is almost blind. Again ironically he tells the truth when he swears to the wolf that “I sall be treu to you quhill I be deid” (2027). His fake death attests to that; and its description is:

The quhyte he turnit vp off his ene tuay,
His toung out hang ane handbreid off his heid,
And still he lay, als straucht as he wer deid. (2053-55)

The cadger’s greed and wishful thinking are boundless. No sooner does he see the fox than he begins to make his “mittenis tway” (2059) in his imagination. Like his greedy counterpart, the wolf, he blindly welcomes the fox into his cart and amongst the herring, “Schir Foxe, in faith, 3e ar deir welcum heir” (2067) only to realize in a minute that this very “Deuyl,” whom he supposed “deid in ane dyke” (2063) is the devil who deceived both him and the wolf. It is no surprise that none of his promises would make the fox to come back for the “nekker” (2089). The fox has heard enough about the cadger’s prospects where his red coat is concerned; after all he is not the greedy character of the story, he is the trickster, the cunning one, hence the winner.

As important as the two motifs of greed and blindness is the revenge motif introduced for the first time in this story. The wolf’s overbearing and bullying manner to force the fox to obey him on the one hand justifies the fox’s tricks to revenge himself, and on the other hand portrays Lowrence as “another of the victims of unjust force everywhere present in the Moral Fables.” This is a vital element to the conflict and a

justification of why the fox tries to deceive the wolf. As such it is also a warning to the audience to be aware of the consequences of oppression, because the oppressed – no matter how weak – may in the long run find a way to take their revenge.

The Moralitas elaborates on the theme of covetousness symbolized by the greedy wolf, who represents covetous man. The wolf is at the mercy of the fox ("the warld") (2205) with all its temptations. The main problem with the covetous man is that he is unaware of death, represented by the cadger, which is the natural end of every creature:

"That euer tuke lyfe throw cours of kynd man dee, / As man, and beist, and fische in to the see" (2208-2209). The narrator implies that man, because of his credulousness, becomes a slave of his own insatiable ambitions, and the yoke of the ‘nekering’ drags him to his doom. The audience is warned against the inevitable death which “cummings behind and nippis thame be the nek” (2223).

Although the Moralitas touches on the motifs of blindness and covetousness:

"The micht of gold makis mony men sa blind" (2224) or “Quhat is mair dirk than blind prosperitie?” (2228), it is altogether mute about revenge. This is apparently a deliberate choice on the part of the narrator, who does not want to spoon-feed his audience. What he does in essence is to make sure that the audience has learned to read between the lines. He undertakes to elaborate on one or two of the many interpretations available to him and then leaves the rest to the audience to find out. This is, in fact, part of his training strategies. He teaches the audience before and above all how to read.

X. “THE FOX, THE WOLF, AND THE HUSBANDMAN”

“The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman” is another beast-epic story although
the narrator ascribes it to Aesop. The fable is fundamentally social criticism centring primarily on the judicial system. The oppressor makes life ever more miserable for the poor who have nowhere to go, and ironically the judge is Lowrence, the fox. Both the oppressor wolf and the corrupt bribe-taker fox expect the poor farmer to keep his word and give them what they think is their due. One clearly represents the landlords, the other the clergy. The narrator exposes the injustice and corruption of society, especially the courts, whether civil or ecclesiastical.

The covetous wolf takes the farmer at his word yelling, “‘Carll, gaif thou not me this drift / Airlie?’” (2266-67) and claiming “‘is thair ought, sayis thou frear than gift?’” (2268). The farmer, finding himself in an awkward situation, tries to convince the wolf that what he said was simply rash and in anger, so he is not bound to keep his word (2273 ff.). He tries to take the wolf by a judicial surprise and asks for a witness (2278). The apparently clever wolf outwits the man, first proverbially “‘But lawte / All vther vertewis ar nocht worth ane fle’’” (2285-86); and next by presenting his witness, the fox. The cunning fox then handles the case in his own way so as to exact bribes for himself and at the same time get rid of an old enemy. He does not seem to have forgotten the wolf’s arrogance in the previous tale. Thus the audience is given a sophisticated legal case against a lawless background and is expected to make its own judgement. The audience quickly identifies the farmer with the cadger of the previous tale, and is stunned to see that he now has to rely on a sworn enemy.

The fox, who is literally promoted to the position of the judge, submits that God is blind to man’s petty sins:
"I am ane iuge," quod Lowrence than, and leuch:

"Thair is na buddis suld beir me by the rycht.
I may tak hennis and caponis weill aneuch.
For God is gane to sleip, as for this nycht;
Sic small thingis ar not sene in to his sicht.
Thir hennis", quod he, "sall mak thy querrell sure:
With emptie hand na man suld halkis lure." (2329-35)

The fox not only finds God asleep and unconcerned about the way of the world but also the man both helpless and gullible. He now appeals to the wolf's most conspicuous frailty, greed. He would exact "ane cabok," a "somer cheis" "That sic ane sall not be in all this land" (2353-55) from the farmer for the wolf. If the cadger of the previous tale was deceived by the show of the dead fox, now it is the wolf who is taken in by the reflection of the moon in the well, "Quhyte as ane neip and round als as ane seill" (2395).

The wolf first wants the oxen and then the cheese; the fox wants the chickens, and the man wants everything to himself. The wolf is covetous, the fox is cunning, and the man is rash and careless. The whole world seems to be in chaos. Ironically, in such a lawless community everyone appeals to rules and regulations. Several questions are implied: What is God doing, or why is He not doing anything? Is there anything man can do about the miseries of the individual and the ills of society? The narrator does not comment on any of these questions. He is not there to answer questions, rather to make his audience consider them.
The narrator is a social critic and a preacher of morality. His imagined audience is primarily the oppressed who could readily identify themselves with the farmer. The narrator's precise use of legal jargon is striking, as is his reporting of a legal case with such a high level of accuracy and expertise. This undoubtedly adds to his credibility and by extension to the apparent truthfulness of his fictions. The narrator also appeals to the audience's memory and expects it to work out his allusions. For instance, the fox's claim that God is asleep and does not care about small matters such as bribes should remind the audience of the sheep's complaint in “The Sheep and the Dog” about God's reluctance to interfere with the miseries of the world. The difference between the two, however, is that the fox is a villain and the sheep is a victim. The narrator also expects the audience to distinguish between the sheep's figurative questioning followed by his earnest prayer that God might discern the justice of his case, and the fox's blasphemy that God is not interfering with petty sins. Here the narrator seems to be utterly disappointed with everything including the usefulness of his own role but, especially with the judicial system because he realizes that even the fear of divine retribution is twisted at the hand of the oppressor, and the appeal to divine love is totally removed from the scene of justice by the very judges who are expected to implement it.

In the Moralitas, the narrator assumes the role of a preacher again and expounds the details of the narratives in terms of their spiritual significance. Here the fox is the devil “Arctand ilk man to ryn vnrychteous rinkis, / Thinkand thairthrow to lok him in his linkis” (2432-33). The wolf is the “wickit man” (2427) and the farmer is “ane godlie man” (2434). The narrator, fascinated by his own train of thought, goes on to liken even
the hens as the “warkis that fra ferme faith proceidis” (2437). Since there is no indication that the fox could extract the hens from the farmer, it sounds logical to conclude with the narrator that the devil is now greatly disappointed. The narrator also reads the setting of the story allegorically. Hence the wild woods, where the wolf is tricked, “Ar wickit riches, quhilk all men gaipis to get” (2442). Here, as Harold E. Toliver observes, the allegory as interpreted in the Moralitas and the details of the narrative itself interact closely and fruitfully. “The stock device of mistaken identity accounts for much of the humour: the wolf, seeing the moon reflected in the well, mistakes it for his reward. But mistaken identity in this case involves a basic flaw in perception and awareness: reality has more layers than the wolf can penetrate.” According to the Moralitas the “cabok” stands for “couetyce” (2448), in the well of “that wickit vyce” (2450) and any man who tries to go down into such a well is bringing damnation to himself:

For it is all bot fraud and fantasie,

Dryuand ilk man to leip in the buttrie

That dounwart drawis vnto the pane of hell. (2451-53)

The narrator can now only pray that “Christ keip all Christianis from that wickit well!” (2454).

XI. “THE WOLF AND THE WETHER”

“The Wolf and the Wether” is the last of six beast-epic stories in MF. Although the audience may think it cannot be easily taken by surprise because it has seen enough

of it already, and despite a number of tips in the narrative, the *Moralitas* of this fable once more creates uneasiness in the audience. Once more the narrator finds enough reasons to imply that his audience — and man in general — may always miss a crucial point if they are not on their guard. It is not the relevance of the *Moralitas* to the narrative as much as the appropriate alertness of the audience which the narrator stresses. It is one thing to refute a point, but to ignore the data scattered here and there is something different; the one is acceptable, the other out of the question. Thus, instead of emphasizing the moral point, it seems that the narrator focuses on a better reading; this, he would argue, makes one a wiser person: not merely holding on to the jasp, being wise, but looking for it.

The narrator may well be the critic of the court satirizing in particular the king’s favourites. He may want to remind his audience of the lesson of the fall of the high and mighty. Yet in the absence of any data one can surmise that his imaginary audience is a sophisticated body of listeners or readers familiar with the literary tradition and ready to improve. Whereas the earlier fables taught almost straightforward lessons, progressively the teaching of later fables becomes more involved, the devices more complex, and the audience, by implication, more sophisticated.

In the narrative, the interaction between the poor shepherd whose darling hound is dead and the sympathetic wether who tries to help him is attractive, especially when this wether calls the shepherd “Maister” (2477). It is also pathetic that whereas the shepherd bemoans the death of his dog, fears that he may have to go and beg his bread, finds the wether’s plan of disguise a sensible one, and thus becomes his accomplice, at
the death of the true and loyal wether he forgets everything and is thus forgotten by the narrator. One distinction between the death of the two beasts must be made here. The dog dies of a natural death after a sudden sickness, the wether is killed by the wolf not because he is his enemy, but because he is hungry and the hunt is natural. Moreover, the narrator does not forget to interject the pride motif in the wether: "Than worth the wedder wantoun off his wed: / 'Now off the volff', quod he, 'I haue na dreid'" (2495-96). Hence literally by changing his appearance he thinks he really becomes invulnerable, and endangers his life and, allegorically, is doomed to fall because of his pride.

Although the narrator often uses hunger to symbolize sensuality in general, he also makes it clear that the wolf's situation is desperate. The wether also falls prey to the wolf because he goes far away from the range of his human protection. Hence by separating himself from the human world, the wether enters the animal world with its own laws. And it is this separation which justifies the hunt. The wether admits that it is not in accordance with the natural order for a wether to chase a wolf, let alone defy him, and yet even worse to cause him so much anxiety that he defiles himself. This is one of the major lessons that the narrator offers to his audience: "do not violate the natural order, know yourself and do not transgress your limits." As the Moralitas makes clear, the fact that the wether did not know his points of strength and weakness caused his death. The shepherd too is blamed for failing to understand that appearance is one thing and reality something else. It seems that in the world of the fable, the shepherd has not learnt his lesson from the fate of the wolf playing dead like the fox, or from believing
that the moon is a piece of cheese. This shepherd, the narrator seems to suggest, is at the
very least negligent both in allowing himself to endorse the wether's suggestion, and in
permitting the chase.

Whether the narrator endorses the class distinction based on an individual's blood
and descent is a moot question. However, the narrative does narrowly criticise those who
become presumptuous and forget their social station and, in Marshall W. Stearns's
words, "who think they are subject to no one, and who counterfeit a lord in every way."

The narrator reminds his audience in the Moralitas of the dangers that lay before the high
climbers of society, a theme which he has already exploited in "The Two Mice":

Heir may thow se that riches of array
Will cause pure men presumpteous for to be;
Thay think thay hald of nane, be thay als gay,
Bot counterfute ane lord in all degre.
Out of thair cais in pryde thay clyn sa hie
That thay forbeir thair better in na steid,
Quhill sum man tit thair heillis ouer thair heid. (2595-2601)

While the audience may well expect to hear some spiritual moral in the
Moralitas, surprisingly enough, the narrator focuses only on social comments in general
and the quasi-political in particular. Critics such as Kindrick and Stearns, quoted above,
are content that this fable is an occasional poem concerning the court of James III. It may
well be so; nonetheless, it has its teaching message for every reader concerning how to

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strive to know one's merits and deficiencies and how not to transgress one's limits. This lesson is equally applicable both to the poet's contemporary Scotland and to all readers of all times. Here is the narrator's final advice in his final stanza:

Thairfoir I counsell men of euerlik stait
To knaw thame self, and quhome thay suld forbeir,
And fall not with thair better in debait,
Suppois thay be als galland in thair geir:
It settis na seruand for to vphald weir,
Nor clym sa hie quhill he fall of the ledder:
Bot think vpon the wolf and on the wedder. (2609-15)

Pedagogically speaking, the narrator utilizes a variety of sources including history and socio-economics to provide convincing material to make his point. Yet he also encourages the audience to read what is between the lines. It is true that one cannot undo what is done. Yet it is equally absurd not to learn from historical fact just like the traditional fictions of fables rich in timeless truths.

XII. "THE WOLF AND THE LAMB"

"The Wolf and the Lamb" is one of the most popular of all Aesopic fables and the narrator does not find it necessary to mention his authority. Its message is clear: "La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure," as La Fontaine would argue with a touch of irony. In the MF the wolf has already become a well-developed character with a

history of all kinds of adventures; he has proven to be arrogant, covetous, and ruthless. He has represented sensuality, oppression, and the devil. Conversely, the lamb, who is also a well-known character, appears to be as innocent as ever. On the literal level this story repeats not only the traditional hostility of the wolf and the lamb, but also his abuse of power where arrogantly he dismisses the logic of the weak. On the allegorical level the story satirizes the social situation where the strong are always right and the weak are always wrong. It is a social satire commenting on the huge gap between the haves and have-nots. Symbolically, however, the story also has scriptural echoes. It is the story of the innocent son killed for the sins of his ancestors.

The narrator here is a social commentator, an advocate of justice, and a patron of the weak and innocent. The narrator’s anger is directed at the wealthy and those in power. His implied audience, as in the Moralitas, is both the oppressors and the oppressed, the landlords and the peasants, the lawyers and the accused. For the first time in the collection, the narrator directs his admonitions to specific listeners. Although he does not mention the barons and the lords, they too are undoubtedly included. He tries to expose their oppression and to warn them against the viciousness of their actions and wrongdoings, warning them also against the consequences of their actions. This is definitely not a children’s story. Those in power may have the means to ruin the lives of their subjects but they will never be able to get away with it. Sooner or later they will be held accountable for their deeds and they will be doomed.

The Wheel of Fortune is one of the most frequently repeated motifs in the MF. It is represented in the two buckets (2418-19) in “The Fox, the Wolf, and the Husbandman”
where the wolf is going down when the fox is coming up. The same theme is more fully expounded in "The Cock and the Fox." However, it is here in the Moralitas that the wrongdoers of all walks of life are once and for all reminded of the inevitable revolution of the Wheel of Fortune. The death of the lamb is much more than bad luck and the turn of the wheel, and the audience is given no clue to follow the argument in that direction. Neither is it a question of revenge as it is in the relationship between the fox and the wolf in "The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger" or the wolf and the wether in "The Wolf and the Wether." Pride, which is the cause of the fall of many a protagonist in the MF, is the main problem with the lamb. To the disgust of the wolf, the lamb is taken by his own dialectical superiority:

"Set me ane laughfull court; I sall compeir
Befoir the lyoun, lord and leill iustice,
And be my hand I oblis me rycht heir
That I sall byde ane vnsuspect assyis.
This is the law, this is the instant wyis;
3e suld pretend thairfoir ane summondis mak
Aganis that day, to gif ressoun and tak." (2686-92)

The wolf simply cannot accept any argument which ignores his natural superior strength:

"thou wald intruse ressoun / Quhair wrang and reif suld duell in propertie" (2693-94).

Although in the narrative the lamb’s argument appears to be faulty in that he forgets his situation and defies his betters and is too optimistic about the judicial system’s ability to protect him, in the Moralitas he is purged of all this: "God keip the
lamb, quhilk is the innocent, / From wolfis byit and men extortioneris” (2770-71). If the lamb is innocent, the wolf deserves only the fires of Hell: “Of sic wolfis hellis fyre sall be thair meid” (2720). Moreover, whereas the narrator focuses on social issues in the *Moralitas*, he provides enough clues (as he has already done in the narrative) for the audience to associate the lamb with Christ and the wolf with the devil. Hence, in such a context, the very presence of the sacrificed Son must enhance the possibility of redemption. Bleak as the situation is, still the narrator hopes, as his prayer for the king to banish the wolves indicates, that his intended audience may learn something from his endeavours and improve both as individuals and as members of the established institutions.

Thus skilfully the narrator amalgamates the Aesopic tradition, which teaches general and secular moralities, not only with the encyclopaedic tradition which concerns itself with allegorical and religious edification, but also with the beast-epic cycles and their emphasis on specific satiric messages. While the historic audience must have been familiar with many of the allusions in this fable and must have heard the poet’s message clearly, the narrator’s teaching reaches beyond contemporary Scotland.

Pedagogically the narrator makes the best of the traditions. He engages his readers in a systematic and progressive interaction. He provides dialectic strategies in which animals and humans debate, and in their discourse resort to conflicting tactics of logic and power as well as justice and mercy. His animals gain momentum and grow into multi-dimensional characters. His human characters represent men of all walks of life. The result is a panorama of a world badly in need of improvement. As far as the
imagined audience is concerned, it grows along with the progressively more and more sophisticated fables. If in the beginning it was naive, simple, and probably much too young, and was easily taken by surprise, now it is a mature, sophisticated, and above all understanding audience. In the earlier fables the audience was invited to witness mild reprimands and inconveniences for the faulty; by contrast in later fables tragic death and ruthless execution is the norm. If in the earlier fables there was much reliance on traditional stories and their animal characters, in later fables the same characters reappear, yet with much more intertextual association.

XIII. “THE PADDOCK AND THE MOUSE”

In his final fable of MF, “The Paddock and the Mouse,” the narrator insists that his source is Aesop; hence he is no more than a translator of the well-established tradition. He is also a preacher who is very fond of the edification of his congregation. He is a serious teacher who is interested in educating his pupils not only in what to look for but also how to look for it. Here, for the first time in the whole collection, he finds himself amongst his peers. Now he calls his audience, “My brother” (2910), and not “maisteris” (29), “gude floke” (789), “worthie folk” (1888), as he called them previously. It really seems that he has left the podium of teaching and the pulpit of preaching and has stepped down to join his listeners. Now that he has taught the lessons and his audience has, he hopes, learnt them, he would rather sit amongst the audience hoping that some other fabulist may resume the task.41 He considers his audience as his equals, his brothers

41Stearns suggests that Henryson’s pointed use of the word ‘brother’ may well be a hint at the relationship of James III and Albany. Stearns 388.
in faith who may now expect some friar to use such fables in his *exempla* for the edification of all: “Say thow, I left the laif vnto the freiris, / To mak a sample or similitude” (2971-72). The audience and the narrator thus become peers, equals in human origin, with equal potential to sin, and of course endowed with the same possibility of redemption. This equality is further stretched to include the beasts as well. Both man and beast are created of the same dust and exposed to the same natural forces, and vulnerable to the same threats and dangers. Although unlike the mouse and the paddock who are anthropomorphs, the kite remains strictly a non-human creature with only natural and instinctive desires, death is the end of all, man and beast, human-like or otherwise.

It is not only the fox who is sly or the wolf who is an insatiable enemy of the lamb; even a paddock can play with words and deceive the mouse who could reason with the king lion. The very mouse who could go to the town and escape the threat of her natural enemy, the cat, is first brought down by the paddock and then along with her oppressor she is taken up and flayed by the kite. There is no end to the calamities of this world. There is always a succession of unpredictable hazards on the way. Yet, the narrator seems to have a scheme of comfort: “make prudence your first lesson and redemption the last.” What he especially emphasizes in this fable is that hypocrisy, and by implication, treason and deceit are the greatest dangers both for the individual and society.

This fable is the sum of all the rest of the fables in the *MF*. It touches on almost all the major motifs that the narrator has already expounded either explicitly or by
implication. Prudence, moderation, contentment, justice, appearance versus reality are all there. But above all it is about life and death, and as Khiony observes, it "is a commentary on the nature of life: the need, the journey, the betrayal, the struggle, the brutal end." However, for the first time, the narrator extracts two distinct lessons from the narrative, one literal and the other allegorical. The first lesson is about choosing one's friends. He believes that it is much better to live alone one's whole life "Than to be matchit with ane wickit marrow" (2933). He also reminds his audience "Be war thairfore with quhome thow fallowis the" (2914) and passionately repeats that:

"For thow wer better beir of stane the barrow,
Or sueitand dig and delf quhil thow may dre,
Than to be machit with ane wickit marrow." (2915-17)

It is a great folly to believe others quickly. "Ane silkin toung, ane hart of crueltie," he says "Smytis more sore than ony schot of arrow" (2922-23). His advice then is clear: "be careful in choosing your companions."

The allegorical interpretation of the fable is, incidentally, the last of a series of edifying lessons he expounds, not surprisingly, about life and death. The paddock stands for man's body which, while desiring to swim across the world's currents, is always in turmoil and "Ay in perrell, and reddie for to droun" (2940). The mouse represents man's soul, lashed to and inseparable from the body:

The quhilk to droun suld euer stand in dreed
Of carnal lust be the suggestioun,

42Khiony 111.
Quhilk drawis ay the saull and druggis doun. (2952-54)

While the body and soul are in perpetual struggle, the unconcerned kite, representing death, comes quite unexpectedly like a thief "and cuttis sone the battall" (2963). This lesson too is clear: "be prepared for inevitable death." And to prepare for death, as the narrator sees it, is for man to make himself "ane strang castell / Of gud deidis" (2966-67). While the death of an animal, as many may believe, means simply despair and then annihilation, for man, so long as he is alive, there is alway hope of first redemption and then salvation. Incidentally, the last words of the narrator are his prayers for a better death for himself and all those who would ever listen to him:

Now Christ for vs that deit on the rude,

Of saull and lyfe as thow art Saluiour,

Grant vs till pas in till ane blissit hour. (2973-75)

Thus the message not only of this last fable, but the rest of them as well, as Kratzmann observes, is "understanding rather than rejection of the world."43

There remains one final yet vital question: "What if the lessons taught are not learnt?" If one remains careless about the jewel and ignores one's growth, if one behaves like the imprudent fox, the oppressive wolf, or the stupid biràs, one will be just like animals. Man is literally brutalized, governed by his carnal desires. As such, no matter how hard he tries to justify his actions, he is no more and no less than the beasts who are, after all, prone to the same pit-falls. Man will simply be deprived of all the exaltation, of all the transcendence that the narrator so enthusiastically tries to help his audience find,

43Kratzmann 65.
no matter how bleak the situation may happen to be. True, his instructions may sometimes be as hard as the mice's nuts or even inedible stones, yet one should never forget the kernel which is hidden in the hard shell. Indeed, even this hardness is intentional; it is part of the narrator's teaching strategies.

Pedagogically the narrator does not pretend to simplify anything. There is nothing either simple or easy when it comes to one's prosperity while alive and salvation when dead. Unlike the tales which tend to be straightforward and simple, the moralization is characteristically much harder. The audience is repeatedly warned that there is no general prescription for all human ills and miseries. Rather it is always implied, if not stated, that one has to look for something beyond the appearance, and that is the key to the understanding of the fables. One should never go blind-folded. Everyone may be able to see the present, but not many are able to foresee the future, and yet fewer are those who really learn from the past. Most of Henryson's fables, however, present a dynamic and engaged dialogue which is not only entertaining but also enlightening. The pedantic debate between the swallow and the birds, the legal debate between the wolf and the lamb, the congenial discourse between the mouse and the lion are only a few amongst many such edifying passages.

It is not a question of whether the original author of these fables is Aesop, and if so, how credible he is. It is not a question who teaches, and to whom, as much as it is what he teaches and how. And as Forugh Farrokhzad, a modern Persian poet, puts it:
“Keep flight in your memory / The bird is mortal.” This is the ultimate message. The moral lessons are there and the narrator has exhausted all his energy by threatening and promising, by alluding and clarifying, by surprising and preparing, by appealing to the audience’s emotions and reason, to make sure that he is taken seriously.

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III. CHAUCER & THE FABLE

Although Chaucer's biography emerges with much greater clarity than that of most of the medieval writers, relatively little is known about his life. He was born presumably in London in the early 1340s. Both his father and grandfather were successful wine merchants and had close associations with the Court. Although no school records concerning his education have survived, it is believed that, like many other merchants' sons, he must have received his early education at some London school such as that attached to St. Paul's Cathedral. Evidently in his teens he was a page in the household of the Countess of Ulster, wife of Lionel, one of the sons of Edward III. Later in his life, he gradually acquired more responsible positions, such as controller of the export tax, justice of the peace, and even member of the Parliament. Although he enjoyed the favours of Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV, his most faithful patron and protector was John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. He also undertook several journeys abroad as the king's special envoy on important missions.¹

Chaucer's experience as a courtier, his journeys abroad, and his close contact with men of all walks of life in his work place greatly enhanced his poetic career. He was fortunate to be born and reared in the right place and at the right time. At court he learned about politics, and at work he encountered people of all walks of life. At home he studied the classics, philosophy, science, even medicine; abroad he made himself familiar with the contemporary Europe and its men of letters. Virgil, Ovid, Boethius,

¹Larry D. Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987) xvi ff. All subsequent quotations from the Canterbury Tales are from this edition with line references in parentheses.
Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, amongst others, were his great sources of inspiration. In France, however, he came directly under the influence of the elegance of French poetry and especially the *Roman de la Rose*. More important than his literary career and even his social experience, it was Chaucer’s keen eye and his observant mind which gave him both the matter and manner of his poetry. His sense of humour, his readiness to laugh with his audience at man’s follies, his mastery of expression, and the fact that he was a commoner by birth and led a life of nobility by profession and association enabled him to create life-like characters – both high and low. No wonder he is regarded as the father of English literature. Chaucer died in 1400 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Although he led a busy life, Chaucer was extremely prolific. He wrote both poetry and prose; he was also a great translator. He wrote in a variety of genres including dream-vision, eulogy, courtly love poetry, love story, and collections of tales. *The Canterbury Tales* (*CT*) is particularly distinctive because of its narrative framework. Collections of stories linked by such a device, like Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* or Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, were not uncommon in the Middle Ages. However, unlike Gower’s confessor and Boccaccio’s five men and five women story-tellers, Chaucer’s pilgrims are more than just tellers. In the *CT* there is a fascinating accord between the narrators and their stories. Chaucer first creates the characters and then has them interact with each other by telling their stories. Hence the pilgrim tellers grow through the poem not only as they reveal themselves in their own tales but as they are targeted in the

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others’ tales as well. The plain Prioress of the General Prologue (GP), for instance, may win the others’ sympathy by telling her story of the miracle of the Virgin. However, in the Priest’s tale of Chauntecleer and Russell she gains all the more attention and becomes the subject of every one’s scrutiny. Moreover, unlike most other medieval stories with one major theme, Chaucer’s tales offer multiple sententiae. It is not the fact that they both instruct and entertain, but it is the multiplicity of the themes and the variety of their overtones, as well as their structural complexities, which have given rise to all kinds of hermeneutic challenges.

Although Chaucer’s House of Fame (a dream-vision with satirical hints), Parliament of Fowls (a love story with allegorical overtones), and Squire’s Tale (a romance full of exotic elements) may all conveniently be categorized as animal stories, they are not fables. In fact Chaucer is not a fabulist in its usual sense. His Nun’s Priest’s Tale (NPT) and the Manciple’s Tale (ManT), the only two animal fables that he wrote, are much more complex than any other fables in the language.3 That is why Chaucer critics over the ages have primarily concerned themselves with his stylistic elaboration, rhetoric, and the like rather than his fables proper.

The Nun’s Priest’s Tale

The story of a singing rooster or crow duped by a cunning fox or wolf is indeed an Aesopic fable, variants of which can be found in many Medieval Latin and vernacular

3The proverbial tale of “The Two Hounds and the Kite” in The Knight’s Tale (I. 1177-80) is sometimes seen as an Aesopic animal fable the moral of which -- to avoid futile toil -- is not taken either by Arcite or Palemone. See Jeffrey Helterman, “The Dehumanizing Metamorphoses of the Knight’s Tale,” ELH 38 (1971): 496; Siegfried Wenzel, “Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching,” SP 73 (1976): 145.
collections. This story also appears in non-Aesopic collections such as the anonymous *Gallus et Vulpes* and the beast epics of *Isengrimus* and the Reynard Cycles. The ultimate origin of the story is traced to both Indian and Greco-Roman sources. In the earlier versions of the tale, there is always a culprit who manages to prey on his victim by exploiting his weak point of pride and by means of flattery. In the course of its historical development, however, the themes of alertness, counter-trickery, fall and resurrection, amongst others, are introduced to this story. Marie de France's *Isopet, branche* 2 of the *Roman de Renart, branch* 6 of *Renart le Conterfait*, and the later *Romulus* Collections, which are believed to have been Chaucer's more immediate sources, are in fact, much more elaborate and detailed than all their crude and simple prototypes. 4

Chaucer's *NPT* is by no means a conventional fable; neither is it a simple episode of a beast epic. In fact, only a small part of Chaucer's tale is taken up with the central episode. The narrative is expanded with anecdotes and moral applications and is enriched with literary allusions and verbal extravagances. Although the essential dynamics of a fable are there, it is both long and complex thematically and stylistically, unlike a conventional fable, which is characteristically simple and short. Moreover, again unlike a mainstream fable, the *NPT* readily lends itself to non-fabular satiric and overtly allegorical readings. But above all, to the dismay of the reader, it does not offer an easy

well-rounded single moral lesson, which is an essential part of any fable. Rather, a number of moralities are offered by different didactic voices to multiple layers of audience. Likewise, different pedagogical strategies are employed both in the fable proper and the tale as a whole. No wonder then that Chaucer scholars have responded to the tale with such an enormous variety of interpretations. While almost everyone agrees that it is one of the best poems Chaucer ever produced, they disagree on almost every single aspect of it.⁵

The moral tag at the end of the tale, “Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille” (VII. 3443), which appears to be clear, has paradoxically proved to be extremely puzzling because one never knows what the “fruyt” exactly is. Is it to avoid pride and lust, or to exercise contentment or vigilance? Is it a warning against flattery or woman’s counsels? Is it about dreams or domestic sovereignty? Is it about the disasters of fate or the blindness of Fortune?⁶ Admittedly it is a needle in a haystack. Although it is widely accepted that the tale is ultimately serious in its intent,⁷ the extent to which the moralizations in the tale are to be taken seriously has largely remained controversial. In

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fact, a number of critics have advanced allegorical views. John Speirs, for instance, interprets the tale as an allegory of the Fall of Man; 8 Bernard F. Huppé's reading is with more heavily moralistic bias. 9 Mortimer J. Donovan sees the tale as a sermon on alertness to moral obligation with Chauntecleer representing the holy man and Russell the devil. 10 Charles Dahlberg detects an allegory on the controversy between the secular clergy and the friars, with Chauntecleer representing the cock-priest in the state of sloth and the fox representing the friar who will beguile him. 11 Judson Boyce Allen shows that Chaucer's intention in presenting the NPT as a mock allegory with Chauntecleer representing the exegetical figure of cock-preacher must have been comic; Chauntecleer's appearance, character, and behaviour consistently undercut a straightforward allegorical interpretation. 12 Stephen Manning points out, however, that fables were controversial in the Middle Ages, particularly as a means of preaching and

8 John Speirs, Chaucer the Maker, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) 185-93.


suggests that Chaucer is ridiculing the rhetorical and poetic practice of his day.\textsuperscript{13} Manning says that “Chaucer is poking fun at those who felt that a poem had to have some moral in order to justify its existence.”\textsuperscript{14} S.S. Hussey, too, argues that the tale is rather a joke, indeed, a mock epic because within the framework of a fable, “the viewpoint switches from animal to human and back again.”\textsuperscript{15} He comments that although it is a commonplace incident happening on a commonplace setting, “it is, by a number of devices found in epic and not often in fable, built up into something much more impressive-sounding.”\textsuperscript{16} Hussey also argues that “Mock-heroic is not meant to be taken too seriously, for its aim is to show how pretentious and self-important we are in our little world.”\textsuperscript{17}

While the issue of morality remains in question, the interpretation of the tale as a parody of the excesses of rhetoric is generally acknowledged. Morton W. Bloomfield, for instance, argues that the tale parodies courtly love and philosophical dispute.\textsuperscript{18} The digressions from the central episode, the anecdotes and the moralities, the literary


\textsuperscript{14}Manning 416.


\textsuperscript{16}Hussey 186.

\textsuperscript{17}Hussey 186.

allusions and verbal extravagances contain the major stylistic feature of the narrative and a main point of the tale. Some critics, such as Arthur Chapin and Lynn Staley Johnson, argue that the tone of the tale is ironic. While Johnson emphasises the rhetoric of the poem and maintains that by evoking the story of Troy's fall in a tale of a rooster's folly, Chaucer reveals the extent to which he understood and was capable of exploiting the possibilities of irony. Johnson further reminds us, however, that "Mock-heroic' is a term Chaucer would not have used; not only was the term coined by Addison, but the word *heroic*, used to describe either the deeds of heroes or a literary style, was not used before the sixteenth century. Chaucer would probably have classed the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as a form of irony." Peter W. Travis, however, argues that the tale is a parody of the medieval trivium, or liberal arts, and that Chaucer "wants not to destroy these liberal arts but to refunction them in ways that refine awareness of language's construction, representation, manipulation, and interpretation of reality." Finally critics like S.S. Hussey, D.E. Myers, Onno Oerlemans, and others believe that the tale is just about confusion. Talbot Donaldson, for instance, notes that "the fruit of the Nun's Priest's tale is its chaff."

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20 Johnson 243, n. 12.


22 Donaldson 150.
All these interpretations are more ingenious than cogent, and while one can make a case for all of the suggested themes of the story as Chaucer scholars have done over centuries (and especially since the 1920s), the two major themes of gluttony and cupiditas in the tale have attracted less attention than they deserve. The fox wants to eat the rooster; Chauntecleer scratches for worms for his wives; and Pertelote advises her royal husband to peck up the laxative. The widow’s dietary system is the focus of the priest’s description of the farm and its residents. In fact, the CT begins at a tavern and is to end with a prize meal for the best story-teller. Harry Bailly, the self-appointed judge and moderator of the stories, is the chef and the announcer of the meal. While eating and drinking motifs are common to almost all of the tales, the Reeve’s Tale, the Cook’s Tale, and the Merchant’s Tale, especially provide abundant use of them. The Nun’s manner at table, her diet, and what she feeds her dog (in contrast to what the widow gives her daughters) all indicate the importance of eating in this tale.

As for the theme of cupiditas, the CT is full of reference to bawdy stories and tales of ribaldry. Chauntecleer’s incestuous relationship with his seven sisters, as well as his craze for Pertelote, in contrast to the poor widow and her two single daughters, is about cupiditas more than anything else. Likewise, the Miller’s Tale, the Merchant’s Tale, the Shipman’s Tale, the marriage group, are primarily concerned with the same topos. As for Harry Bailly, beside profit of course, ribaldry is the only thing he understands. Take his comment in the Epilogue to the NPT, for instance, where he regrets that the Priest is not a secular person or else he, like Chauntecleer, could enjoy many women:
But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,
Thou woldest ben a trede-fou1 aright.
For if thou have corage as thou hast myght,
Thee were ned of hennes, as I wene,
Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene. (VII. 3450-54)

Moreover, the Priest’s relationship with the Nun has given rise to all kinds of such
speculations which are — though improper — by no means impossible. However, in either
case — be it the theme of gluttony or cupiditas — Chaucer never allows us to be sure
whether he is serious, ironic, or just entertaining.

What makes it virtually impossible to pinpoint any specific truth about the NPT is
the fact that there are at least three distinct layers of narrative in this tale.23 Right in the
centre of the tale, there is the well-known fable of the rooster and the fox; then there are
the narrator’s rhetorical elaborations; and finally, it is the frame tale with its Prologue
and Epilogue in the context of the CT. The fable proper, in essence, is the lowest level of
the hierarchy. It focuses on the flattery of the fox, the capture of the cock, and the cock’s
reversal of the situation. Most of the controversial disputes such as the prophetic
importance of dreams, the question of predestination versus man’s free will, the problem
of sovereignty, and woman’s counsel, amongst others, are the narrator’s contributions on
a somewhat higher level. But on the highest narrative level, the Priest himself, as yet
another character in the CT, is engaged in a dramatic relationship with other characters,

23See D.E. Myers, “Focus and ‘Moralite’ in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” ChauR 7
(1973): 211; Friedman, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale: The Preacher and the Mermaid’s
especially with the Monk, the Knight, and the Prioress. At the expense of oversimplification, one may argue that the fable of a rooster and a fox is a general statement about alertness; the narrator’s exemplum of Chauntecleer and Russell is a sermon on the act of interpretation; the NPT, as a whole, then is the sum of a number of truths rather than any specific didactic point. Each layer of the story has its own teaching voice, its own audience, and its own ways of handling things. The CT narrator manipulates the Nun’s Priest, who exploits Chauntecleer, who, along with Pertelote and Russell, in turn, exhausts all kinds of topoi. Likewise, the relationship between the fabular birds sheds light on human problems in the Priest’s world, which, in turn, represents Chaucer’s England and, by and large, all human life. Hence the NPT provides a spectrum of layered narratives which, though overlapping at times, address different issues on different levels. The very puzzling nature of the wisdom of the tale is its plan to educate the reader by engaging his mind to find “solaas” in the confusion of its “sentence.”

Although the tale is initially required of the Priest on the ground that the Monk will not comply with the Host’s demand to tell a happier story, and although the tale itself begins with the description of the widow and her farm, the fable proper begins with Chauntecleer dismissing Pertelote’s arguments (or rather his own convictions about dreams) and getting duped by the crafty fox, who exploits his tendency to vainglory. Here flattery is the fox’s tactical device. No sooner does Chauntecleer close his eyes than the fox snatches him, shoulders him, and heads for the woods only to be counter-tricked by his victim using his own tactic -- flattery. The narrative turns out to have not one but two specific moral lessons each to be taught and taken by the same beast: Chauntecleer
blames himself for shutting his eyes when they should be open and Russell curses himself for opening his mouth when he should have kept it shut:

“For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see,
Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!”

“Nay,” quod the fox, “but God yeve hym meschaunce.
That is so undiscreet of governaunce
That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees.” (VII. 3431-35)

However, there is no evidence to believe that either one will learn anything from experience. By the time the pursuers come, the fox retires to the woods; back on the farm, life comes back to normal — there is no further mention of either flattery or the lesson taught by either the culprit or the victim. The narrator’s moral lesson too addresses almost the same wisdoms that the beasts pronounce, i.e., avoiding negligence and flattery: “Lo, swich it is for to be reccheless / And necligent, and truste on flatterye” (VII. 3436-37).

The NPT -- even without its Prologue and Epilogue -- is much more than the fable of a rooster and a fox. Rather it is the contrast between two dramatically different worlds: the old widow’s farm and Chauntecleer’s “palace.” On the farm live not only the old widow, but also her two daughters and a group of domestic animals who are all anonymous except for the three dogs and Malle, the sheep.\(^\text{24}\) In the birds’ coop, however, 

\(^{24}\)The reference to Jack Straw and the curious canine names -- Colle, Talbot, and Gerland -- though traditionally common names of dogs, have been associated with the Peasants Revolt of 1381. For more historical readings of the Tale, see Dolores Warwick Frese, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale: Chaucer’s Identified Master Piece?” ChauR 16 (1982): 332; Saul Nathaniel Brody, “Truth and Fiction in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” ChauR 14
Chauntecleer presides along with his harem of seven wives including his favourite queen, Pertelote. Unlike the common and quiet background of the farm, Chauntecleer's palace is a royal theatre of philosophical debate and treacherous crime. In this version of the fable, the tale is rich in many more lessons than the central call for precaution and avoidance of flattery. Beside the explicit morals stated above, both the anthropomorphs and the narrator have a lot more to offer.

The debate between Pertelote and Chauntecleer glosses a number of controversial issues such as dreams, Fortune, and sovereignty. The narrator demonstrates the limits of irrationality, forgetfulness, and confusion in the complex character of Chauntecleer. So does his contrastive illustration of the farm and the coop silently present the themes of contentment, chastity, and silence. The first wisdom the couple elucidate is whether or not the dream is a forecast of things to come. Shocked at her lover's cowardice — "Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" (VII. 2920) — Pertelote is resolved that Chauntecleer's dream — like all dreams — is reducible to an imbalance of the humours. Having displayed her great learning²⁵ with enthusiasm, she recommends that her husband had better take her prescribed laxatives²⁶ and pull himself together.

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“Pekke hem up right as they growe and ete hem yn.

Be myrie, housbonde, for youre fader kyn!

Dredeth no dreem; I kan sey yow nameore.” (VII. 2967-69)

Despite Pertelote, however, Chauntecleer maintains that dreams surely predict the future. He demonstrates his point by citing not only notable authorities, but also a number of exempla in which dreams play a great role. The recital of these dream exempla, however, emphasizes how easily he ignores his own wisdom. Neither does he take Pertelote’s laxatives nor does he follow his own accurate knowledge of equinoctials to identify his natural enemy. As such neither the debate itself nor the narrator seems to be conclusive. The dichotomy of the birds’ argument in itself is suggestive. Both Chauntecleer’s “speculative intellect” and Pertelote’s “empirical intellect,” as Monica E. McAlpine suggests, “are limited ways of knowing, neither is definitely superior to the other.”

If Chauntecleer’s first two exempla focus on the prophetic importance of dreams, his reference to Andromache’s dream and Hector’s needless death further emphasizes the theme of irrationality which led to Troy’s fall:

Lo heere Andromacha, Ectores wyf,

That day that Ector sholde lese his lyf,

She dremed on the same nyght biforn

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28 McAlpine 85-6; Chapin 17 ff.

29 Johnson 226-27.
How that the lyf of Ector sholde be lorn.
If thilke day he wente into bataille.
She warned hym, but it myghte nat availle:
He wente for to fighte natheles,
But he was slayn anon of Achilles,
But thilke tale is al to longe to telle,
And eek it is ny day, I may nat dwelle. (VII. 3141-50)

Instead of taking any real lesson from his pretentious display of erudition, Chauntecleer seems to feel that there is little he can do to avoid the adversity he feels the dream foreshadows. Although he insists on the importance of his dream, he appears to be convinced that there is nothing he can do to avert the course of his fate:

Shortly I seye, as for conclusioun,
That I shal han of this avisioun
Adversitee. (VII. 3151-53)

Thus instead of becoming more alert, he acts more foolishly and chooses to exercise his free will in the wrong area, lust and arrogance: “He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme. And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme” (VII. 3177-78).

In his confusion, the narrator first blames Lady Fortune as the cause of Chauntecleer’s adventure:

Now goode men I prey yow herkneth alle:
Lo, how Fortune turneth sodeynly
The hope and pryde eek of hir enemy! (VII. 3402-3404)
Then, like his creation, he appears to advocate predestination, especially when he comments "But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee, / After the opinioun of certein clerkis" (VII. 3234-35); "O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed" (VII. 3338); or "For evere the latter ende of joye is wo. / God woot that worldly joye is soone ago" (VII. 3205-3206). And finally he sounds even superstitious when he seems to blame Friday for being the cause of Chauntecleer's fall (3341). Thus, the narrator, as Myers observes, simply does not seem to understand "how God's Providence operates through Fortune and how to 'maken virtu of necessite.'"

The unresolved issue of sovereignty is yet another major theme in the debate between Chauntecleer and Pertelote which has attracted much attention. The narrative provides all kinds of causes for Chauntecleer's near-disaster: Fortune, destiny, Venus, Friday, the fox, the cock's own vanity. However, the most compelling argument is the anti-feminist suggestion that all man's miseries have their root in woman's counsel. Other reasons aside, Chauntecleer's decision to fly down from the safe beam and, therefore, to the clutches of the fox may well have been influenced first by Pertelote's persuasive argument:

"I kan nat love a coward, by my feith!

For certes, what so any womman seith,

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30 Corsa 213 ff.

31 Myers 217.

32 Note the way in which this topos is a part of the topmost layer of the interaction of tales, especially in the "marriage group." Compare the Wife of Bath's assertions with the relationship between Chauntecleer and Pertelote.
We alle desire, if it mighte bee.
To han houesbondes hardy, wise, and free,
And secrey — and no nygard, ne no fool,
Ne hym that is agast of every tool." (VII. 2911-16)

and then by her extraordinary beauty which kills all fear in him:

"For whan l se the beautee of youre face,
Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,
It maketh al my drede for to dyen.

.........................

I am so ful of joye and of solas,
That l diffye bothe sweven and dreem." (VII. 3160-62, 3170-71)

Furthermore, Chauntecleer's praise of his wife contains the Latin tag, blaming woman
for man's ruin, and its mistranslation, which is hilarious at the expense of Pertelote's
ignorance.33

"For al so siker as In principio,
Mulier est hominis confusio —
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
"Womman is mannes joye and al his blis."" (VII. 3163-66)

To the reader's surprise, the narrator endorses Chauntecleer's view and hastily concludes
that Eve is the cause of all man's problems:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo,
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese. (VII. 3256-59)

As Charles Owen and others have suggested there is some truth in Chauntecleer’s literally inadequate rendition since in the beginning woman was not only man’s joy and bliss, but also his confusion.\textsuperscript{34} It is in this state of confusion that Chauntecleer, who believes in dreams, silences his wife, who plays a different tune; he is overcome by his victory over her so much that he ignores both his dream and his own conclusion, “The many a dreem ful soore to drede” (VII. 3109) and thus falls into the trap.

One of the implied themes of the tale is forgetfulness. Chauntecleer, the fox, and the narrator all seem to be forgetful at one time or another. Chauntecleer forgets his own dream and conviction when he leaves his safe beam. Even before that, in his debate with Pertelote, he forgets to draw the appropriate conclusion from his first \textit{exemplum} and instead of arguing that dreams come true, he cries out “Mordre wol out; that se we day by day” (VII. 3052). Hussey argues that “this often happens in sermons, for everything is grist to the preacher’s mill, and no opportunity is lost to emphasise a point that arises, as it were, in passing.”\textsuperscript{35} Russell forgets his trick of flattery, which the cock uses against him. The narrator is frequently trapped in the dispute over the issues that he raises and the thought of Chauntecleer alone can free him from any serious embarrassment.

\textsuperscript{34}Owen 137.

\textsuperscript{35}Hussey 184.
Moreover, his *moralitas* at the end of the tale suggests that he is addressing an absent audience of “lordes” (VII. 3325). In fact, the art of forgetting, as a mode of self-deception, is first introduced in the *GP*, where Chaucer, the pilgrim says: “My wit is short, ye may wel understonde” (I. 746). The Nun’s Priest, too, seems to forget where he is and what he is doing; he is perhaps as confused as Chauntecleer — his creation — or even his creator — Chaucer, the pilgrim.  

The contrast between the old widow and Chauntecleer presents at least two other implicit, though conspicuous, motifs: contentment and chastity. The regal palace of Chauntecleer and his harem of seven wives is juxtaposed to the poor background of the farm with the old widow and her two daughters and their few livestock. Unlike their down-to-earth owners, Chauntecleer and Pertelote appear to lead a luxurious life of leisure and beauty. Forgetting that he himself is a bird, Chauntecleer invites his love to listen to the music of birds and enjoy the beauty of the flowers:

"Madame pertelote, my worldes blis,

Herkneth thise blissful briddes how they synge,

And se the freshe floures how they spryngge."

(VII. 3200-3202)

Again unlike the seemingly pious widow and her daughters, Chauntecleer is a lecherous male with incestuous relationships with his seven sisters:

This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce

Sevèn hennes for to doon al his plesaunce,

Whiche were his sustres and his paramours. (VII. 2865-67)

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16 Champin 25-26; Owen 142.
Finally, while the human residents of the farm are all quiet and virtually say nothing, the beasts, especially Chaunticleer, are extremely talkative. It appears that they always argue and abuse speech, always flatter and cause trouble, always appeal to vanity and create chaotic situations. Only when they are quiet is the world at peace; no sooner do they open their mouths than the trouble begins.\(^{37}\)

The tale with all its elaboration presents a host of wisdoms. The teaching voice is mainly that of the birds, especially in their debate. However, Chaunticleer is the predominant expounder of erudition. He is also an exemplary teacher in that he sounds like a preacher himself, who produces at least three sermons in a row. As a bad example, however, he represents fallen man not only because of his pride, but also his sins of the flesh. Although the fox too has a say, though briefly, it is the old widow who teaches the most in her peculiar silence. She teaches the lesson of contentment, moderation, and, above all, silence — a lesson which is not taken either by Chaunticleer or Russell. Yet all these are the mouthpieces of the narrator who can only wrap up their wisdoms in a disturbing moral which offers more questions than answers. In fact as Alfred David argues, although both Chaunticleer and Pertelote exhaust their auctors and authorities, “the greatest user of authority in this tale ... is the narrator. He spies a lesson the way Chaunticleer spies a corn in the yard, and he hastens to pick it out for us.... He attributes Chaunticleer’s fate to a variety of causes.”\(^{38}\)

\(^{37}\)For more on the abuse of language, see McAlpine 82.

Chapin aptly suggests that to find the interpretation of this tale is like peeling an onion which leads to "either nothing ... or an excellent view of a clear blue sky."\(^{39}\) To Chapin, the moral at the end of the poem, offers a "choice between fruit and chaff: between a unitary interpretation of the Chauntecleer exemplum and one that would accept the immense disorder of its truths as its truth."\(^{40}\) The numerous explicit and implicit wisdoms of the tale ultimately take the shape of the chaff and the sententious audience may well choose the chaff after all. Chapin also observes that "thus we heedlessly ignore Muscatine's magisterially sensible observation, "that they are chickens."\(^{41}\) We do what comes naturally, and go pecking for "sentence" even in an ambiance of comic grace that seems beyond such gross appetite."\(^{42}\) Finally, as Chapin again reminds us, "it is through making foolish mistakes in their application of sententiae, or in deliberately misapplying them, that [Chaucer's] characters come to life and grow as self-creating creatures."\(^{43}\)

At the end of his tale the Nun's Priest warns his audience:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,

As of a fox, or of a cock and hen,

Taketh the moralite, goode men,

\(^{39}\)Chapin 20.

\(^{40}\)Chapin 22.

\(^{41}\)Muscatine 237.

\(^{42}\)Chapin 16.

\(^{43}\)Chapin 19.
For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, nd lat the chaf be stille. (VII. 3438-43)

With the Prologue and the Epilogue, we have yet a different story on a higher level. On the first level any fox and rooster would do; for the second layer any priest — in fact any teller — could tell the story of Chauntecleer and Russell, but not any cock and fox; on this level of narrative the teller is specifically the Priest, whose immediate audience are his fellow pilgrims with Harry Bailly as their speaker. Thus it is in the context of the CT as a whole that not only every wisdom of the tale but also its very form should be scrutinized. In other words, it is no more a question of what the tale teaches as much as why such ideas are introduced and how they are perceived by the rest of the pilgrim audience. Moreover, the reader is urged to look for the interaction between the characters rather than looking for simplified teachings. The tale, therefore, presents a microcosmic depiction of the world we live in with all its confusions and possibilities, with all its pretensions and realities, and with all its hopes and illusions.⁴⁴

The Monk's Tale, which precedes the NPT, consists of a number of "tragedies" with the unifying theme of the wheel of Fortune. The Knight, who quickly finds this contradictory to the theme of Providential order in his own tale, is irritated and certainly would hear "namore of this" (VII. 2767). In his confusion the Host calls on the Nun’s

Priest, who has clearly been trying to avoid attention, to come forward and tell an amusing and entertaining tale, at least to settle the dispute between the Knight and the Monk:

"Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!
Tell us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade.
Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade.
What thogh thyn hors be bothe foul and lene?
If he wol serve thee, rekke nat a bene.
Looke that thyn herte be murie everemo." (VII. 2810-15)

It takes the Priest, who is taken by surprise, a while to pull himself together. He has a difficult task to accomplish. He must honour the commitment that every pilgrim has made and participate in the contest of story-telling; he must also make every effort to win the promised prize. He must comply with the Host's demand and tell an amusing and entertaining tale which will at the same time defeat the Monk's sorrowful tragedies and make the Knight happy. However, by the time he is about to tell his tale, the art of telling stories is almost perfected. Besides, the mixed audience of clergy and laity have already raised a certain set of expectations which the Priest cannot underestimate. Since they are both tellers and listeners, the kind of story they want to hear is very much like the ones they themselves have told. Hence the Priest, who is a later teller in the order of delivery, finds his options narrower and his audience's demands more constraining. In addition, as a clergyman, he would attempt to make the best of the means available to him to

45Oerlemans 321.
expound some doctrine for his audience. The choice of a well-known fable serves him best because fables were commonly used as *exempla* in sermons. But more importantly, the Priest would be able to criticize his audience at will without fear since his beast characters would not be readily identifiable. As such his anthropomorphs, relying on the views of Boethius, Bradwardine, and Augustine, could debate about free will and necessity with an eye on the Monk’s assertion about the role of Fortune in human life. He would not even worry if his audience should identify his birds’ coop on the desolate farm with a comic version of Paradise. He, would, however, try to find some satisfying order in the flux of temporal events in the lives of his fellow pilgrims, his own misogynist inclinations, and the Host’s pressing for obedience to the rules of the game.

Although the fable proper is a general statement about being more careful and avoiding flattery, the Priest’s tale primarily concerns itself with the themes of Providence and Fortune which were central to the tales of both the Knight and the Monk. In fact, he builds his argument on the last words heard from the Monk:

> Tragediés noon other maner thyng  
> Ne kan in syngyng crie ne bewaille  
> “But that Fortune alwey wole assaille  
> With unwar strook the regnes that been proude;

46Watkin 461-2.
47Bloomfield 72; Oerlemans 323.
48Watkins 462.
49Corsa 211.
For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,
And covere hire brighte face with a clowde.” (VII. 2761-66)

Hence, Chauntecleer’s adventure provides the Priest with the necessary substance for the story of the fall of Man. The birds’ dispute over the importance of dreams gives him further ammunition to enhance his analysis of the fallen world. The dream motif leads to the theme of “destine” which, in turn, raises the problem of Fortune. The Priest also draws on the question of sovereignty and woman’s counsel, on the one hand, and Chauntecleer’s pride and lust, on the other. Russell, Chauntecleer, and Pertelote are thus damned by their deceit, vanity, and smugness respectively. So is the Priest damned for his misogyny and confusion. The only character which is spared is the old widow, who “with her simple life,” as Friedman observes, “serves an ethical norm for the poem.”

But the Priest’s confusions are only analogous to those of his creation, Chauntecleer. There are several errors made along the way in the narrative which are never clear as who is responsible for them, such as “Mordre wol out” (VII. 3052), or “Wommennes counseils been ful ofte colde” (VII. 3256). In fact, even the reader’s confusion here is part of the tale’s serious joke. Nonetheless, first the Priest tries to pass it over as part of his “game” (VII. 3263), and then he says, “Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne” (VII. 3265). He confuses God’s foreknowledge with determinism, 

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50Friedman 251.

51This is also an allusion not only to the theme of the Prioress’s Tale, but it literally repeats the same words that she uses in her tale: Cf. VII. 576, “Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille.”

52Oerlemans 325.
“But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee” (VII. 3234). He comments on the danger of a “fals flatour” (VII. 3225) in the courts of absent lords. He bewails “O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed” (VII. 3338), yet Chauntecleer’s fate is miraculously reversed. Besides it is a point which is somewhat at odds with his previous statement about “necessitee condicioneel” (VII. 3250). He does not seem to be certain himself as to the cause of Chauntecleer’s fall: was it Chauntecleer’s pride or lust that brought him down; was it Russell’s flattery or Pertelote’s persuasive temptations; was it because Pertelote “ne roghte nat of dremes” (VII. 3340) or that Venus had forsaken her “servant” (VII. 3342); was it Chauntecleer’s predestination that he left his secure and safe beam, or, superstitiously, was Friday, on which “fil al this meschaunce” (VII. 3341) to be blamed? Each conclusion shows that the narrator is trying hard to make sense of the direction his narrative has taken.\textsuperscript{53}

The Priest is kept anonymous all through the \textit{CT} except for a brief hint in the \textit{GP} that the Prioress is attended by “preestes thre” (I. 164) and that the Host refers to him as a Sir John (VII. 2810), who rides “upon a jade” (VII. 2812). But this relatively unknown pilgrim becomes important as tale-teller, entertainer and instructor.\textsuperscript{54} His confusion, then, is also important, for he cannot make a good case for any one of the varied issues he raises. In the course of the delivery of his tale, at least three times (VII. 3214, 3251, 3374) he says he must get back to his story. “This protestation of helplessness in the face

\textsuperscript{53}Oerlemans 325; Susan Gallick 474-75.

\textsuperscript{54}See amongst others David 223.
of his material," as Hussey suggests, may well be "all part of the fun." Undoubtedly, the Priest, like Chauntecleer, enormously enjoys himself talking. Nonetheless, regardless of the confusion of either the tale or the teller, the underlying truth in any good fiction cannot be more emphasised than the Priest's ironic reference to the Arthurian legend of Lancelot:

Now every wys man, lat him herken me:

This storie is also trewe, I undertake,

As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,

That wommen holde in ful greet reverence. (VII. 3210-13)

Whether or not the Prioress appreciates the hint, she is not the only target of the Priest's joke. In fact, his tale offers at least a bit to every pilgrim and the audience. Nonetheless, when his long and elaborate narrative comes to a close, he seems to forget his present situation and addresses his moralitas to an absent audience of "lords" and nobility:

Alas, ye lordes, many a fals flatour

Is in youre courtes, and many a losengeour,

That plesen yow wel moore, by my feith,

Than he that soothfasnesse unto yow seith.

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55Hussey 188.

56For the audience of Chaucer in general and the NPT in particular, as well as the importance of instruction along with entertainment, see Edmund Reiss, "Chaucer and His Audience," ChauR 14 (1980): 390-402; see also Ruth Crosby, "Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages," Speculum 11 (1936): 88-110; and "Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery," Speculum 13 (1938): 413-32.
Redeth Ecclesiaste of flaterye;

Beth war, ye lordes, of hir trecherye. (VII. 3325-30)

Yet this should be seen as another part of the trick he is playing on his audience, not to allow them to catch him in the act of direct interpretation. Otherwise, he has exposed the frailty of both the Knight's theme of Providence and the Monk's theme of Fortune. At least ironically he has suggested to both of them that neither argument is necessarily conclusive. Even if what he proposes is more confusing than enlightening, after all we all live in a fallen world and are liable to every confusion.

One of the unmistakable targets of the Priest is undoubtedly the Prioress, under whom he works. The contrast between the birds' palace and the widow's life-style reveals how much the Priest would want his superior to consider the widow's simple "suffisaunce" (VII. 2839). Especially, the account of the Prioress's table manners in the GP (I. 118 ff.) is in sharp contrast to the widow's diet. In fact the "wastel-breed" and "rosted flessh" (I. 147) with which she fed her dogs were finer than the "broun breed" (VII. 2844) and the black bacon that the widow gave her daughters and consumed herself. However, all this does not mean that the Priest is satirizing the Prioress, and perhaps the nobility. Rather, it seems that he is trying to give her and the rest of the pilgrims a gentle lesson "on the true sources of satisfaction in this our life." In addition, although his misogynistic implications are the last straw for the Prioress, when he urges his audience to "Reede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere, / And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere" (VII. 3263-64), no one, even the Prioress herself, seems to be

57Owen 134-5.
really keen on the point. 58

Neither is the Wife of Bath spared, who must find the tale a deliberate twist of the biblical truths — at least the way she reads them. Although the Parson may not be really amused by the manner of the fable, there is no evidence that he should dislike its matter. The Franklin may find the widow a more appealing character, while the Miller and the Merchant may be more fond of Chauntecleer. If the Pardoner is very keen on how the Priest manipulates sermons, the Manciple is definitely interested in the theme of silence which is so majestically depicted on the farm surrounding the birds’ coop, except, of course, at the ending of the story. In fact Russell’s learning that he has to keep his mouth shut shapes the Manciple’s Ovidian story of the talkative crow.

Finally, Harry Bailly, who is, as Myers so aptly puts it, “the most unperceptive listener,” 59 stands for all kinds of disinterested and absent-minded audience everywhere. Harry Bailly, that master of the nonsequitur, comments, “if thou were seculer / Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright” (VII. 3450-51), and this seemingly aimless remark throws a whole new light backward upon the story which has just been told. The Host sees the story not as an entertainingly presented instruction to secular rulers, but as a commentary on priests in general and the Nun’s Priest in particular.

Whereas it is not all that difficult to identify the audience of the tale in the world of the CT, it is considerably more difficult to establish any convincing historical audience


59 Myers 217.
for it. However, besides addressing a listening audience, to whose allegedly superior taste and sensibility the poet often ironically defers (l. 745-48), Chaucer has in mind a few discriminating readers whom he might expect to share his sense of humour and his complex attitudes toward the company of “sondry folk” (l. 25) who make the pilgrimage to Canterbury. Edmund Reiss and others, however, have argued that the Ricardian court is in fact a possible candidate. Reiss believes that “the medieval writer directed his work, not to the world in general, or the ‘public,’ but to a very definite and restricted circle.”

Moreover, again according to Reiss, “Chaucer’s awareness of an immediate listening audience may have resulted in using and even relying on its presence.”

Pedagogically speaking, in the fable proper, both the cock and the fox get themselves into trouble because they are careless. However, if the fox’s trick wins him the prize, so does the former’s counter-trick save his life. In other words, while the cock seems to have realized the danger of pride, he has been able to survive only by appealing to pride in someone else. Thus although he warns against being blind, presumably to flattery, it is only by using flattery that he manages to escape from the jaws of the fox. The implied learning here is that the end justifies the means. On the second level, the narrator’s commentary at the end of his elaborate tale further intensifies the counter-trick motif. Nevertheless, while he warns his noble audience against negligence and flattery, he leaves room for the listeners of lower class too to take his recommendation and keep their own interest in view. These ambiguities are part of both the instruction and the

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60Reiss 391.

61Reiss 391.
entertainment of the tale.

The tactic of persuasion is yet another major motif in the tale. All three major beasts, Chauntecleer, Russell, and Pertelote appeal to it in a variety of ways. They flatter each other, tease each other, exhaust actors and authorities, and, in short, talk each other into what they are after. The narrator, too, makes every effort to persuade his audience to share his convictions — no matter how ambiguous they are and how confused he himself is.

Preaching, or more specifically, using *exempla* in the context of sermons, is itself a persuasive method of making a point. Both the narrator and Chauntecleer are great preachers. If the narrator uses the fable of the rooster and the fox to warn his audience against flattery and negligence, so does Chauntecleer allude to Biblical stories, quote authorities, and especially (parodying his creator) offer at least three lengthy *exempla* to convince Pertelote of the importance of dreams. The clergy, of all people, are most expected to act in accordance with their own learning. Nevertheless, as in real life, Chauntecleer proves to be, as Gallick observes, "a man of great rhetorical skill but no personal conviction." In theory he wins the argument in his debate with Pertelote about the importance of dreams, but in practice he proves to be a very bad model for the lesson he teaches. It is not that he is ignorant; rather he ignores what he already knows. Thus the narrator provides the reader with the wisdom to take and the model to avoid.

On the third level, the Priest distances himself from his audience by offering a beast fable so that they will not easily identify themselves with his characters. At the very

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62Gallick 472.
outset, he removes his tale both from time and place:

A povre wydwe, somdeed stape in age,

Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,

Beside a grove, stondynge in a dale. (VII. 2821-23)

Later in the tale, in an aside, he reassures his audience that he is talking of a different time: "For thilke tyme, as I have understonde, / Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge" (VII. 2880-81). Moreover, the Priest, as Watkins puts it, "places a moral barrier between himself and his tale by establishing himself as an `unreliable narrator` capable of deception and irony."61 This allows him to speak equivocally and at times to feign absolute innocence when in fact he is extremely provocative. For instance, first he disregards the presence of his superior as well as the rest of the women pilgrims and attacks womankind as the cause of man`s expulsion from Heaven. Then, instead of taking his words back or at least apologizing, he ascribes his anti-feministic opinions to the cock: "Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne; / I kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (VII. 3265-66). Watkins also asserts that not only is the Priest unreliable, but also he feigns "moral neutrality toward the words and deeds of his characters although as priest, religious teacher, and father confessor he is morally responsible for his tale and its impact on his audience."64 In fact until his final words of prayer, he manages to maintain both his unreliability and his appearance of neutrality.65

61Watkins 463.

64Watkins 463.

65Watkins 464.
The audience who was denied access to the Priest’s opinion as regards predestination and free will, may only at the close of his tale infer from his prayer what his convictions might be:

Now goode God, if that be thy wille,
As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
And brynge us to his heighe bliss! Amen. (VII. 3444-46)

The Priest’s “amused detachment from his story,” as Helen Storm Corsa observes, “has been so consistently maintained that it is indeed up to his hearers to ‘taketh the fruyt’ for he gives no guidance.”\(^{66}\) Whereas he provides contrastive cases such as the coop and the farm or Arthurian legends and his \textit{exemplum}, and although he does present conflicting opinions such as the convictions of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, he does not commit himself to any one single viewpoint. Whether he is really confused or his confusion, too, is part of his game, he does manage to engage his readers in a quiet search for truth. His tale, it seems that the Priest is suggesting, is not about flattery, free will, woman’s counsel, or any other particular moral lesson. Rather he “is raising,” as Samuel Nathaniel Brody says, “all sorts of possibilities of meaning which compels the audience to confront the ambiguities raised in the tale and he thus creates in his fiction a mirror of what individuals regularly confront in life, what moral meaning they extract from or impose upon life or the story presumably depends upon their ethical predispositions and their burden is to make the right choices.”\(^{67}\)

\(^{66}\)Corsa 213.

\(^{67}\)Brody 43.
Furthermore, the tale of the rooster and the fox comes to an end exactly where it begins, that is, on the old widow’s farm. The tale offers each pilgrim, and every reader for that matter, something to ponder. Above all, however, it seats the animals side by side with the human characters. Ironically enough, although the widow and her daughters all remain anonymous and the Priest is simply referred to as Sir John, not only the three fabular beasts, Chauntecleer, Pertelote, and Russell, but also the three dogs, Colle, Talbot, and Gerland (VII. 3383) are given proper names; even the only sheep on the farm has a proper name, Malle (VII. 2831). As such the animals cease to be merely a source of food and clothing; they are our fellow creatures. They are there not for us but in their own rights. One has to only consider the link between Chauntecleer’s fate and that of the story of Troy, one of the greatest catastrophes of ancient times. It is not then a coincidence that with the comparison of the hens’ cackling to the lamentations of the Trojan and Roman women the old widow and her daughters join in the chase for the fall of their hero, Chauntecleer.68

Obviously the animals most often follow their natural instincts. Birds peck grains of corn, foxes catch birds, and dogs chase intruders. Chauntecleer, Russell, and Pertelote, however, are not just any animals; they are anthropomorphs and humorous ones at that. Chauntecleer groans like a vexed man (VII. 2890), Pertelote, the courtly paramour, challenges her royal husband whether, having a beard, he also has a man’s heart (VII. 2920). Chauntecleer, the clergy and the philosopher would give his shirt to his obnoxious Cato-lover queen if she bothered to read the legend of St. Kenelm (VII. 3120-21). The

68David 228.
Priest compares Chauntecleer's fear with that of a man "affrayed in his herte" (VII. 3278). Russell tells Chauntecleer, "Save yow, I herde nevere man so synge / As did youre fader in the morwenyngne" (VII. 3301-3302). To prove he is no less than his father, "This Chauntecleer his wynges gan to bete, / As man that koude his traysoun nat espie" (VII. 3322-23). After all the tale of the cock (VII. 3252) is no less true or less serious than the story of Lancelot (VII. 3212). It holds a mirror up to human behaviour and it raises the sort of questions that human catastrophes normally do. Finally, the moralitas invites both garrulous beasts and silent readers to take the fruit and leave the chaff — one literally and the other figuratively.

**THE MANCIPLE’S TALE**

The story of a deceived man and his talking bird can be found in almost all cultures; among others, its variants are traced in Chinese, Indian, and Persian traditions. Chaucer's *Manciple's Tale* (*ManT*) is ultimately derived from the version in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2. 531-632). Chaucer was also acquainted with other medieval versions of the story of Phoebus and Coronis such as *Ovide Moralisé* (II. 2130-2548), Machaut's *Le Livre du voir dit* (7773-8110), and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*69 (III. 768-835). Chaucer, however, alters his sources in many ways and for good reasons. Unlike Ovid, for instance, whose focal point is the crow's punishment for his loquacity, Chaucer, as Donald C. Baker observes, "stresses the propensity of human nature, exemplified by

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Phoebus' wife, to follow its own bent, even without a justifiable excuse."70 Moreover, parodying his sources, especially Gower, Chaucer tries to emphasize the pettiness and the sordidness of the incident and highlight the issue of language in the tale instead of its common-sense morality.71

Like the NPT, the story of Phoebus and his tell-tale bird is not a conventional fable. The moral interpretation of the tale, granted that it is relevant and appropriate, is uncharacteristically long (54 lines). Besides, oddly enough, it comes not from the narrator, rather from an impersonated mother figure. Furthermore, it comes as a surprise, contrary to the tone of the story itself. In fact, the first 307 lines of the poem seem to be almost a warning against anger and violence rather than jangling — about Phoebus' rash reaction rather than the crow's lack of restraint in speech. Moreover, the narrator is sympathetic to the crow almost to the end of the narrative when all of a sudden he is consigned "unto the devel" (IX. 307). Finally, the questions raised in the tale about language and its place in human social life are ultimately counter-effective and non-fabular.

Unlike most of the CT, the tale has progressed from being, according to John M.


Manly, "so insignificant" to "this little masterpiece," according to Coghill. In fact Manly's negative attitude towards the tale set the tone of its criticism for the following generation. Since the early 1950s the tale has generally enjoyed much more favourable scholarship although much recent criticism has concerned itself with seeing the tale as a parody of other things, a joke upon the Manciple himself, a joke upon the other pilgrims, and finally a joke upon us. However, it is J. Burke Severs's thorough and unbiased analysis of the tale in 1952 which set a new direction of criticism and injected fresh blood into its appreciation. Severs not only traces the sources and analogues of the tale, but also tries to justify Chaucer's deviation from his sources. One of Severs's major contributions is his explanation of the contradiction between the tale and its moral.

Whereas the tale itself warns against rash action, the Manciple's interpretive sermon preaches against jangling and tale-bearing. According to Severs, "the crux of the matter is merely this: the Manciple suddenly changes the basis of his judgement from morality to expediency. Up to line 307 his attitude has been based upon judgements of right and wrong; after line 307, it is based upon judgements of wise and foolish." In fact this switch of moral is very appropriate to the Manciple, who is not a learned man but enormously practical. The story is then quite suitable to his purpose as an *exemplum*.

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74 Baker 24; Hazelton 3.

75 J. Burke Severs, "Is the Manciple's Tale a Success?" *JEGP* 51 (1952): 1-16.

76 Severs 10.
against jangling and is most likely aimed at the Cook, whom he has angered and who may reveal his dishonesty later on.

Like the *NPT*, the *ManT*, too, draws on the two major themes of gluttony and *cupiditas*. The Prologue begins with the Host (an inn-keeper) inviting the Cook to tell his second tale; but the Cook is too drunk and too unstable to do so. The Manciple (of necessity the Manciple’s job is closely related to that of both the Cook and the Host, i.e., the kitchen) taunts the Cook for his excessive consumption of wine but later gives him even more from his own gourd to reconcile with him. As for the theme of *cupiditas*, the fable of Phoebus and his crow is, in essence, about Phoebus’ wife’s adultery more than anything else. It is this topos of infidelity which is first intensified in the narrator’s digression on the use of “lemman,” where he compares the courtly loves of the aristocracy and the wenches of lower classes. Then it is further emphasised in his three beast *exempla* which, despite his hasty denial, are suggestive of the innate evil in women. The she-wolf *exemplum*, in particular deals with an explicitly lecherous incident.

Like the *NPT*, again, the tale will definitely make more sense if the three levels of its narrative are sorted out. In the centre of the tale, there is the Ovidian fable of Phoebus and his crow; then there is the narrator’s digressions and rhetorical elaborations; and finally there is the tale with its Prologue in the context of the *CT*. The fable proper, which is indeed the lowest level, focuses on the crow’s extraordinary faculty of speech which inadvertently causes not only Phoebus’ anger, violence, and despair as well as his wife’s murder, but also his own ruin – he is turned black and speechless and then thrown away. The fable is then a warning against jangling. The second level contains the
The narrator’s contributions to the fable such as his elaborations on the class system and
different registers of language on the one hand, and his digression on women’s evil
nature, on the other. On this level of the narrative the basis of judgement is expediency
rather than morality. However, on the highest level, the Manciple himself, as yet another
character in the C’T, is engaged in a dramatic relationship with other characters, directly
with the Cook and the Host in the Prologue and indirectly, in the tale, with almost every
pilgrim. Again at the expense of over-simplification, the fable of Phoebus and his crow is
a statement about rashness, and anger; the narrator’s tale is an exemplum about
expediency; and the Manciple is a treatise on language. Each layer of the story has its own
teaching voices, its own audience, and its own pedagogical strategy.

The narrator of the C’T manipulates the Manciple, who is a capitulator himself but
impersonates his mother to give a sermon on quietism. In the tale itself, the narrator --
though not necessarily the Manciple -- exemplifies the dilemma of truth-telling. The
reader may well agree with Hazelton’s comment that the fable itself, “like countless
other moralized tales” does not offer any clear moral lesson. “Chaucer,” says Hazelton,
“seems to have noted what escaped all the moralizers; namely that this ‘moral’ fable
creates more moral problems than it solves.”

Chaucer’s fable of Phoebus and his talkative bird deals with a number of topoi,
such as Phoebus’ anger, the crow’s jangling, and Phoebus’ wife’s infidelity. Whereas in

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77Hazelton 4.

78Unlike its sources, the tale leaves Phoebus’ wife anonymous. Cf. the old widow
of the NPT.
the narrative, Phoebus himself elaborates on irreful violence and rash action, in its

*moralitas*, which follows the crow’s punishment, the narrator warns his audience against reporting the unpleasant news of anyone’s cuckoldry:

> Ne telleth nevere no man in youre lyf
> How that another man hath dight his wyf;
> He wol you haten mortally, certeyn. (IX. 311-13)

Although no word comes from either the wife or her paramour, besides the narrator himself, there are two other distinct voices in the fable: that of the crow and that of Phoebus. The crow tells the truth he knows while Phoebus is quiet and apparently all ears. The crow, in fact, is a faithful companion/servant and tells his master what he has seen and that with the best of intentions, though with an air of mockery. Nonetheless, it is his taunting tone which gets him into serious trouble. First he begins singing out of tune, ““Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!”” (XI. 243) imitating a cuckoo — the traditional symbol of cuckoldling. Then more aggressively he teases his master: “‘For on thy bed thy wyf I saugh hym swyve’” (IX. 256). Phoebus, who finds his utmost joy in his wife, is so much outraged at the news of her infidelity that he kills her unceremoniously: “And in his ire his wyf thanne hath he slayn” (IX. 265). Having murdered his wife and broken his musical instruments as well as his bow and arrows, Phoebus seems to gradually come to his senses. First he reprimands the crow as the source of his confusion; then he laments over his loss and bemoans his misery; and at last makes the crow speechless:

79At least in Persian culture and folklore, if not the Islamic world in general, the crow is always associated with bad news. Superstitiously, its crowing is interpreted as unhappy tidings.
“Thou songe whilholm lyk a nyghtyngale;
Now shaltow, false theef, thy song forgon,
And eek thy white fetheres everrichon,
Ne nevere in al thy lif ne shaltou speke.” (IX. 294-97)

The crow is not given any choice either to defend himself or show any regret for opening his mouth when it was to be kept shut. It is as if the crow testifies that he has made a mistake, and would like others to hold their tongues rather than fret about morality or ethics. It is surprising that the fable does not gloss the real issue of adultery. Whereas Phoebus regrets killing his wife later in the poem, there is no evidence that he feels sorry either for his crow or for his musical instruments. The narrator seems to suggest that although the wife’s treachery is absolutely base and deserves the harshest punishment, it is foolish for the tale-bearer to inform the husband. Trusting his crow, Phoebus acts violently. However, “his moral triumph in realizing the necessity of her killing,” as William Cadbury puts it, “is also his defeat, in that he loses his earthly joy.”

It is not because of his wife’s infidelity but her very death that he punishes himself by destroying his musical instruments as well as his bow and arrows:

For sorwe of which he brak his mynstralcie,
Both harpe, and lute, and gyterne, and sautrie;
And eek he brak his arwes and his bowe. (IX. 267-69)

\footnote{Cf. The $NPT$ where the cock and the fox make similar mistakes and open their mouths when they should keep them well shut.}

\footnote{Cadbury 545.}
In depriving himself of earthly joys, Phoebus also deprives his crow of music and speech. Devastated by his wife’s death, he begins to cast doubt on the crow’s truthfulness. Since he needs to believe that his wife could not have betrayed him, he cherishes the vague feeling that she is innocent and the crow is false. According to Cadbury, “he fools himself into thinking that because his wife was the source of his happiness, she must have been faithful; his self-laceration after his loss is deluded, but understandable.”

Since Phoebus finds no one else to blame except his crow, he punishes him by rendering him speechless, not only for his jangling but also further potential scandal. As Britton J. Harwood observes, “the uncontrollable girl is dead and the only one who knows the facts about her will never again be able to say what they are.” Although as Hazelton maintains, “the moral issues raised by the sexual betrayal and the murder in the tale are completely ignored,” the tale-bearer gets the harshest rhetorical treatment. The crow is demoted from being the most lovely bird to a traitor and his sweet human speech turns metaphorically into a scorpion’s tongue:

“Traitour,” quod he, “with tongue of scorioun,
Thou hast me broght to my confusioun;”

And to the crowe, “O false theef!” seyde he,

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82 Cadbury 546.


84 Hazelton 4.
“I wol thee quite anon thy false tale.” (IX. 271-72, 292-93)

By contrast, it is in the same state of confusion that his unfaithful wife becomes “O deere wyf! O gemme of lustiheed!” (IX. 274). Again in his state of confusion, Phoebus admits that it was because of his thoughtless rage that he smote a “gilteles” creature unadvised (IX. 280). And his advice is then clear:

“O every man, be war of rakelnesse!
Ne trowe no thyng withouten strong witnesse.
Smyt nat to soone, er that ye witen why,
And beeth avysed wel and soberly
Er ye doon any execucion
Upon youre ire for suspicion.” (IX. 283-88)

Hence even in the fable itself there are three different sententiae: the crow’s fate strongly implies: shut your mouth because otherwise you will be punished; Phoebus implores everyone: avoid anger because otherwise you will do what you will later regret having done; and finally the narrator admonishes the audience: do not tell a man about his wife’s unfaithfulness because you will be hated for your meddling.

As for the audience of the fable, despite the narrator’s explicit apostrophe: “Lordynges, by this ensample I yow preye, / Beth war, and taketh kep what that ye seye” (IX. 309-10), there is no evidence that the fable is addressed to any nobility. All three messages are general enough to apply to any audience. Old and young, poor and rich, and high and low alike are advised against jangling, let alone gossiping. Everyone is well advised to avoid anger because of its unpredictable consequences, especially violence.
The narrator’s focused lesson (which is not a moral one after all), addresses an unspecified audience.

The *ManT*, even without its Prologue, is much more than the fable of Phoebus and his crow. One of the most important topoi in the tale on this level of the narrative is the issue of class distinction. The narrator in his “knavyssh speche” (IX. 205) refers to Phoebus’ wife’s lover as “hir leman” (IX. 204, 205) and then sarcastically tries to apologize for his bold use of the offensive word. Uncompromisingly, however, he argues that despite their different appellations, “his lady, as in love” (IX. 218) is the same as “his wenche” (IX. 220). Both are transgressors and both are adulteresses. “And, God it woot, myn owene deere brother, / Men leyn that oon as lowe as lith that oother” (IX. 221-22). This is in sharp contrast with the general understanding of adultery as regards different classes of the society in the Middle Ages. “Phoebus’ wife,” as Peter C. Herman suggests, “must be found guilty of both adultery and the graver crime of high treason.”

Whereas adultery is in itself a great sin and a serious cause for domestic dispute, “treasonous adultery [threatens] the adulteration of the royal blood and therefore of the social order.”

Also in line with the “wenche/leman” disparity comes the narrator’s persuasive argument that there is no difference between a tyrant and an outlaw because, apart from their different appellation, they are, indeed, both law-breakers. One slays men and burns houses and “therefore is he cleped a capitayn” (IX. 230). The other one, who is by far the


*86*Herman 323.
more innocent because he does not cause so much harm and does not bring a country to so great a mischief, “Men clepen hym an outlawe or a theef” (IX. 234). However, it is interesting to listen to the narrator who obsessively insists that his denial of class distinction is only due to his ignorance since he is “a man noght textueel” (IX. 235). Even by denying his own textuality, he implies that the literate -- and even the authorities, for that matter -- are not different from the illiterate and the ignorant.

Although the very fable he tells is a textual borrowing and although he makes frequent references to authorities such as Plato, Solomon, David and Seneca, he maintains that he “wol noght telle of textes never a deel” (IX. 236). It is as if he were trying to belittle the authenticity of his sources and undercut the authority of his authors, yet at the same time, he finds himself compelled to rely on received literature for his audience’s comprehension.

Along with devaluing the class system, the narrator underestimates the appalling issue of adultery by focusing on how the abhorred act is named only, rather than by condemning it. Although in his tale the adulterous wife is killed, it is never clear what Phoebus’ real motive in killing her is. Is it anger or justice? Is it because his wife has a lover or that the lover is a man of no reputation? The narrator never elaborates and the audience does not have a clear clue.

A second important issue that the narrator raises on this level is women’s natural indiscretion. Referring to Phoebus’ wife and her treacherous adultery, the narrator observes that,

But God it woot, ther may no man embrace
As to destreyne a thyng which that nature
Hath natureely set in a creature. (IX. 161-62)
The three exempla that he produces all demonstrate the evil nature of the wife and, by
way of extension, all women. First he likens her to a bird fostered tenderly in a cage
"with mete and drynke / Of all deyntees that thou kanst bithynke" (IX. 165-66); but even
if its cage is made of gold, the bird prefers "a forest that is rude and coold" (IX. 170) and
would rather eat "wormes and swich wrecchednesse" (IX. 171). The bird would escape
the cage of gold, and so the wife would transgress matrimonial boundaries and betray her
husband. Then he likens the wife to a cat fostered well with milk and tender flesh on a
couch of silk. Yet no sooner does he see a mouse go by the wall than

\[\text{Anon he weyveth milk and flessh and al,}\]
\[\text{And every deyntee that is in the hous,}\]
\[\text{Swich appetit hath he to ete a mous. (IX. 178-180)}\]

Finally he likens her to a she-wolf who selects

\[\text{The lewedeste wolf that she may fynde,}\]
\[\text{Or leest of reputacioun, wol she take,}\]
\[\text{In tyme whan hir lust to han a make. (IX. 184-86)}\]

As Severs observes, "this implied comparison between Phoebus' wife and a series of
animals which cannot restrain their evil desires and the further implied comparison
between her paramour and the disgusting objects of the animals' desires have the effect
of impressing upon the reader the essential evil in the wife's nature."^87

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^87 Severs 5.
As with his denial of class distinction, the narrator is quick to hold back his harsh judgement of women. Although all his three exempla of bird, cat, and wolf are pointedly about Phoebus’ wife in particular and women in general, he disclaims any such point of view and says that it is men who are to blame for their infidelity:

All thise ensamples speke I by thise men
That been untrewe, and nothyng by wommen.
For men han evere a likerous appetit
On lower thyng to parfoure hire delit
Than on hire wyves, be they never so faire,
Ne never so trewe, ne so debonaire. (IX. 187-92)

Thus instead of blaming the wife for her lechery, the narrator blames all men for their indiscretion. This follows his strategy of denial in his fable where instead of highlighting the act of adultery, he draws on Phoebus’ ireful violence. The issue of women’s mastery - - central to so many tales in the CT - is once more brought to the front only this time in an oblique way. First Eve’s daughters are illustrated as evil, and then shrewdly they are purged at the expense of men.

The narrator’s final act of denial is when he impersonates his mother to gloss his tale and elucidate the moral lesson for his audience, since he is neither textual nor perhaps even really concerned. It is ironic to consider that having defamed women in the clearest and most generalized way in his tale, he should hide behind the mask not of Apollo/Phoebus, a philosopher, or a clergymen, but a woman — his mother. His mother becomes his authority rather than a learned clerk or great teacher who writes his lessons.
By the end of the tale, one wonders if the fable of Phoebus and his crow is not primarily meant to educate the narrator himself (as a child of course) more than anyone else, and that it is a children’s story, after all, read by a mother to her young son. Not only the explicit address of “My sone” which is repeated ten times in the moralisation, but also the fact that the same moral is repeated so many times in different words suggests that the tale is pedagogically aggressive. Moreover, by no means does it demand a highly sophisticated audience. Indeed its primary audience could well be either a child or a not-an-altogether mature adult.

The narrator’s strategy of denial is rooted deeply in his desire for expediency in lieu of any clear morality. In fact he is much less concerned about the truth of anything that he tells his audience than his own profile. He rejects any difference between classes of society: learned/ignorant, courtiers/commoners, or mighty/desperate; he distorts his sources and disclaims any textuality; and he defames all women and concludes that all men are false. As Severs contends, and most later critics agree with him, the narrator simply tries to exalt expediency rather than morality. “The tale is a bit of practical advice for comfortable living in a world not operated altogether under reason and justice. In this imperfect world, even goodness, inconsiderately exercised, may cause suffering and distress. With the best of intentions, the crow has brought about murder, the destruction of his master’s happiness, and his own undoing.”

There are two dominant voices in the tale on this level of the narrative: the narrator’s and that of the mother figure. Whereas the narrator offers a mixed impression

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88Severs 11.
about women, language, and authorial sources, the mother’s voice is clear and compelling. The narrator favours capitulation and the mother advocates silence. Truth-telling, the only other option — and indeed the really moral one — is left to the crow of the fable proper. Unlike the well-meaning crow, both mother and son seem to argue that it is wiser either to surrender or to shut your mouth. Despite the final moralitas in which a mother warns her son against jangling, what the tale offers requires a much maturer and more general audience.

With the Prologue, the highest level of the narrative, we have a more complex story. On the first level any family betrayal and any meddler would do; on the second layer any teller could tell the story of Phoebus and his crow — given that the audience is familiar with its classical and popular analogues. On this third level of the narrative, the tale is specifically assigned to the Manciple, whose portrait is well-known to his fellow-pilgrims as well as to the reader. In fact the focus of the tale is the Manciple himself and not the fable or its moral. Who he is and what he represents, how he deals with people, on the one hand, and how he uses/abuses language to serve his own purposes, on the other, are the major questions that the tale addresses.

The tale, as Cadbury argues, “must be read as a vehicle for a dialectic between the Manciple and his audience, as a strategic device by which he manipulates his hearers.” In other words, the tale acts as an “ironic explication of the Manciple’s character itself.” On this level of the narrative, although the moral reveals the

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89Cadbury 538.

90Cadbury 538.
Manciple’s character and his claim of expediency, all other *sententiae* — such as warnings against rashness, tale-bearing, and adultery (by implication) — are there in the narrative itself. If the narrative depicts the kind of person Manciple is, the moral of his tale reveals his thesis. In the narrative he may easily be likened to the jangling crow, and in the moral he is obviously identifiable with the mother figure warning others against jangling.

The Manciple is proud of his ability to outwit the learned and the simple alike. The *GP* leaves no doubt as to how he “sette hir aller cappe” (I. 586) at the Temple in London:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace} \\
\text{That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace} \\
\text{The wisdom of an heep of lerned men? (I. 573-75)}
\end{align*}
\]

The Prologue to his own tale, too, shows how he gulls the Cook and charms the Host, only this time setting the caps of two commoners. Moreover, as Cadbury argues, “it seems probable that by placing the tale, with its serious ethical problems against the moral, with its rule of expediency over all, the Manciple is again trying to ‘sette hir aller cappe,’ to manipulate his audience’s responses again."⁹¹ The Manciple is not only garrulous but gregarious as well. He is keen to please everyone and avoid any possible displeasure on the part of his audience. In fact, to win everyone’s approval and sympathy if not support, he does not make any effort to keep his tongue about his own secret. Most probably, by the time he is about to tell his story, as Earle Birney puts it, “he has been

⁹¹Cadbury 546.
silly enough to boast of his duplicities to the entire company. There is a conflict of needs
within the Manciple: to triumph over others by trickery, and to secure social approval by
revealing his tricks. It is ironic that the Manciple talks of his shrewdness to almost
everyone, as if by exposing his vices he is trying to win his audience's confidence. It
seems that he is confident he can thus intimidate his listeners -- all his fellow pilgrims --
not to attempt to accuse him of anything. After all he confesses to everything they might
find wrong with him already. No one -- he seems to suggest -- is going to sue him for
what he so openly confides to all. As Arnold E. Davidson suggests, the Manciple's
"simple-mindedness" is his deliberate tactic to mask his roguery.

The crow's jangling about Phoebus' wife and her adultery is metaphorically
analogous to what the Manciple does to the Cook when he ridicules him for drinking to
excess: "Lo, this dronken wight, / As though he wolde sowe the us anonright" (IX. 35-36).
His rude remarks infuriate the Cook so much that he becomes speechless and falls off his
horse "til that men hym up took" (IX. 45-49). But unlike the crow whose jangling is not
checked by anyone and is therefore severely punished, the Manciple's sharp tongue is
quickly checked by the Host, who reminds him of the likelihood of the Cook's later
revengeful actions:

"But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce,
Thus openly repreve him of his vice.

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Another day he wole, peraventure,
Reclayme thee and brynge the to lure;
I meene, he speke wole of smale thynges,
That were nat honest, if it cam to preef.” (IX. 69-75)

Being an expedient person himself, the Manciple quickly finds a way to amend his misconduct and by giving more wine to the already drunk Cook, he manages to procure many thanks from him: “And of that drynke the Cook was wonder fayn, / And thanked hym in swich was wise as he koude” (IX. 92-93).

The Manciple thus saves face and escapes the Cook’s anger both to the Host’s credit. However, given that the narrator of the fable and its digressions and elaborations is the Manciple himself, he has to be on his guard against more than a single charge or from just one corner. Amongst other things, his tale makes a mockery of the tradition of courtly love and hence, by way of extension, of the aristocracy in general. His pseudo apologies for using the term “lemman” are more pernicious than his actual use of the word, which he actually repeats over and over. Moreover, his digressive elaboration on the term further leads him to another bold analogy, when he likens Alexander (if behaving unjustly) to a thief and an outlaw. This is utterly beyond the tolerance of his fellow pilgrims, especially those who are sympathetic to the code of chivalry and associate themselves with aristocracy such as the Knight, the Squire, and the Franklin. However, to avoid any confrontation with these individuals, who must have certainly be displeased, he denies being a textual man and returns to his tale.

Like the talkative crow of his fable, the Manciple tries to exhaust Phoebus’ case
and glosses the base nature of women, not only to distract his audience from his bold remarks against the aristocracy, but also to align himself with the majority of the pilgrims whose tales have been one way or another about women in general and marriage in particular. This is much in keeping with the Nun’s Priest’s attitude of misogyny. He is not so much concerned with the truth of anything he says, as with securing his own prestige amongst his fellow pilgrims. His three beast *exempla*, which are primarily meant to show that a creature’s innate evil cannot be changed, are in fact intended also to illustrate the natural evil in Phoebus’ wife. However, since he is fully aware that this may enrage the Second Nun, the Prioress, and the Wife of Bath (the three female pilgrims), he denies the fact that his *exempla* have anything to do with women at all. Boldly he protests that all such examples apply only to men. It is men who are untrustworthy and not women.94

The Manciple still has two other potential adversaries whom he desires to silence once and for all: the Cook and the Host. By impersonating his mother to deliberate the moral of the tale, he creates a situation where he can address — in all likelihood — the drunkard Cook, whose intelligence in his condition is by no means more than a child. His ten-times repeated “My sone” is an obvious address to the Cook. As such he tries to make the Cook — or every one else who is familiar with his deceits and may at some point be tempted to bring it up against him — keep his mouth shut, so as not to suffer the crow’s fate. The Host, in particular, of all pilgrims, is also the target of this admonition

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94 In a footnote, Severs raises the likelihood of the Manciple’s reconciliatory gesture appealing to the female pilgrims, or that of Chaucer while reading before the court to conciliate the gentle ladies. Severs 10.
because unlike the other pilgrims familiar with the Manciple's crooked business dealings, Harry Bailly is the only one who publicly reminds him of his cheating. In fact he openly makes reference to what the Cook may or may not report against him (IX. 69 ff.).

Having thus saved his face before almost all the pilgrims, the Manciple, however, falls short of complying with ethics or morality. In fact his theory of doing wrong and keeping quiet, and also keeping quiet when others are engaged in any wrong-doing has paved the way for the final piece of the 

CT, The Parson's Tale (ParsT), which at the outset repudiates fables in general and purely entertaining tales in particular. Language thus plays a major role in the tale. The Cook, being taunted by the Manciple, cannot tell his tale and is utterly speechless. The Host warns the Manciple against his indiscreet criticism of the Cook. The crow does not hold his tongue and brings about all the calamities. The Manciple does not condemn the wife for her adultery, but the crow for his jangling. He criticises Phoebus not for his ireful violence, but for fretting about his cuckoldry. It is not the truth that the Manciple is after; rather the unscrupulous denial of it. He implies that Phoebus could easily deny the truth about his wife and live a perfectly happy life with an adulteress. He also seems to suggest that had the crow followed the path of denial, he would have definitely secured everybody's happiness. He would have certainly survived and enjoyed his ability to talk and sing. Phoebus would have still enjoyed his armoury, musical instruments, his bird, and his most beautiful wife. Phoebus' wife too would have enjoyed her rescued honour and in all likelihood her "lemman" too.

As Harwood and a number of other scholars have suggested "the subject of the
tale is language." Chauncey Wood argues that the tale builds up what the ParsT in contrast, will defy. As much as the Manciple abuses the language, the Parson will make better use of it. He claims: "as we observe this contrast between the proper and improper uses of speech our attention is drawn to the even larger question of text and gloss, fruit and chaff, the contest for tales of 'best sentence and moost solaas' [(I. 798)]." Morton Donner believes that it is a sermon on careless speech. Birney suggests that "in all of these we can hear, behind the amused pretence of wonder and approval by Chaucer, the irresponsible savouring of his own slynness by the talkative Manciple." V.J. Scattergood thinks that the tale demonstrates how by verbal dexterity one can try to avoid the consequences of what one says; he stresses it is a tale about a servant who has to be careful about how he tells the truth. Finally Michaela Paasche Grudin argues that "in general, it is agreed not only that 'the subject of the tale is language,' but also that the tale suggests a view of language and the poet which 'finally leaves the poet no function at all.' Most simply put, we are to believe that Chaucer concludes the Canterbury Tales


98Birney 261.

by negating the assumptions about language and poetry that shaped it."\(^{100}\)

The Manciple’s dishonest business transactions, as we know from the *GP*, are in line with his fraudulent literary practices in his tale. Always by insisting that he is not textual — and he may well be right — he manipulates both the literate and the illiterate pilgrims. His digression on language, his very fable, and especially his mother’s final advice against bearing bad news all aim at de-functioning and abusing language. In Celeste A. Patton’s words “throughout the tale, the Manciple abuses language by subverting the very premises upon which it is based, its conventional meanings, and its usual purposes.”\(^{101}\) Moreover, again as Patton contends, “rather than stimulating further conversation and the exchange of diverse viewpoints among the Manciple’s fellow-travellers, the tale and Prologue militate against further discourse and full disclosure by figuring words as weapons and language as a self-collapsing system.”\(^{102}\) His strategy of denial blocks any genuine dialogue between the pilgrims about chivalry, women or even morality in general. In theory he advocates polite speech; in practice his tale is full of words such as “lemman,” “Cokkow,” and “swyve.” His crow gets himself punished for telling the truth and becomes an *exemplum* against bearing tidings. Even in the face of the deadly sin of adultery, the Manciple prescribes silence and indifference. His mother’s


\(^{101}\) Patton 400.

\(^{102}\) Patton 400.
argument too simply preaches pragmatism rather than any ethical or moral lesson: "'My sone, keep wel thy tonge, and keep thy friends'" (IX. 319). She proposes that "'God of his endeles goodnesse / Walled a tonge with teeth and lippes eke'" (IX. 322-23) to guard speech; that one should restrain one's tongue in self-denial on all occasions save "'To speke of God, in honour and preyere" (IX. 331); that one has to teach his children "'whan that they been yonge" (IX. 334) to keep their tongue; that "'In muchel speeche synne wanteth naught" (IX. 338); that speech once uttered is irrevocable (IX. 355); and one should never be "'auctour newe / of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe" (IX. 359-60). Finally, as Patton suggests, "it is clear that the Manciple's impersonation of his mother's voice is part of his overall rhetorical strategy to shun responsibility for his words through displacement, outright denial and parody as he makes fools of others."103

The dominant elaborating voice of the tale on this level of narrative is that of the Manciple. His voice, however, is echoed by others such as the Host, Phoebus, the crow, and especially his mother. All these diverse voices seem to agree with their originator as regards the problem of language -- its use/abuse -- the issue of truth-telling, and the relationship between word and deed:

The word moot nede accorde with the dede,

If men shal telle proprely a thyng,

The word moot cosyn be to the werkyng. (IX. 308-10)

The Manciple is by no means an honest person; neither is he a reliable narrator. How can one trust a narrator who so openly and so frequently admits his unreliability. He is non-

103Patton 413.
textual, he says one thing and concludes something utterly different; he accuses one gender and claims that he means the other sex. He disturbs his hearers by the discrepancy between what is good and what is practically wise. And finally he uses language so forcefully to make a point against language and its conventional use. All in all, despite the disparity amongst so many voices in the tale, the concluding warning comes from the poet himself who challenges the reader to reevaluate the ultimate function of language and to learn to decide for himself when and how to use the gift of speech.

The Manciple's immediate audience is all his fellow-pilgrims, especially those familiar with his crooked business dealings in general and the Host and the Cook in particular. But, by way of extension, the tale addresses the whole English society of the time, especially its two major centres of ecclesiastical and secular headquarters: the church and the court. The advice to hold one's tongue following the crow's experience with truth-telling, however, is applied to each and every one of us. The inherent parallelisms in the Tale and its Prologue -- the crow/Manciple, the crow/Cook, The Manciple/Phoebus -- are all meant to give the reader a more philosophical understanding of language in general and truth-telling in particular. Unlike the Manciple, who by denying the truth secures his position in the society, the crow speaks with dignity but suffers for it. As Grudin says, "His punishment is emphasized in the plot's concentration on Phoebus's anger; it never returns to the crow. The crow is literally silent, in social terms he is disenfranchised."

Again, "Though both the Prologue and the Manciple's Tale suggest that society is not at ease with total truth neither of the alternatives posed

\footnote{Grudin 333.}
seems a satisfactory solution to the dilemma of truth telling. The crow’s alternative has dignity but ends in total failure. The Manciple’s seems like a dangerous capitulation. The third alternative, quietism, suggested by the Manciple’s mother in the moral, is not much better. While it brings neither capitulation nor punishment it denies free expression of what is most human.”

The Manciple amuses himself and his fellow pilgrims by quoting Solomon — not directly, but “as wise clerkes seyn” — that “Techeth a man to kepen his tonge weel” (IX. 314-15). However, since he is “noght textueel” (IX. 316) he can only repeat his mother’s advice, virtually against using language at all. Now he is simply enacting his mother’s tone as if his listeners are no more than a group of children listening to a grandmother’s bed-time story:

“My sone, keep wel thy tonge, and keep thy freend.

................................................

My sone, from a feend men may hem blesse.
My sone, God of his endeleeys goodnesse
Walled a tonge with teeth and lippes eke,

................................................

My sone, thy tonge sholdestow restreyne

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105Grudin believes that “This emphasis on artistic expression in the poem and its coincidence with the poet’s own craft concentrate our attention on the example of Chaucer himself, a poet writing in the court of Richard II, and conveying the truth in the most effective way possible. This was not always easy, especially in the late 1380s and 90s. The chronicles of the period make frequent reference to suppression of speech.” Grudin 333.
The firste vertu, sone, if thou wolt leere,
Is to restreyne and kepe wel thy tonge;

My sone, of muchel spekyng yvele avysed

my deere sone, right so
A tonge kutteth freendshiphe al a-two.

My sone, spek nat, but with thyn heed thou bekke.

My sone, if thou no wikked word hast seyd,
Thee thar nat drede for to be biwreyd;

My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe
Of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe. (IX. 319-60)

Pedagogically, the tale presents a dialogue not only between individuals but
between classes as well, not only between wrong and right but also between morality and
expediency. Although in his confusion the Manciple seems to be convinced that the best
way in life is to keep quiet at whatever moral cost, the audience is expected to be more
vigilant than the teller at least in this respect. The audience is not confused and,
therefore, there is no reason to believe that the Manciple’s statement about capitulation
or his mother’s invitation to quietism will ever be taken seriously – at least not by those who are keen about the sentence of a tale in addition to its delight. The tale, especially, delights and educates by means of the principle of contraries, contrasting the same theme in different renditions. The audience learns to act not according to the Manciple’s advice, but according to its contrary. He advocates silence; the audience learns to be truthful; he turns a blind eye both to Phoebus’ anger and his wife’s adultery, the audience learns how to condemn both; and finally he consigns the crow to the devil because of his telling the truth, the audience learns for itself the merits of truth-telling albeit from an unfortunate beast.

Apart from the principle of contraries, the tale uses also the principle of parallelism. The Manciple, for instance, like the crow sees facts about the Cook and reports them truthfully; however, one gets punished and the other praised – each for the wrong reason. Phoebus and the Cook are angry at one point at least; one acts rashly and the other is checked by his adversary, though not necessarily for any good reason. Both the Host and the Mother admonish the Manciple, one in the present and the other in the past; yet despite his compliance with their advice, there is no evidence that he ever learns his own teaching to keep his mouth shut. Although in the bird exemplum, the bird escapes captivity at the first chance she gets, the crow, another bird, plays the role of a loyal servant until he is thrown away for his jangling. The crow’s unchecked tongue is parallel to the fox’s mouth and the cock’s eyes of the NPT.

In both tales Chaucer raises the problem of restraint not only in speech, but also

106 Wood 209-29.
in eating, drinking and disposition, as well as being faithful to one’s spouse. In fact restraint is the main issue at stake in the rest of the tales in the final fragment of CT.

Keep your tongue. Hold your eyes open. Do not open your mouth. Why do you say one thing and act differently, like the cock? Why do you succumb to pride? Why do you listen to women? In both stories the women are shown to be inferior — one is a betrayer and the other is unreliable. In both cases the male characters are beguiled. The cock is talked into pride; Phoebus is taken by anger. In both cases there is an ordeal for the beast-hero — the crow is severely punished, and the cock almost loses his life between the fox’s jaws. The crow in the ManT is in fact a replacement for the cock of the NPT, who having escaped once from the jaws of the fox gets himself into further trouble.

The strategies of reward and punishment are there in the tale both explicitly and implicitly. Although both the Manciple and his mother manipulate the fable of Phoebus and the crow to make a case against jangling, the facts speak for themselves by implication. The mother and son insist that if one does not hold his tongue, he will suffer severe consequences like the crow. They seem also to suggest that if one does keep his mouth shut, everything will be all right. Yet the unjust punishment that the crow earns is by no means greater than the implicit praise for his truth-telling. The easier way of silence is not necessarily the best one. It must be borne in mind that neither the mother nor the son seems to pretend to any morality; what they are concerned with is pragmatism. Now it is for the reader to choose between the reward of being spared for being untrue to oneself on the one hand, and the unjust punishment for telling the truth on the other. It is a choice between the crow, whose tongue is unchecked and the Cook,
who is so easily bribed into silence.

The tale also manipulates the sermon form as a convenient and forceful strategy to make a point. While the tale, as a whole, is an exemplum, the narrative includes three other exempla, such as the clergy commonly used in their sermons. Normally after each exemplum comes a moralitas which narrows its message into a specified lesson. Curiously enough, although the Manciple is articulate about almost everything, when it comes to clarity, he is evasive, deceptive, and awkwardly timid. Conversely, his mother is both persuasive and to the point. Her admonition at the end of the tale creates the illusion that in fact it was she who told the story to her son for the first time to educate him in things he never learnt, though he has been trying very hard to teach his audience now. Whether the sermon strategy works or not is just beside the point. The narrator, or Chaucer for that matter, may well sound ironic in all he says, but the heart of the matter is that the technique of expounding a sermon and lecturing an audience is there.

Chaucer is by no means a conventional fabulist. In fact the only two fables that he has written -- the NPT and the ManT -- have little resemblance to the mainstream of fable collections. Like any other medieval writer, Chaucer may well have tried his hand at translating Aesop at an early stage of his career. However, when it comes to his two fables, it seems more than anything else that he is critical of the very assumption of narrative as exemplum. Instead of producing a story with a moral tagged to it, he manipulates the Aesopic and Ovidian stories so as to serve his purpose of addressing a number of issues simultaneously. The ManT is obviously a clear parody of the very genre of beast fable; but it also provides an abundance of ironies, especially comic ones, by
juxtapositions and diverse angles of view. His \textit{NPT} and \textit{ManT} both offer a drama of man and beast interchanges. Humans are made to act like the beasts and the beasts are made to talk like human philosophers. If in the former animal characters are promoted to the level of human beings, in the latter human characters are demoted to the level of the beasts. In a burlesque of swift changes Chaucer introduces a number of allusive digressions; but he never lets the reader get caught in any single topos seriously. He simply enjoys playing with his reader's sense of expectations. There is no pretence, no harm is meant; but scarcely does any reader get spared. He does not teach; yet he does not advocate idle writing. He does not preach any sermon; but he always challenges his reader to find the fruit in the chaff of poetry — his and that of any other poet.
IV. GOWER & THE FABLE

John Gower was born in 1330 in Yorkshire and grew up in Kent. He belonged to the upper middle class and had some connections with the court, although the nature of this affiliation is not clear. After 1375, Gower was associated with a number of friends with the same social and intellectual interests, such as Chaucer, who dedicated his *Troilus and Criseyde* to him. He died in 1408.¹

Apart from his earlier French and Latin works, Gower wrote the *Confessio Amantis* (*CA*) (1390) of which some 49 manuscripts are extant in three versions or recensions (31, 7, 11) with minor differences. The *CA* is a huge collection of more than one hundred *exempla* "illuminating the vices and virtues about which the priest interrogates the penitent."² The poem is divided into eight books, each devoted to one of the traditional Seven Deadly sins except for Book VII, which is a pivotal treatise on the education of the ruler. In the course of the poem, Amans, Gower-the-lover, confesses his sins to the allegorical figure of Genius, the priest of Venus, who in turn, "defines the sins, tells illustrative tales, offers Amans 'lore' on a wide variety of subjects and hears the confession."³

Although Gower is not a fabulist in its general sense, some of the stories that


Genius tells Amans may conveniently be categorized as fables. A good number of the tales are, in fact, animal stories, such as “The Aspidis” (I. 463-480) which has a precious stone in its head, but when a man tries to enchant it so that he can win this stone, it refuses to hear the charm by placing one ear flat against the earth and stopping the other with his tail;4 “A Wondrous Bird” (III. 2599-2621) which has a man’s face, and dies of sorrow after it slays a man; or “The Lion” (VII. 3370-3416) which will not slay the man who falls before it and entreats mercy.5 Nonetheless, the stories of “Phœbus and Cornide” (III. 783-817) and “Adrian and Bardus” (V. 4937-5162) are unmistakably well-wrought animal fables.

“PHEBUS AND CORNIDE”

4This story is drawn from Psalm 58:4; one must turn the ear toward good so that one’s heart may learn virtue; one must also turn the ear away from evil to protect the heart from vice, especially pride.

5By this example princes should learn not to destroy the man who asks mercy; but there are cruel tyrants who cannot be moved by pity; cf. Ovid’s Metamorphosis, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 247.

6Apart from numerous Oriental analogues, the fable appears, amongst other European analogues, in Ovid, Metamorphosis, II: 531-632; Ovide Moralisé, 2130-2548; Guillaume de Machaut, Le Livre du Voir Dit, 7773-8110, The Seven Sages of Rome, 2193-2292; Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae, Book III; Chaucer, Manciple’s Tale, and various allusions in Roman de la Rose. See also James A. Work, “The Manciple’s Tale” in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, ed. W.F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (New York: Humanities, 1958) 699-722.

7Michael Chesnutt says: “Neither the story as such nor its exemplary interpretation was however a European much less an English invention, for it occurs in the famous collection of oriental animal tales generally known as Kalila and Dimna, a work which through numerous translations – all of which can be traced back to an Arabic original of the eighth century -- came to exert considerable influence on the popular story repertoire of Europe in medieval and more recent times.” Michel Chesnutt, “The Grateful Animal and the Ungrateful Man,” Fabula 21 (1980): 24-55.
The story of "Phebus and Comide" is a very short and conventional animal fable. In fact, it is the well known story of the talking bird who is punished for his jangling. The story begins with an introductory moral lesson regarding holding one's tongue and keeping other people's affairs secret. The narrator argues that the blabber not only causes harm to others, but he also "lest ful many time grace, / Wher that he wolde his thonk pourchace."8 (III. 773-74). The fable proper begins with Phebus, who loves his wife, Cornide, dearly. She, however, is fond of a "yong kniht" (III. 790) to whose desires she yields (III. 791). Corvus, Cornide's bird, "Discoevereth all that evere he cowthe" (III. 794) and reports it all to Phebus, who, in anger, draws his sword and kills the adulteress (III. 798-801). Afterwards, however, Phebus repents of his deed and punishes the tale-teller by changing his feathers from white to black (III. 802-808). The fable comes to a close with the narrator's sententious comments on the dangers of jangling, re-stating the introductory moral of the fable.

Although "Phebus and Cornide" primarily concerns itself with the topos of jangling, it also presents other lessons in its narrative, though indirectly and by way of implication. The tale-telling bird of the fable is obviously meant to be seen as the real villain who speaks when he should hold his tongue and who is consequently punished. However, his loss is much less than what both human characters of the tale suffer through their own mistakes. Cornide loses her life because she is not faithful to her husband, and Phebus is deprived of his great love partly because of his own wrath. As

8John Gower, The English Works of John Gower, ed. G.C. Macaulay, vol. 2, EETS 82, 83 (London: Oxford UP, 1901) 248. All subsequent references to Gower's poem will be to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the body of the text.
such, the fable condemns both adultery and anger. After all, Book III of CA is so devised as to address the sin of wrath; “Phebus and Cornide” is but one in a series of stories admonishing against this kind of behaviour. The moralization of the fable, however, is confined to jangling as a major cause of wrath and violence.

Though indirectly, the story also touches on the topos of Fortune when it casts doubt on the end of love between Phebus and Cornide. It is noteworthy to remember that Phebus or Apollo is, in fact, the god of light and the light of the universe. Hence, it is ironic that “Phebus, which makth the daies lihte” (III. 783), fails to discover — or uncover -- Cornide’s adultery and is informed of it by a bird. It is also important to note that unlike its analogues, in this version of the fable Corvus belongs to Cornide and not to Phebus, who, like any other man, is blind to the turn of the wheel of Lady Fortune:

    bot what schal befalle

    Of love ther is noman knoweth,

    Bot as fortune hire happes throweth. (III. 786-88)

This pessimistic speculation concerning the unpredictability of the relationship between lovers juxtaposed to Phebus’ boundless love for Cornide marks the importance of Fate as opposed to the individual’s active role. Moreover, such a speculation shrewdly questions women’s fidelity in general. Paradoxically, then, Cornide is seen both as Lady Fortune’s victim and her ally. As a victim, she loses both her love and life; as an ally, she ruins not only Phebus’ happiness but also Corvus’ charm and beauty. As an individual, she suffers death and causes much grief; as an example, her tale illustrates how unpredictable fate is and how dreadful, yet how real, the consequences of lust are. Though not in so many
words, the narrative seems to raise the question: if Comide, Phebus' wife, cannot be trusted, who can?

As for Phebus, not only does he love Cornide blindly, so does he judge and kill her impulsively. The fable depicts Phebus as an unsophisticated man who knows next to nothing about women and is utterly out of touch with what goes on in his own backyard. Moreover, he never gives himself the benefit of the doubt about what Corvus reports to him; neither does he leave any room for Cornide to tell him her own side of the story. He does not question either the latter's faithlessness or the former's truthfulness. When in love, he loves Cornide "aboven alle" (III. 785); when angry, he kills her ruthlessly and unhesitatingly (III. 801). Nonetheless, unlike Cornide, Phebus survives the turmoil both to repent his deed and to punish Corvus, whom he finally considers the main villain. It is important, however, to note that Phebus spares the bird's life and simply changes the colour of his feathers, not so much to punish her, or display an act of justice or compassion, rather to transform him from a white and beautiful bird into a black messenger of bad omens -- a warning for others:

He was transformed, as it scheweth,
And many a man yit him beschreweth,
And clepen him into this day
A Raven, be whom yit men mai
Take evidence, whan he crieth,

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9In the East, the crowing of crows is always interpreted as a bad omen. Even his sight is sometimes considered an evil prophecy of death or defeat.
That som mishapp it signefieth. (III. 809-14)

The fable also mentions Phebus’ revenge, or “wrecche”, in a passing way: “Of hem whiche usen wicke speche, / Upon this bridde he tok this wrecche” (III. 805-806). Here, again, it is ironic that Phebus’ “wrecche” is juxtaposed to his “repentance” (III. 804). This time the fable raises more questions about men’s accountability and reliability. One wonders how sincere Phebus is in his repenting, even more, what it is that he repents of. In the context of the fable proper, he must repent his believing Corvus, the jangler, instead of punishing him; on the wider level of Book III, it is his anger that he repents of. Yet, on even the widest level of CA as a whole, he must repent of indiscretion manifested in all Seven Deadly Sins. However, although the reader is never told of any certain sin of which Phebus repents, the narrative does highlight the importance of repentance.

That the narrative stresses the evil of jangling does not mean that it condones any of the other vices it touches on. It does not, for instance, encourage falsehood. To hold one’s tongue is one thing, to tell lies or bear false witness is something different. Again although the narrative emphasizes Phebus’ repentance, it does not approve of Cornide’s adultery. Revenge and anger are depicted as two human weaknesses that one must always avoid. Vice versa, repentance and alertness are seen as two strengths which one should always cherish. As for the theme of jangling, the moral of the fable cannot be any clearer:

Mi Sone, be thou non of tho,

To jangle and telle tales so,

And namely that thou ne chyde,
For Cheste can no conseil hide,
For Wrath the seide nevere wel. (III. 831-35)

The fable of "Phebus and Cornide" appears as an exemplum in Genius's sermon on wrath. Genius, the priest of Venus, is the fictitious teacher, the narrator of the fable, and the commentator on its ethical applicability. Genius relies on many sources -- here a popular medieval fable -- to expound the vice of jangling which is a prelude to wrath. Whereas Gower plays the role of the pupil in the world of fiction, in the real world he is the author and ultimately the one who creates, edits, and dictates the instructions. Thus the apparent ambivalence of the teaching voice in this fable, as with the rest of the CA, is beside the point. It is also of little consequence to try to make certain whether or not Genius' ideas are really those of Gower. Yet one may turn the question round and ask if the voice should be taken as a serious expression "of the social and ethical ideals of the work itself."\(^{10}\) As such the voice of the poem which Gower presents, in Middleton's words, "is offered not as the realization of an individual identity, but as the realization of the human condition."\(^{11}\)

Amans is the fictitious audience of the fable. After all, Genius' job is to hear Amans' confessions and help him purge his worldly vices in order to deserve Venus' grace. Amans, however, is Gower-the-lover, as the Prologue to the CA makes clear at the outset. Hence it is possible to argue that Gower, the poet, is undertaking some self-

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\(^{11}\) Middleton 109.
edifying meditation. In this tale, for instance, he is trying to teach himself, especially to hold his tongue to avoid his own ruin and that of others. He is not only Genius, the Confessor, who tells the tale and elaborates on it, but he is also the very penitent Amans of the poem. The "my son formula" assumes Gower as the immediate audience of the poem. If Genius, the Confessor, is Gower the poet, so is Amans, the penitent, Gower the seeker of the way. He is the real referent of "Mi Sone" (III. 768, 831), "my Sone diere" (III. 775), and "Mi goode Sone" (III. 816). The poet as audience of the poem also justifies the use of the second person singular pronoun, "thou", throughout the poem, stressing the fact that in the world of fiction, at least, there is just one single audience involved -- Gower himself. Nonetheless, his act of writing the poem necessitates an imagined audience as well. There is enough evidence that he wrote the CA for the court, though this is a point which cannot be stretched too far. It should suffice to be reminded that although Gower seems to write with an aristocratic courtly audience in mind, his readers, as V.J. Scattergood points out, "appear to have been career diplomats, civil servants, officials and administrators who were attached to the court and the government."12

The CA in general, including the fable of "Phebus and Cornide," speaks to the entire Christendom, if not the world as a whole. Gower seems to reach out to as wide an audience as possible. His imagined audience may well be an idealized community with diverse individual interests, but which may be brought to mutual awareness and resolve

into common understanding. The fable encompasses the high and the low, man and beast, and conveniently appeals to listeners of all walks of life. Although the nominated addressees of the poem change first from a book for ‘King Richardes sake’ to a “bok for Engelondes sake,” and yet later to “Henry of Lancaster,” “the mode of address,” as Middleton argues, “is not a matter of deferential politeness to a ruler, but of rising to sufficient largeness of mind and of reference for a public occasion, and a broad common appeal. The king is not the main imagined audience, but an occasion for gathering and formulating what is on the common mind.”13 Middleton also maintains that Gower’s cancellation of the famous reference to Chaucer in the final revision of the CA may have been because of the same consideration: “that coterie references were out of place in a work now explicitly meant for the ‘comune’ at large.”14

The very fact that Gower turns his back on his French and Latin works, which aim at the elite, the ecclesiastics, and presumably the court, and writes the CA in English suggests that he has a much wider audience in mind. Russell A. Peck justifiably contends that “by the 1390s it must have been painfully clear to Gower that a writer cannot effect social reforms in an academic treatise. Reform can come only from the people themselves. In Confessio we hear a different voice crying, that of a common Englishman speaking the common language.”15 Thus he is trying to reach out to all who care to read

13Middleton 107.

14Middleton 107.

or bother to listen to something of the middle “weie”. “Phebus and Cornide” thus does not address any specific audience per se. Gower seems to suggest that individuals have a lot in common to share and “if they become like the house divided against itself,” as Peck observes, “they are doomed to fall, both individually and collectively.”

Pedagogically, the fable employs the punishment strategy. Phebus first punishes Cornide for her alleged adultery, then he punishes the raven for his indiscreet jangling. Phebus’ long grieving and repentance testify to the fact that he too is punished inadvertently by losing a dear one through his rashness and anger. Whether one tries to blame Fortune for the turn of the event or human incapacity for not always acting rationally, the fable leaves no room for any escape from the inevitable. Repentance may help reshape one’s future, but as for what is done, it cannot be undone. Whereas the poem does not suggest that punishment is a cure, it does assert that it is always there and one must always be wary of the consequences of one’s deeds.

“ADRIAN AND BARDUS”

The story of “Adrian and Bardus” is another fascinating animal fable which both entertains and edifies. It addresses the problem of avarice and breaking one’s word, which is seen here as another aspect of the same vice. The person who is guilty of this sin, of course, suffers from “unkindeschihe” (V. 4887). He is:

The worldes fo;

For he nomore than the fend

Unto non other man is friend,

\[16\]Peck xxiv.
Bot at toward himself al one. (V. 5490-93)

Avarice variously manifests the self-love of a corrupted nature. "Unkindeschipe" is an ill which darkens man's heart so much that "he can no good dede aquite" (V. 5487) and is a friend "toward himself al one" (V. 5493). An "unkinde" person is bereft of truth, gratitude, kindness, and even an understanding of the effects of his own crime. No wonder Genius implies that avarice is the greatest sin that Amans has to avoid: "Forthi, mi Sone, in thi persone / This vice above all othre fle" (V. 5494-95).

The story of "Adrian and Bardus" is not another version of Cain and Abel -- the villain and the virtuous; it is about a much older and more thought-provoking relationship. This is the story of the uncorrupted kindness of nature on the one hand, and man's fallen situation on the other. In the CA – in its entirety -- the fable is another example of man's failure to appreciate his station in the universe; it is another instance of his myriad self-inflected ills; it is about another vice, a sin that he must atone for if he is ever to be saved. By itself, however, the fable is more specifically about the long-lost kinship between man and beast; it is about man's deteriorated, corrupted, and pathetic situation as opposed to the unchanged, grateful, and awesome nature of beasts. As such, both Adrian who is rescued from the pit, and Bardus who rescues him, share the same deviation from nature; they are both avaricious, selfish, and ungrateful. Conversely, both the ape -- the human-like animal -- and the serpent -- the accused first-fiend of mankind -- are natural, kind, and grateful. The fable stimulates the hope that such a comparison may be both amusing and instructive; and that is why Gower calls it a tale "of olde ensamplerie" (V. 4935) from which every wise man may take counsel.
Although Adrian and Bardus are different in many ways, they are both subject to the same dilemma of "unkindeschipe." If Bardus' poverty forces him to be in touch with the outside world, and "necessity," as Peck suggests, "keeps him mindful of his interdependence with nature," by contrast, Adrian's wealth enables him to "assume an independence of his fellow creature." Although socially one is a "povere" (V. 4972) wood-cutter and the other a "gret lord" of Rome (4939), they are both morally deficient. Both of them are subject to avarice though to different degrees. They are both incapable of acknowledging human fellowship:

That maketh a kinde herte dull,

To sette his trust in such frendschipe,

Ther as he fint no kindeschipe. (V. 4908-10)

They are both subject to Fortune which throws one down and the other up. Adrian is first thrown deep into a pit where his companions are two wild beasts; then he is found guilty of "unkindeschipe" and disgraced, and is made to live up to his covenant by giving half of his wealth to Bardus. Bardus, on the other hand, is uplifted from sheer poverty to fortune and fame. The contrast between the two, however, is not necessarily between vice and virtue, rather between two aspects of the same vice: "unkindeschipe."

The "uninke" (V. 4937) Adrian proves to be not only ungrateful, but also untrustworthy since he breaks his spoken promise. Of the three entrapped creatures in the pit, Adrian alone has the gift of speech which enables him to make a verbal covenant: "'Ha, help hier Adrian, / And I wol yiven half mi good'" (V. 4970-71). Neither the ape

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17Peck 116.
nor the serpent can communicate with the outside world, much less entreat any passer-by to come to their help. Bardus, however, with the same gift of speech, is drawn to the pit only because he hears a human voice. Furthermore, he is tempted rather than encouraged to offer his help when — and only if — Adrian swears that he will truly keep his promise of the generous reward in return for his help (V. 4975 ff.). He removes his load of sticks from his ass and lowers down the rope. To his surprise there emerges an ape whose sight makes the poor man think he has seen “a jape / Of faerie” (V. 5002). For a second time, not because of Adrian’s welfare but rather because of the prospect of the great reward, he lowers down his cord. Again to his astonishment, there comes to the surface a great serpent whose sight makes him think that he is the victim of some “fantosme” (V. 5011). At this point, one wonders if Bardus would have not fled for his life leaving behind Adrian and the ass with the load of sticks, had it not been for the magnitude of the reward that Adrian keeps promising.

It takes a human voice to save the ape and the serpent. This faculty is, in fact, what binds Adrian to Bardus. Speech is a sign of human nature by which the individual may benefit from community as well as serve the commonweal. It is a gift that — if used properly — may serve the profit of the whole community. The rope, in this fable, may be seen as a symbolic representation of this faculty. Whereas it is deliberately used to connect man to man, inadvertently it reaches out to man’s forgotten co-inhabitants on earth. Adrian abuses this natural sign both by making a covenant which he does not intend to honour and then by threatening Bardus to drop the matter altogether at the peril of his life:
If so be that he him umbreide
Of oght that hath be speke or do,
It schal ben venged on him so,
That him were betre to be ded. (V. 5034-37)

Ironically neither the ape nor the serpent makes any audible noise either in their captivity or after their freedom. They do not cry or complain as Adrian does; neither do they make promises as he does. They are dumb — lacking the gift of speech. Adrian has nothing to share with the beasts in the pit; neither does he care about them afterwards. Bardus does not hear them; neither does he expect, let alone cherish, any gratitude from them. Furthermore, both Adrian and Bardus abuse their gift of speech by keeping quiet about the incident — one out of selfishness and the other out of fear. Their silence is yet another sign of the avarice which denies them of fellowship either amongst their fellow human beings or with the rest of the world.

Adrian’s “unkindeschipe” (V. 4887) is juxtaposed to the beasts’ “kindeschipe” — gratitude, kindness, loyalty, in a word, “naturalness”:

the worm and ek the beste,

Althogh thei maden no beheste,

His travail hadden wel aquit;

Bot he which hadde a mannes wit,

And made his covenant be mouthe

And swor therto al that he couthe

To parte and yiven half his good,
Hath nou foryete hou that it stod,
As he which wol no trouthe holde. (V. 5131-39)

Gower asks us to compare man’s power of speech and his abuse of it to the quiet of the
dumb beasts and their abiding by natural law. Adrian’s sins of speech are indeed
unnatural, but unfortunately not uncommon.

If Adrian is avaricious, so is Bardus; whereas the former fails to give his saviour
what is his due, the latter would not help the victim out of the pit unless he is sure of the
reward:

‘If I thee save,
What sikernesse schal I have
Of covenant, that afterward
As thou behihest nou tofore?’

That other hath his othes swore
Be hevene and be the goddes alle,
If that it myte so befalle
That he out of the pet him broghte,
Of all the goodes whiche he oghte
He schal have evene halvendel. (V. 4975-85)

Thus Bardus is as avaricious as Adrian, if not more so. As for his saving the beasts, at
first he is utterly unaware of their being in the pit; hence there is no indication that he has
any intention of helping them. This is stressed by his initial reaction at his first sight of
them when he is almost scared to death. Neither is there any reason to believe that he is
generous towards his wife at home or his ass in the woods. Furthermore, after he obtains the magic gem from the serpent, he shows absolutely no concern for the merchants to whom he sells this strange gem, which keeps reappearing in his purse along with the price he sells it for, although the intentions of these merchants are by no means purer than his own. They too are only concerned about their personal profits and do not deserve any sympathy. Finally, Bardus does not even bother to thank the emperor and his court, who have made Adrian live up to his promise to give him half of his riches.

Nonetheless, although human nature is perverted by avarice, “kindeschipe” can still be found, if not among human beings, at least in the world of the wild. With the help of the ass and the rope, Bardus manages to rescue not only man from “the very pit of fallen nature,”¹⁸ as Peck suggests, but nature incarnate. The day after the rescue operation when Bardus goes on his routine wood-cutting, he finds the ape has gathered a great “route” (V. 5054) of sticks in return for his “kindeschipe” and is waiting for him to come and load his ass with it. This the ape repeats every day:

Fro dai to dai and in this wise
This Ape profreth his servise,
So that he hadde of wode ynoh. (V. 5057-59)

The serpent too returns Bardus’ “kindeschipe” by presenting a strange gem to him which reappears every time it is sold for a fortune. The narrator beautifully illustrates the cinematographic scene when this “grete gastli Serpent” (V. 5062) glides close to Bardus but stops at a distance — as if in his beastly world he is fully aware that Bardus may be

¹⁸Peck 116.
scared by his sight -- to let fall his mouth “A ston mor briht than a cristall” (V. 5066), and retreats so that Bardus may pick it up with no fear (V. 5069). Both the magical properties of the gem and the serpent’s careful manner in presenting it follow the universal “kindeschipe” in the world. “One would gather,” Peck argues, “that this kindness dwells in the very animal souls of creation. Creatures with rational souls have perversely abused it, however, the price being, as we have seen, the obscuring of common profit and loss of the peaceful repose of a golden age.”

Unlike the ape and the serpent, Adrian’s primary concern becomes maintaining his gold behind walls instead of caring about his fellow men and his obligations towards them. Despite his enormous wealth, it seems that he fears poverty and that is why he does not abide by his promise. What he is incapable of understanding, however, is that his poverty is spiritual and not material. Hence instead of being lord of his gold to dispense when necessary he becomes its servant and guardian. Avarice divides him from his true nature so much that he behaves unnaturally. Thus “unkindeschipe,” as Peck puts it, “is more than ingratitude; it is a denial or perversion of man’s innate sense of his common nature.”\(^\text{19}\) At the end of Book V, Genius emphasizes that “unkindeschipe” is that ill “which nevere drouh to felaschipe” (V. 7620).

The poem presents several contrasts between man and the natural world. Adrian, for instance, threatens Bardus when he should be grateful to him. The serpent, on the other hand -- with its mythic notoriety as man’s greatest enemy -- gives him a magical

\(^{19}\)Peck 116.

\(^{20}\)Peck 116.
and precious gem. Compare also Adrian’s unnatural wrath and his leaving Bardus without saying a word of gratitude, to the serpent’s natural — though breathtaking — gesture of spitting the gem and moving away from it so that Bardus can pick it up without fear. Whereas the ape goes on gathering sticks day after day and the gem miraculously reappears in Bardus’ purse with the money it is sold for, in the human world, both Adrian and Bardus unnaturally — ungratefully — are busy with their own lives disregarding every one and every thing else. Because of their abuse of speech, Adrian and Bardus prove to be “unkinde” — unfaithful, ungrateful, and unnatural — whereas the ape and the serpent, though dumb, transcend their nature by helping Bardus gather wood and obtain wealth and by giving a practical lesson to the whole community.

Two sets of laws are simultaneously at work in this fable: natural law and common profit. The first one is the God-given nature which all human beings share. It is manifested in human reasoning and compassion, in the gift of speech and free will. In the rest of the world, amongst the beasts, it is manifested in their instincts from which they cannot deviate. Whereas in the nonhuman world nature alone suffices, mankind has always been in need of human offices to oversee the common profit where it is in conflict with personal interests. According to Gower, the canon law is a reflection of “God’s expressed intent even before the Fall,” while the civil law is established by man and reflects “social agreements after the Fall in an effort to deal with human nastiness.”

The wellbeing of the individual and the common profit solely depend on sincere and thorough abiding by both kinds of law. It is, in fact, man’s moral obligation not only to

\[21\]Peck xxii.
make every effort possible not to break any social laws, but also to strive not to alienate himself from nature and its laws. Adrian both abuses natural law, his innate and God-
given capacity for truthfulness and kindness, and ignores his responsibility to the laws of the community. Adrian is "unkindef" (V. 5160), that is, unnatural in that he violates the laws of his society. Although Genius does not elaborate on the consequences of Adrian's not abiding by nature, he is exposed in the court of Justinian, where he is put to shame and forced to do what he should have done in the first place:

And thus of thilke unkinde blod
Stant the memoire into this day,
Wherof that every wysman may
Ensamplen him, and take in mynde
What schame it is to ben unkinde. (V. 5156-60)

Allegorically, however, the emperor Justinian, as his name suggests, may be interpreted as a figure of Almighty God: he represents the power of justice and order. When he hears of the story of Bardus' gem, he is astonished much more at Adrian's "unkindenesse" (V. 5142) than at the magical property of the gem. The pit, too, may be interpreted as a figure of worldly danger and sins. Adrian the ungrateful represents fallen man: and poor Bardus, the wood-cutter, who happens to be able to help someone else, stands for the occasion of repentance. The miraculous gem represents Christ, who will always live in those whom he saves. The rope with which Bardus helps Adrian and the
beasts out of the pit is Christ's net hunting those who have gone astray.²²

The fable of "Adrian and Bardus" appears as another exemplum in Genius' sermon on avarice. As in the previous fable, Genius is the confessor and teacher, who tells Amans stories and elaborates on them. This time Genius relies on an oriental fable to expound the vice of avarice and its cure, largesse. Gower would put his words in Genius' mouth, who in turn invites the reader to learn from the ape and serpent what Adrian fails to appreciate. Hence at one end of the line, the serpent teaches Amans not only to be grateful but also to exercise discretion and be wary of his station. The ape teaches Amans both gratitude and perseverance. With their unexpected responses both the ape and the serpent teach Amans "kindeschipe" in its many senses. They show that they are grateful to their saviour. They remind him that it is natural to return someone's help in any way possible. They prove that they are kind and that they appreciate kindness. Moreover, they illustrate the long-forgotten fact that man and beast are kin, they belong ultimately to the same family. Last but not least, they suggest that unlike "unkindeschipe" which deprives man of his "felaschipe" (V. 4988) "the lawe of... nature" (V. 4930) brings speaking man and dumb beast to mutual appreciation.

Justinian teaches justice and the importance of order. Although he does not say it in so many words, his first astonishment, his assembly, and his final implementation of the verdict to make Adrian give Bardus half of his wealth as he has promised, all encourage an ideal world to be cherished. Justinian appears to have a greater intention

²²Chesnutt shows that the Gesta Romanorum version concludes with just such an allegorical exposition. Chesnutt 30.
than just giving Bardus what is his due. He turns the story of Bardus and the beasts into a teaching exemplum for his own people in the world of the fable. Amans is thus presented with a case in which Justinian’s subjects are to learn gratitude from the beasts. They also get a chance to compare the beasts’ natural “largesse” to the “unkindeschipe” of both Adrian, who breaks his covenant, and Bardus, who fails to be grateful either to man or beast.

As in the previous tale, and all the rest of the book for that matter, Amans is the fictitious audience of the fable. Since Gower is practically both the teller and the audience of the tale, the fable turns to be another self-edifying piece for further meditation. He is creating a world of imaginary ungrateful human beings juxtaposed to grateful animals to examine its pedagogical possibilities. Besides, if it works for one -- that is, it the fable proves to be instructive -- it surely does for the community at large. Gower does not seem to focus on either individuals or any well-defined groups; rather, he is interested in people as members of a community bound by laws and rules. It is the common agreements and commitments that matter for him. Thus he warns against any ill in society, avarice in this case, which counter-affects the commonweal. He invites all those who believe in any kind of association for mutual benefit to avoid “unkindeschipe.” However, as moralist and social critic, according to Peck, “he directs his attack against men, not the office itself.”23 Gower is always keen to the fact that man has a double identity -- social and individual. Hence “the manifestations of human happiness, whether personal or social, are mutually dependent. Neither form of happiness

23Peck xx.
can be fully realized without the other.”

Pedagogically, the fable draws both on strategies of reward and threat. In the human world, Adrian does not live up to his promise of reward and it takes a civil court and an emperor to enforce justice. In the world of nature, by contrast, the ape and the serpent are grateful to Bardus beyond the audience’s imagination. Bardus, the poor wood-cutter, begins to have an easy job because every day the ape gathers his sticks for him. Thanks to the serpent’s magical gem, he becomes a rich man almost overnight. Despite Adrian’s villainy, Justinian makes it possible for Bardus to add half of Adrian’s wealth to his already accumulated gold. Moreover, although Adrian’s threat that he would kill Bardus if he reveals the incident of his fall to anyone keeps him quiet for a while, Nature and Fortune have their own threats in stock for him. The more Bardus rises in society, the lower he falls. Since he does not learn his first lesson after falling into the pit, he must suffer both shame in society and loss of gold at home. By contrast, though Justinian does not threaten the wrongdoer, he serves justice by actually humiliating and fining Adrian.

More important than the rewards and the threats involved in this fable, is the manner of executing each which Amans is alerted to. Although it is an extraordinary picture to find a pile of sticks that the ape gathers, it is even a more breath-taking sight to find him sitting beside the pile waiting for Bardus. Neither is it the gem itself, but the serpent’s careful manner in producing it that is so poignant. Adrian’s hypocritical gesture in crossing himself and leaving the scene without a single word of gratitude is really

24Peck xxi.
effective. In a community where everyone is interested in his personal welfare and where material values have replaced moral ones, Justinian’s astonishment at Adrian’s irresponsible behaviour rather than at the mythic gem is beyond the reader’s expectation. Yet both the emperor’s exemplary intervening and the beasts’ extraordinary gratefulness suggest the possibility of a world of “kindeschipe,” which must have existed at some point and is not all that impossible to come true once more. It is not only that nature teaches animals everything they need, or that, unlike natural law with its roots in kindness, civil law has alienated man from his roots, but rather something more of a greater significance is missing: that man and animals, in fact belong together. Drawing on the Stoic theory of oikeiôsis, Richard Sorabji reminds us of at least three reasons why man is akin to the animals. “We are made of the same elements, one breath permeates us all, and we are quite literally akin, because the dog you are beating may be a friend, or presumably a relative, reincarnated.”²⁵ Although it took man a long time to come to terms, even partially, with his kinship with animals, in the late nineteenth century Darwin defended this thesis “by insisting that animals differ from man only in degree. No characteristic, he maintains, although not quite consistently, is unique to man, not emotion, curiosity, imitation, attention, memory, imagination, reason, progressive improvement, belief in the supernatural, nor moral sense.”²⁶


²⁶Sorabji 131.
V. LANGLAND & THE FABLE

Very little is known about William Langland (if indeed that is his real name), the man who is generally believed to have written *The Visions of Piers Plowman* (*PP*).¹ He was probably born in or near Malvern about 1330. He must have received his first education in his birthplace before leaving for London as a married cleric in minor orders. Based on internal evidence, the author of *PP* must have had some academic training, and a deep familiarity with both the Bible and the liturgy. Furthermore, it seems that, whether he lacked or scorned the means of advancement, Langland and his family led a life of poverty. Langland died in London around 1387.

*PP* is Langland’s life-long single work, which has come to us through fifty-two extant manuscripts. Scholars have pieced together at least three versions of the poem, the original A-text, the much enlarged B-text, and the modified C-text.² In its totality the poem is a series of extraordinary visions concerning the way in which man can find salvation. It is both thematically and structurally, as D.J. Williams suggests, “a quest for understanding,”³ “a search for truth and meaning,”⁴ or in James Simpson’s words, a

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²The so-called Z-text has recently been claimed by its editors, A.G. Rigg and Charlotte Brewer, to be a draft version earlier than the A-text.

³Williams 135.

⁴Williams 137.
consideration of "the relations between justice and mercy." The poem is divided into two main parts. The first part, the *Visio*, criticises society as a whole. Yet it also seeks a solution to the ills of society through individual conscience and responsibility. The *Visio* comes to an end with fresh doubt as to the efficacy of such virtues to guarantee safety from evil in the world. The poem resolves that the first requirement for salvation is to 'do well' and for the rest to trust in God. The second part, the *Vita*, presents all kinds of questions and doubts not only about the practicality of myriad possible answers, but also about the necessity of such an endeavour.

"BELLING THE CAT"

The fable of "Belling the Cat" is fitted into the larger context of *PP*. Although it is lacking in the A-text, it appears in the Prologue of the B-text6 (146 ff.) and Passus I of C-text (163 ff.) Oddly enough, in the entire poem of several thousand lines this is the only fable recounted. Nonetheless, it has stimulated diverse scholarly interest for students of *PP*. It has helped establish, for instance, a more accurate date of the writing for the poem; it has also provided further evidence for Langland's conservative, though by no means submissive, religious and political views.

This fable is generally believed to apply to the political scene of England at the

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end of Edward III’s reign. Although not everyone agrees how Langland happened to come across this fable, Baum’s suggestion that its ultimate source must be the old Syriac Kalilah and Dimnah of the late sixth century, is intriguing. In this version of the story, the king of mice seeks his ministers’ opinions as how to free themselves from the cats. The first minister proposes to hang a bell on every cat as a danger signal; the second one suggests that all the mice go into the wilderness for a year so that people may do away with the cats as superfluous. Both plans are rejected on the ground that they are impractical and involve great hardship. Unlike others, the third mouse, who is very wise, first warns the king that “an evil of long standing cannot be so easily abolished, and that any attempt to cure it may easily cause a great calamity.” Then to convince the king, he supports his opinion by telling a story, the lesson of which is not, of course, taken. Hence to satisfy the king’s desire he suggests that the mice bring great damage and harm to men, but in such a crafty way that everything will be ascribed to the cats. The scheme works well, and the cats who get the blame for the harm are driven away.

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8Baum 37.

9Baum 37. Cf. (Prol. 185 ff.).

10Kalilah & Dimnah is the most famous Oriental collection of beast fables in which layers of stories are embedded, onion-like, in each other. This collection was meant, both according to the internal evidence and historical testimony, to educate the young princes and to prepare them for their later ruling strategies. It was also a source of inspiration for the production of many other collections of teaching fables in India, Persia, and the Arab world.
The main theme of the Syriac fable, which is unfortunately missing in Baum's argument, is what has given rise to its proverbial legacy. Trying to 'belle the cat' has come to mean -- at least in Persian folklore -- finding a scape-goat to blame for the evil done and hence to chase it away. As such the fable, in its native land at least, teaches the young princes to exercise restraint and justice if they do not want to be held responsible not only for their own wrong-doings, but also for those of others in which they may well have had no hand at all. This is another point in Langland's fable which seems to have escaped the attention of his critics. His fable is as much about the mice -- the unruly subjects -- as it is about the kitten and the cat -- the king and his guardian. Although, in all likelihood the king rules unjustly, not always are the complaints of the commons justified.

There is another fourteenth-century eastern parallel for the fable of belling the cat which will help a better appreciation of Langland's fable. Obeid Zakani's Gorby and the Rats\textsuperscript{11} (1340) is an allegorical story satirizing not only the political court of the Mongol princes in the occupied Persia of the fourteenth century, but also the hypocritical clergymen of the time. It is the story of a deceitful cat who, having devoured a wretched mouse, retires to a mosque not only to repent, but also to devote his entire time to praying and fasting like a hermit. However, no sooner do the mice come out of their nests to praise him for his decision than he surprises them and kills and devours as many of them as he can. Mice declare war against cats; the war spreads all over the country. At

first the mice manage to defeat the cats and take the cruel and deceitful cat as captive. However, when they are ready to hang the cat, he manages to free himself from his bonds, and catches and devours the king of mice and many more. Those who survive make themselves scarce. Interestingly enough, at the close of the poem, instead of a clear moral, the poet, like Langland, simply suggests that the reader find the message of the fable for himself: "Learn your lesson from this fable to live a happy life. / The reason why we should read the story of *Mouse and Cat* is to comprehend its intended meaning." Though there is no reason to suggest that this story was known to Langland, any familiarity with such a heritage must have encouraged a comparative and cross-cultural reading of Langland's fable then as it certainly does today.  

G.R. Owst contends that Langland's fable of the rat parliament, as he refers to the fable of "Belling the Cat," is a closet reference to Bishop Brunton of Rochester and his manipulation of parliament. Based on her reading of Owst, Eleanor H. Kellogg makes further attempts to work out a correlation between the fable and its application to Bishop Brunton on the one hand, and its political implications on the other. Kellogg writes: "In

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13 Almost all Aesopic versions of this fable lack many of the subtleties of Langland's tale. For the sources and analogues of the fable see Baum 38-41. Baum traces the western tradition of the fable from Odo of Cheriton first to an Old French translation and then to a Latin translation by the English Franciscan, Nicole Bozon. Baum then identifies, beside PP and the Spanish *El Libro de los Gatos*, six other fourteenth-century versions of this fable: 1) Gualterus Anglicus in Latin; 2) its Old French translation, *Ysoper I*; 3) Ulrich Boner; 4) John Bromyard; 5) Eustache Deschamps; and 6) the *Dialogus Creaturarum LXXX*.

1376 the fifth Sunday after Easter fell on May 18. Consequently we are justified in fixing this as the definite date on which Bishop Brunton put forth his bold application of the familiar fable of the attempt made by the rats and mice to restrain their ancient enemy, the cat."\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, referring to the Good Parliament which had already raised questions concerning certain abuses, but had not yet taken any practical steps, Kellogg resolves that “indeed, this was just the point that the fable of the rat parliament was designed to drive home.”\textsuperscript{16}

Two different, though not exclusive, approaches are possible to Langland’s fable. Allegorically, it may well be an allusion to the political events in England in 1376-77. If so, the rat parliament stands for the Good Parliament; the kitten for the boy-king Richard; the cat for his uncle and guardian, John of Gaunt; the mice for the representatives of the House of Commons; and the wary mouse of the end of the fable for a certain conservative member of Parliament. Symbolically, however, the fable can apply to any such situation anywhere and at any time. One of its major themes, as it is of \textit{PP} as a whole, is that “true salvation is not only personal but social.”\textsuperscript{17} The fable functions as a microcosmic epitome for the macrocosmic vision that the poem depicts. Both the poem and the fable begin with a quest; either explicitly or by implication, they deal, as

\textsuperscript{15}Eleanor H. Kellogg, “Bishop Brunton and the Fable of the Rats,” \textit{PMLA} 50 (1935) 63.

\textsuperscript{16}Kellogg 65.

\textsuperscript{17}Morton W. Bloomfield, \textit{Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-century Apocalypse} (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1961) 4.
Bloomfield suggests, "with the search not the finding."¹⁸

The Prologue in which the fable appears as a dream to Will sets the background for a world which is full of sin, yet with a dim aspiration to be free of it. The "faire felde ful of folke" (Prol. 18) is a depiction of the hierarchical society as it was perceived by medieval man. Here man is trapped in a continual struggle — both individually and socially — between the two forces of hell ("A depe dale binethe a dongeon þere-Inne") (Prol. 15) and heaven ("a toure on a toft trielich ymaked") (Prol. 14) with the suggestion of the Kingdom of God hovering above his head. Here most people are concerned only with the field itself and ignore both the dale and the tower. In fact, although a few individuals seem to be anxious about their proper end, the majority are evil. The Prologue, especially, singles out the friars and highlights their sins (Prol. 58 ff.). They "Preached þe peple for profit of hem-seluen" (Prol. 59) and interpret the gospel merely to justify their own wrong-doing. Moreover, "Many of þis maistres Freris mowe clothen hem at lykyng / For here money and merchandise marchen togidres" (Prol. 62-63). On top of all that they have totally ignored charity. The Prologue also predicts great calamities and mischief unless the church as a spiritual institution acts promptly to bring about serious reforms within its own walls.¹⁹ As Margaret Schlauch aptly puts it, the "denunciation of friars and pardoners, absentee priests and worldly bishops, did not mean

¹⁸Bloomfield 3.

¹⁹"For Langland’s initial commitment in the poem is not to poetry as a self-justifying art; on the contrary, his commitment is rather to the reformation of both social and ecclesiastical institutions, and his initial reliance is on genres of writing and speaking which ideally sustain these situations.” Simpson 14-15.
a frontal attack on the church from without, but rather a plea for reform from within."  

Following this scene, the picture of the ideal king and the fable of "Belling the Cat" is given: "banne come þere a kyng knyȝthod hym ladde" (Prol. 112). This king whom "Miȝt of þe comunes made hym to regne" (Prol. 113) is the rex justus who will usher in the reformed age. The king, as it is hoped, will not just rule, but will rule justly supported by both the nobility and the clergy. Reason will prevail over rashness and favouritism. Each class of society will perform its proper role to make the ideal state possible.

Although much speculation exists as to the interpretation of the fable, it is clear from the outset of the story and from its context that layers of voices are heard. At one end of the scale it is a tiny mouse who is resolved against provoking either the cat or the kitten. He is opposed to all discussion of the collar which, as he claims, he never contributed to buying (though if he had he wouldn't let it be known). He would rather put up with what the cat wants and let him do as he pleases.

"I sey for me, " quod þe mous "I se so mykel after,

Shal neuer þe cat ne þe kitoun bi my conseille be greued,

Ne carpyng of þis coler þat costed me neure.

And þouȝ it had coste me catel biknowen it I nolde,

But suffre as hym-self wolde to do as hym liketh,

Coupled & vnecoupled to cacche what thei mowe.

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His advice is simple and clear: stick to your own business and let the superiors do as they wish.

Another solemn voice, though not always transparent, is that of Piers himself. He is not only the teacher but the guide as well. He seeks and encourages; he learns and teaches; he preaches and practises. He sets an example for those who would follow him. Disobedience seems to be endemic throughout the *Visio*. To find Law and, in the long run, Love, it is vital to coerce obedience.\(^{21}\) Both the angel’s address to the king (Prol. 135), and the fable stress this topos of obedience. In this connection, Britton J. Harwood argues, “if the moral conscience and kynde wit succeeded in regulating human conduct, they would adjust human relations to provide for the general welfare, the ‘comune profit.’ But they do not.”\(^{22}\) Harwood then concludes that “In the allegorical fable of the rat parliament – a kind of dumb show presaging the *Visio*’s complex revelation that the moral conscience and kynde wit save no one – the rodents would plunder like the cat if they were not physically contained”\(^{23}\) (Prol. 197-200).

Then at the other end of the scale, as opposed to the mouse, comes the most immediate narrator, Will, most probably the author himself,\(^{24}\) who as an impartial


\(^{22}\)Harwood 145.

\(^{23}\)Harwood 145.

\(^{24}\)The dreamer Will stands on the one hand for all human beings, and on the other for the author. It is interesting to be reminded that in his role as poet, Langland is
observer recounts his dream to the reader making a cautious remark: “What þis meteles bemeneth ȝe men þat be merye, / Deuine ȝe, for I ne dar bi dere gode in heuene!” (Prol. 208-209). Will is sure that something is definitely wrong and certain individuals are responsible for the ills of society; he suggests that people can help correct the evil and stop the wrong-doers. The fact that he indirectly touches on the ills of society through the implications of a fable rather than by articulating them in itself is suggestive of yet another dilemma -- insecurity. Suppression in its diverse forms is a universal problem.25

In S.S. Hussey’s opinion, however, “there is a general lesson to be learned about the nature of democracy and authority.”26 Thus the rats’ acceptance of the cat as such foreshadows the compliance and coercion which Hunger leads Will to.27 As such Langland, the teacher, reveals the ills of his contemporary society in particular, and of

reproved by Imagination in Passus XII for writing poetry instead of performing religious duties. “He is not even allowed to plead the serious theme of his work an excuse -- there are enough books to teach such things. Will’s reply is in two parts. First he simply enjoys doing it and he has observed that even the saints have recommended recreation amongst more serious pursuits. Then he says that if he knew what it meant to do well he would gladly give up poetry for religious devotion. His poetry is synonymous with Will’s quest for understanding, and the passage expresses, with a candour unusual in medieval literature, the deep personal necessity of that search. But the disarming irony of the scene should also correct any notion we may have of Langland as a dourly humourless moralist.” Williams 141.

25Insecurity is one of the main reasons why in the East satirical works are so popular with those writers who are critical of their societies. They often find it much safer to write an animal fable, for instance, to expose a tyrant’s oppression than to overtly sympathise with the cause of the oppressed.


27Harwood 143.
the whole world in general. Under the guise of a dreamer, and yet in the double-distanced medium of figurative language, he finds it possible to criticise not only the Royalty as well as the Parliament, but also, and most certainly, the church and its fathers. Although he does not say it in so many words, it seems that by the rats he especially implies — amongst others — the friars who, if not held in check, will certainly cause great damage and harm to the whole society:

For may no renke þere rest haue for ratones by nyȝte;
þe while he caccheþ conynges he coueiteth nouȝt owre caroyne,
But fet hym al with venesoun defame we hym neuere.
For better is a litel losse þan a longe sorwe,
þe mase amonge vs alle þouȝ we mysse a schrewe,
For many mannus malt we mys wolde destruye,
And also ȝe route of ratones rende mennes clothes,
Nere þat cat of þat courte þat can ȝow ouerlepe. (Prol. 192-199)

Langland suggests that while it is easy to blame the outside world for the ills of society, the king, the court, all those who are one way or another in power, there is something seriously wrong within the church itself. The friars, and by extension all the church, must come to their senses and change their un-Christ-like ways of life.

The narrator of the fable detaches himself from his artifact in many ways, including separating himself physically from his audience. He has apparently nothing to share with the community; he is an alienated figure wandering in disguise (Prol. 2-4). He

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28Simpson 12.
does not even seem to be interested in any kind of entertainment at all. Emphasising the immediacy of didacticism, he considers most literary amusements a waste of time (V. 396-407). Neither is he interested in the participation of his readers in any genuine and argumentative dialogue in the course of the poem. The invitation of the audience to interpret the dream at the end of the fable, although an exception to this rule, is simply a case in which the audience is given a judgement completed rather than in progress.

It is difficult to establish any specific audience for the fable. In fact, anyone could be the most immediate reader of this fable, especially the clergy. Incidentally, Will, the narrator, is at the same time the seeker and learner himself. He finds many mentors such as Lady Holy Church in the course of the poem. He is always on the move. He is seeking Christian perfection primarily for himself though he also cares about others. He seems to be convinced that despite the fact that the world is full of sin, there must also be a way for man to be saved. He knows that if he loses his guide Piers, for whatever reason, especially for his despair, he, the dreamer himself "must undertake a pilgrimage and become active instead of passive, a seeker instead of an observer."29 Nonetheless, if the king is implicitly criticised for not ruling justly,30 the friars are explicitly reproved for

29In the very important discussion between the dreamer and Lady Holy Church in Passus I, after the description of the field of folk and the fable of the rats have been detailed in the Prologue, Will raises the question, 'How I may save my soule' (I. 84), and is given a brief answer with instructions to teach Holy Church's lesson to unlearned men (I. 134). It is true that this question and answer, and the following action of the poem, seem to provide the poem's rationale. In modern times, however, salvation tends to be thought of in individualistic terms. One of the major themes of the poem is that true salvation is not only personal but social." Bloomfield 4.

their inappropriate and improper activities. Whereas the mice and rats may be right in their complaint about the injustice they suffer, their proposal to bell the cat is doomed to fail because it is simply impractical. Similarly the wise are welcome to offer their constructive advice, but they must realise that any solution to human dilemmas which is not practical is worthless. The fable both criticises the ruling body of the society by implication and the futility of much of human short-sightedness. The audience is led to appreciate what John A. Alford refers to as “the truth of subjects and their obligation to obey.”

31 People of all walks of life can blame others for the ills of society, yet the first step to correct the wrong begins with the individual self. Moreover, it is true that neither the state nor the church is free from flaws, but it is the individual man who is to blame the most because he fails to appreciate that to do something collectively will make salvation possible.

The audience of the fable is definitely not limited to the clergy. The newly prosperous middle class laity too must have been an imagined potential audience. Williams suggests that “there is even evidence that some of his ideas, perhaps too some of his actual lines, came to the ears of a virtually illiterate lower class audience who found in them echoes of their own unrest and dissatisfaction. But Langland, though he deals critically with the contemporary scene, including the lot of the poor, is no revolutionary. Yet his traditionalism is, and must have seemed then, challengingly idealistic. Politics are not his real concern and his ideas and art would mean little to a

wholly unlearned man." Comparing Langland to Chaucer, J.A. Burrow is confident that: "Langland's was the modern situation – more modern than Chaucer's. His poem was destined for an audience as variegated as our Reading Public; and this, at the least, freed him from some of the exact pressures exerted on an author by a close familiarity with his readers & their tastes."33

The fable of "Belling the Cat," regardless of the intention of its author, in itself is an amusing piece of work. It both teaches and entertains; it teaches in an entertaining way and entertains in a teaching manner. Doubtless it is a much more suggestive fable than any Aesopian one. It is both similar to the mainstream fables and different from them. It does not have a clearly tagged moral at its end; it comes much closer to allegory than animal fable; it is not placed in a collection of fables, neither is it embedded in a sermon; in short it is a miniature drama, which stages an action, rather than a narrative or a pointed dialogue. However, it follows the generic rules of fable in that anthropomorphized animals speak and act like humans. It makes a didactic point and it is concise.

The fact that the fable of belling the cat is the only (animal) fable in PP makes it all the more appealing. It raises several questions and expectations; it invites different readings as well as allowing analytical and comparative interpretations. It also challenges allegorization. Pedagogically, there is no clue either to any direct threat or reward in this fable. Yet there is plenty of challenge in it. The fable transcends the animals to the state

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32Williams 135.

of men, and men are demoted to the level of rodents. Hence there is an apocalyptic\textsuperscript{34} cast to it. Although it is not clearly stated, man is charged on several counts by implication. Human beings are all fallible if not sinful; their king is not just; their spiritual leaders are mindless, selfish, and above all impractical. While the superiors fail to rule justly, their subjects can only make fools of themselves by interfering with what is far beyond their courage if not their right. The fable thus exposes man’s conditions of life and his failure in assessing the situation and acting collectively to bring about necessary changes. Again, although the speaker does not say it in so many words, the implication is there that if nothing is done to correct these ills soon, man has no choice but to expect the worst. Man must find a way out of his miseries, but more importantly, he must be prepared to act as well. Part of the moral that La Fontaine attaches to his version of this fable, “Conceil Tenu par Rats,” centres around this very obligation:

\begin{center}
\begin{verbatim}
Ne faut-il que deliberer,
La cour en conseillers foisonne;
Est-il besoin d'executeer,
L'on ne rencontre plus personne.
\end{verbatim}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{34}Bloomfield 73-74.

VI. LYDGATE & THE FABLE

John Lydgate was born in Lydgate, Suffolk about 1370. He spent most of his life as monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds. His literary career, as Lois A. Ebin believes, began around 1400. While at Oxford, between 1406 and 1408, Lydgate wrote his version of Aesop's fables. His much longer works, mostly secular, as well as his occasional religious works, appeared between 1412 and 1440 "when he not only was associated with the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds, but also was closely connected with the royal court and a number of important English families as an official poet and rhetorician who might be called upon to write for various occasions." Lydgate died about 1449.

As Lydgate's patrons varied greatly, so did the commissions and grants which he kept receiving until the end of his life. His works range from "translation to original creation, from religious didacticism to courtly love, from legends of saints to actual history, from monumental epics and romances to brief pieces designed to accompany the various courses at a coronation banquet, from philosophy to satire, from prayers to semi-dramatic pieces, and so on."


3 Ebin 2.

4 Hartung 6: 1809.

5 Hartung 6: 1809-10.
Whereas Lydgate wrote almost all sorts of moral and didactic poetry, such as instructional lyrics and homilies, proverbial refrains, and satirical poems, animal fables do not constitute a significant part of his literary career. Moreover, of the seven Aesopic fables that he produced, Fable VI. "The Sun's Marriage" is not an animal fable. Also of his three non-Aesopic fables, the third, "Fabula duorum mercatorum," is not an animal fable. Finally, he wrote other animal poems: "A Saying of the Nightingale," which is a dream vision concerning the nightingale's singing, not of the flesh, but of the injuries of the Lord on the Cross for man; "The Nightingale," in which the nightingale stands for Christ Himself and every Christian soul; "So as the Crabbe Goth Forward," which illustrates how duplicity counterfeits the notion of an ideal world and causes disturbance in both England and France; and "The Cock Hath Lowe Shoon," which is a lyric and emphasizes the wisdom of silence. However, none of these fall into the category of animal fable. Nonetheless, whether Lydgate writes animal fable or other corrective poem, the choice of didactic tales seems well suited to his general outlook and his idea that "It is the poet's role to inspire man to this order and to lead him to wisdom and truth." 7

The recurrent themes of Lydgate's fables are prudence and contentment which are repeated over and again with slight variation. At the outset of the Churl and the Bird, he argues that fables are pleasing fictions on the surface concealing a significant truth which the reader must try to discover for himself:

6Cf. Chaucer's NPT and ManT.

7Ebin 16.
Problemys, liknessis & figures
Which previd been fructuous of sentence,
And han auctoriteers groundid on scriptures
Bi resemblaunces of notable appearence,
With moralites concludyng in prudence. (1-5)

And later on, he gives the same formulation in slightly different terms:
Poets write wondirful liknessis,
And vndir covert kepte hem sif ful cloos;
Bestis thei take, & fowlis, to witnessis,
Of whoos feynyng fables first arroos. (29-32)

Again in his Isopes Fabules he contends that poets have in fact “In fables rude includyd
gret prudence / And moralytees full notable of sentence” (20-21). He goes on, arguing
that in the same way that precious stones may be found “vndir blak erpe” or white pearls
“in muscle shellys blake,” so can men find “gret wysdom” in fables (22-28).

Lydgate’s Fables are, in essence, loose adaptations rather than literal translations
of the sixth-century Romulus, a Latin prose translation of the original Phaedrus’ verse
tradition of the first century.9 Romulus was turned back into verse and greatly amplified
by an unknown Walter in the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century Walter’s version
was further expanded and became not only the most popular of all Aesopic collections,

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9Citations are from Henry Noble MacCracken, ed., The Minor Poems of John

9See also Ebin 106.
but also the basic source of inspiration and adaptation in the Middle Ages. However, whether Lydgate’s immediate source was a Latin version or the French rendering of Marie de France has never been conclusively established. What is unanimously agreed upon is that the first four, if not all of his seven Aesopic fables, belong to his days at Oxford around 1400.¹⁰

Lydgate’s fables are extremely straight-forward and overtly didactic. Frequently he expands the moral passage at the expense of the narrative material.¹¹ Moreover, Lydgate fails to allow his animal characters to develop; instead he makes them speak with the narrator’s voice. His plots, dialogues, and narrative commentaries, like his characters, are all exploited for didactic purposes. Lydgate’s verbosity and his obsession with pounding his commonplaces repeatedly and emphatically leave little challenge or even appreciation for the reader.¹² Derek Pearsall, one of Lydgate’s few admirers, assesses his fables in the following, not altogether unjustified, terms, “Lydgate encases life in a shell, blurs all its dangers and sharp edges: he has no sense of courage or pity, only sets of consoling platitudes and balanced contraries to which all experience may be referred and which cannot be disturbed. It is an equilibrium which could be majestic, and is, in some medieval poetry, and can make post-medieval poetry look fretful and sentimental, but in this case it is too easily won, too cheap, to be effective. There is

¹⁰Ebin 106.

¹¹Cf. Henryson’s more traditional appropriation.

¹²Compare Lydgate’s bookish and moralistic tackling of the fable to Chaucer’s realistic and ironic and Henryson’s humorous and often surprising approaches to it.
nothing wrong with the medieval tradition, but Lydgate represents it here in his most undistinguished manner. "13

*ISOPES FABULES*

"PROLOGUE" AND FABLE I.

"The Tale of the Cock, that founde a precyous stone, groundyd by Isopus, the phylosopher of Rome, that yche man shuld in gree suche as God sent."

The Prologue begins with the commonplace that wisdom is worth more than gold. But here, confusing Aesop, the Phrygian poet, with his Latin translator, Lydgate proclaims that animal fables are both pleasing and instructive:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Vnto purpos } & \text{ b } \text{ poete laureate} \\
\text{Callyd Isopus dyd hym occupy} \\
\text{Whylom in Rome to plese } & \text{ b } \text{ senate,} \\
\text{Fonde out fables, pat men myght hym apply} \\
\text{To sondry matyrs, yche man for hys party,} \\
\text{Aftyr } & \text{ b } \text{eyer lust, to conclude in substaunce,} \\
\text{Dyuerse moralytees set out to b } & \text{ eyr pleasunce. (8-14)}
\end{align*}
\]

The wisdom in fables, Lydgate maintains later on, is like precious stones "vndir blak erpe" (22) or a fabulous pearl within the oyster14 (26-27). Then the poet proposes that, even though he is not well-schooled and lacks the necessary rhetoric, he will translate Aesop into English. Having besought his readers to forgive him for his ignorance, and the


14 Cf. Henryson's nutshell and kernel.
expert to correct him where his work is flawed, he begins with the tale of "The Cock and the Jacinth," traditionally the opening of most of Aesopic collections.

FABLE I. "THE COCK AND THE JACINTH" ["COCK & JEWEL"]

"The Cock and the Jacinth" is 168 lines long and it takes the narrator 54 lines to get to the "iacynct stone" (110). He provides a lengthy description of the cock's appearance and his activities, much in line with the encyclopaedic tradition, such as keeping time at night (65), protecting his brood (70), awakening folks at dawn and championing against the "vyce of slouê"13 (92). No sooner does the narrator get to the jewel than he dedicates some 32 more lines to praising the cock's diligence in scraping for his food, "Vertu gynnep at occupacion, / Vyces all procede of idelnesse" (134-5).

Unlike Henryson's jasp which symbolizes wisdom, Lydgate's jacinth remains a piece of stone throughout; so does the cock remain literally an industrious bird. Even when for a brief moment he appears to play a different role, he can only betray himself at the expense of the whole animal kingdom:

They be no men, but folkis bestiall,

Voyde of reson oonly for lak of grace,

Whyche ete & drynke & labour nat at all. (127-29)

Although he resolves that lazy people are beasts because they are not diligent, his diligence does not enhance his status by any means. Hence the tale merely elaborates on the importance of the cock's "dylygent trauayle" (115) and the consequence of "idylnes

& froward negligence” (118). Having found the jewel, however, the cock addresses it in a long monologue which entails all kinds of commonplaces such as “a wyseman in wysdom hape delyte” (181), “The hert desyre to drynke of crystall welles” (190), “euery þyne foloweþ hys nature” (187), and “Yche man cheseþ lyke hys opinion” (200).

In the “Enuoy” the narrator simply repeats what he has already expounded in the narrative in so many words, that is, people should be diligent. Once more, a series of commonplaces forms its basis: “Who foloweþ vertu, vyces doþ eschew” (211) and “The vertuos man to auoyde all ydelnesse / With suffisaunce hold hymself content” (220-21). This topos of contentment is neither developed in the narrative nor further elaborated on in the envoy, hence it is far from a surprise motif. Like the wise cock who chooses to ignore the jewel and stick to his natural diet, the audience is encouraged to take what God has sent and be satisfied with it (216-17). As such Lydgate’s narrative falls short of being independent, loaded as it is with the core of the moral message and failing to challenge the reader to find his own way through. Thus Pearsall’s comment that the narrative “is engulfed: like the nutshell, it is disposable” is entirely accurate.  

The teaching voice in this fable, as well as in the subsequent Aesopic ones, is unambiguously that of the poet himself. Although at the outset of the collection he claims that he is about to translate his Aesop, both the narrative and the envoy, here as well as elsewhere, testify to Lydgate’s obsession with verbosity, repetition and, of course, pious manners. It is Lydgate who tells us to “Thanke þe Lorde, in vertu kepe hem stable, / Whyche ys conclusioun of þys lytyll fable” (223-24). While he will do his best to

16Pearsall 196.
produce an agreeable translation of his Aesop for the readers, momentarily Lydgate seems to have a specific intended audience as well when he begs his readers to accept his provincial origin as an excuse for his rhetorical imperfection (31-35). This audience, while it demands entertainment, itself is literate, well-informed, graceful, and capable of compassion:

To do pleasaunce to þeym, þat shall hit rede,

Requirynge hem of verrey gentylnes

Of her grace to rewe on my rudenes. (38-40)

Although such a sense of modesty is not all that uncommon with medieval authors, certain clues cannot be dismissed here. He is more concerned with style than substance (36 ff.); he is clear about his reading audience as different from a listening one (38); his audience is likely familiar with Aesop and the Aesopic tradition and, he hopes, will be pleased with his translation.

The possibility that Lydgate may think of his fables as being imbedded in a sermon to which an attentive congregation may listen cannot be ruled out. Moreover, a group of young students might have comprised Lydgate’s audience. Walter F. Schirmer reminds us of Bale’s and other biographers’ claim that, on his return from his studies at Oxford and journeys abroad, Lydgate founded in the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds or in London a school of rhetoric “where he taught sons of noblemen.”17 Finally, it is also possible that he is writing his fables for a particular commission, now unknown to us.

After all, Lydgate, whose writings were mostly written on commission and for specific patrons, was indeed the first English author to live by his pen.\textsuperscript{18} Whether Lydgate wrote for a commission or for his students, the newly-emerged upper middle-class of the early fifteenth-century read voraciously all sorts of literature including fables. Lydgate could not have dismissed the ever-increasing number of those who could afford obtaining his manuscripts and reading his tales.

Pedagogically, if anything is indisputable about Lydgate in general and his fables in particular, it is his wordiness. He repeats the same theme over and over. While the techniques of reward and reprimand are vaguely present in the fable, Lydgate fails to use them in a forceful or cogent way. So instead of being appealing, he is pushy; instead of reinforcing, he is repetitive; instead of challenging, he is pedantic. As a result, he is neither particularly entertaining nor instructive. "Cock and Jewel" generally suffers from overt description and excessive didacticism. The brevity of narrative in contrast to the ceaseless moralisation does not allow any character development. Hence the cock does not merely have anything specific about it to offer; neither does the narrator try to encourage any symbolic reading, either in the narrative or the envoy. Comparing Lydgate to Henryson, Pearsall sums up all these defects in one quick sentence: "it is not that Lydgate is elaborate and Henryson does not disdain long words; but Henryson is forceful, compact and varied, where Lydgate is loose, heavy-handed and monotonous."\textsuperscript{19}

FABLE II. ["WOLF & LAMB"]

\textsuperscript{18}Schirmer 22.

\textsuperscript{19}Pearsall 195.
"The Tale of the Wolfe and the Lambe groundyd opon Isopus, the phylosophor of Rome, ayenst raueyn & tiranny."

This fable depicts the world as a place where extremes cannot be reconciled. The first three stanzas give a series of examples of contraries in the world such as vice and virtue (227), fraud and truth (231), "rancour & humble pacience" (232), "a sely sheep" and "a strong lyon" (234-35), big pikes and small fishes (239-40), the rich and the poor (241-42), and the lamb and the wolf (243). The sequence runs for 49 lines (7 stanzas) of a total of 133 (19 stanzas) which is then interrupted by a narrator who further illustrates the initial truth:

Who hat is forward of condicion
And disposyd to malyce and outrage,
Can sone seke and fynde occasion
Pyke a quarell for to do damage. (253-56)

The narrative proper is about an angry wolf who approaches an unsuspecting lamb drinking from a stream (251-52). He rebukes the lamb for muddying the water as his father had done before (260-70). The lamb defends himself arguing that the wolf's accusation is out of place because he is standing downstream. He even retorts that

'The clere ys youres, but I must endure,
Tyll ye haue dronke and þen at erst begun,
Take, as hit falleþ, þe þyk with the þyn.' (278-80)

Nonetheless, he regrets that he has been trying to talk sense to the wolf because he will have his desire of him anyway (283). The wolf, who is not at all amused by the lamb's
polemics, cuts the discussion short and devours the lamb. However, before he does so, the wolf makes two remarks. First,

‘I see hit well in myn inward syght,
How þou dost ayene me malygne
To vex me wrongfully, yef þou haddyst myght. (289-91)

Second, “‘The lawe shall part vs, whyche of vs haþ ryght’” (292), the former implying that might leads to oppression, and the latter, appealing to law while acting unlawfully. The narrator’s ironic observation that “But he no lenger on þe lawe aboode” (293) highlights oppression as the central topos of the poem. The rest of the fable follows the encyclopaedic tradition, emphasising the greater value of the lamb to man since he gives us cheese and milk (309) as well as the golden fleece of the ram (316). Yet he was killed because “he seyd soþ” (295) but the wolf “goþ fre” (324). The narrator generalises the case and criticises the law which consents to “hang a trew man & saue an errant theef” (329). The poor are then likened to the lamb. They may appeal to law, but all in vain, “Voyde purse causeþ he may nat spede. / The lamb put bak, þe wolf þe daunce dop lede (333-34).

In the “Conclusion,” first the natural diets of the two beasts are compared and then the herbivorous lamb is praised for his flesh, served at the king’s table, “The lambe vp seruyd at þe kingis table” (343) and the carnivorous wolf despised even by the hounds which would not feed on his carcass. The narrator further emphasises the wolf’s greed and cruelty (339) in contrast with the lamb’s contentment (340). He then concludes that men deserve what they receive (344); while the tyrants will go to hell (345), the poor but
content will go to heaven (246-50). Finally he gives us his reading of Aesop:

The wolfis felenne, be lambes properte;  
The lamb commendyd for naturall mekenes  
the wolfe rebuked for rauenous felenes. (355-57)

While the narrative illustrates a case of oppression and the futility of resorting to sense and law, the moralisation advocates submission and indulgence in the prospect of grace after death. Moreover, although the narrator presents a case in which the wolf clearly transgresses and violates justice, and the moral hints at the ineffectiveness of man’s law, he falls short of condemning the legal system or highlighting the suffering of the innocent. Nonetheless, the stated moral of the fable is not the only lesson it teaches. Both the narrative and the commentary teach the audience, though by implication, to avoid cruelty, greed, and falseness. They also seem to console the poor and the weak with the hope of some spiritual reward, even if there is no material justice in this world.20

The teaching voice of this fable, like that of the first one, is that of Lydgate, feigning to translate Aesop while interjecting his religious convictions. Neither is there any clear change in the tone and the style of the fable to indicate a different audience from the first one. Pedagogically, while the promise of the reward in heaven for meekness may be palatable, the preference of being served at the king’s table to being discarded as a favour is far from encouraging.

FABLE III. [“FROG & MOUSE”]

20Cf. Henryson’s more practical and down to earth approach to the same fable drawing on legal -- both ecclesiastic and civil -- systems.
“The Tale of the Frogge and þe Mowse foundyd by Isopus, þe philosophr, groundyd ayenst deceyte.”

This fable, 23 stanzas (161 lines) long, serves as an example of deceit. The narrative proper, however, is prefixed by 4 stanzas which elaborate not only this central motif, but also provide a number of proverbial phrases, such as whoever tries to deceive another will be repaid accordingly (360-61), “Clope falsly wouen may kepe no fresshe colours” (368), deceit always comes out (370-71), and some men act with “trouþe” (377) while others are “fraudulent” (378). Before the narrative begins, the narrator condemns the deceivers as man’s worst enemies:

Who þat menep treson or falsnes
With a pretence outward or frenshyp or frendlyhede,
face counterfete of feynyd fals gladnes,
Of all enemyes suche oon ys most to drede. (379-82)

The fable is about a frog who is invited to dine at a mouse’s mill.\footnote{Here Lydgate amalgamates the two distinct fables of “The Two Mice” and “The Frog and the Mouse” in one single tale.} The mouse, though poor, is happy: “‘I lyue here esly out of noyse & stryfe’” (402). He is content with what he has: “‘Suffisaunce ys my possessione’” (404). He thinks that he is well-off and does not worry about “ryches” (408). Moreover, he considers his poverty a strong safeguard against any thief (413). Then he praises poverty and the importance of contentment. Speaking more like a human preacher rather than an animal character,

‘Blessyd be pouerte, þat causeþ assurance,
Namely when gladnes dop hys brydyll lede.

What God sendep, hit ys to þeyr plesance,

Thankeþ þe lorde, grogeþ for no nede.

As he fyndep, þeron he dop hym fede.’ (414-18)

The mouse finds himself as satisfied with his household as Croesus with “all hys golde” (420). Unlike the sleepless Midas, bereft of his liberty, the mouse can sleep “fearelese” (423). Unlike Diogenes with “hys towne as lyght” (437) or Alexander with “all hys apparayll” (438), he enjoys his mill as much as king Priam enjoyed “hys towne of Troy” (441).

At this point the mouse tries to persuade the frog to spend the night at his mill (449) but the frog, stuffed with all the victuals, feels like a drink (459). Thus they both go to the nearby river. Here the narrator notes that “The frosshe delyteþ to abyde in mory lakys, / The mowse to fede hym on chese & tendyr cakys” (475-76). He also hints at the mouse’s concerns about associating with the frog (477). However, now the frog tempts the mouse to join him to cross the river so as to “abyde & see þere my householde” (483). The mouse’s excuse that he cannot swim is readily dismissed because the frog would carry him, tied by a thread (486 ff.). The image of the mouse with a string around his neck pulled across the river by the frog is really appalling. However, before the false frog finds a chance to carry out his ominous plot to drown the mouse (492), a kite swoops down and catches both “vp hangyng by þe þrede” (497). Since the mouse is “sklender & lene” unlike the frog who is “fatte,” the kite begins to eat the frog first (491 ff.). No sooner is the thread broken than the mouse escapes with his life.
Although in the narrative the same moral lesson is repeated in different terms, there is more than one conclusion to the story. Toward the end of the narrative, we are told of the inevitable consequences of being unkind: “For conclusion clerk[25] put in mynde, / Lawe & nature pleynyn on folke vnkynde” (503-504). The “Conclusio,” the final three stanzas, warns us against ingratitude:

Of vyces all, shortly to conclude,

Ther ys no vyce in comparyson

To þe vyce of ingratitude. (505-507)

Ingratitude, we are told, is worse than pestilence or poison for which one may find preservative; “But agayn fraude may be no defence” (511). The narrator then comments that the mouse is simple while the frog is deceitful. Unlike the cock of “Cock and Jewel,” the frog’s “frendly dylygence” (516) is fake and justly does not prevent his death. Finally, according to the narrator’s reading of Aesop, the moral of this fable is “Who useþ fraude, with fraude shalbe quyt” (525).

The narrative emphasizes the importance of being content, represented by the mouse before he is tempted to leave his familiar mill for the promised land beyond the river. The mouse here is depicted as diligent like the cock of “Cock and Jewel.” His short-lived friendship with the frog also suggests that people should know well with whom they socialize and intend to make friends. Again, unlike the lamb of “Wolf and Lamb” who is killed by the wolf, the mouse narrowly escapes death. If Fortune turns a blind eye to the lamb, she saves the mouse to demonstrate another instance of her indifference and her impartial turn of the Wheel. Although in the “Conclusion” we are
told that ingratitude is the worst of all vices, neither does the narrative provide enough material for that reading nor does the "Conclusion" elaborate on it any further. The frog is an ungrateful friend who tries to drown his generous host for no good reason. Hence his deceit is the focal core of both the narrative and the "conclusion." The kite, though a perpetrator of crime, does not receive any elaboration. After all, it too, like the cock of "Cock and Jewel" has to be diligent and look for its food anywhere it can. However, unlike the cock, the lamb, the wolf, the frog, and the mouse, it is not an anthropomorph.

Although the central lesson of the fable for the mouse, and by extension for the reader, is to watch out for the kind of friends that he picks up, there are a number of other related lessons for the audience to attend to. One has to be wary of deceitful friends let alone enemies. One must also be grateful to friends, especially those who have proved hospitable. Finally one should never forget that fraud will be quit with fraud.

As in the previous two fables, the teaching voice is that of the author who tries to make his point via the dialectical discourse between the two animals as well as by their actions. Whereas the audience of the fable does not differ from that of the previous two fables, the narrator’s strategy in conveying his message is obviously different. The frog is punished for his deceit and the mouse is given another chance to live, possibly not to distract the audience’s attention from the consequences of falsehood. The mouse’s ordeal and his moment of terror, however, can be seen as reprimands for his lack of discretion. Nonetheless, despite all its merits, the fable does not evoke much interest because its

\[22\text{Cf. Gower’s handling of the same motif in “Adrian and Bardus” in a much more sophisticated manner.}\]
animal characters fail to be either true beasts or convincing human types.

FABLE IV. ["HOUND & SHEEP"]

"The Tale of þe Hownde and þe Shepe grounded ayen períure & false wytnes founde by Isopus."

This fable, the longest of all Lydgate's Aesopic fables, runs for 224 lines (32 stanzas). The first two stanzas of this fable condemn the false jurors and false witnesses whose "cancryd lyppes" and "tung[e] double" (533) hinder "Ryghtfull causes to trauerse & trouble" (535). The narrative concerns a hound accusing a sheep in court of failing to repay him what is his alleged due. We are already told that the hound is "gret" (542) and his suit is out of "hatefull violence" (543). The sheep, on the other hand, is not only "simple of innocence" (544) but also "voyde of all refuge" (545). The "ravenous" hound (549) falsely swears that by giving a "large lofe" (552) of bread to the sheep he has saved him from "mortal hunger" (559). The "astonyed" (565) sheep who can find "no diffence" (567) can only humbly deny the allegation. The unspecified judge who feigns impartiality (578) asks the hound for his witnesses (585). The hound accordingly produces the "faithful wolf" (592) and the gentle "kyte" (593). The hound further testifies that both the wolf and the kite abhor lies and falsehood (596-98). The witnesses in turn swear by the book (609) so that the sheep pleads guilty. The narrator, who simply cannot help expressing his resentment, curses both the wolf and the kite: "Mote they be hanged on high by the halse, / Be-cawse they swore wetyngly vntriwe!" (610-11). The sheep pleads guilty and has to sell his fleece to pay the hound. Without his "flees of gold" (624) he cannot survive the cold of winter. His carcass is eaten up by the wolf and the kite. The
narrator notes that the “Poore folk be devoured alwey by the riche” (637). The narrator then introduces a number of proverbs and moral generalisations such as “gret fissh devoured bien the smale” (639) and false witnesses are worse than barbed arrows (659-61). Then he draws on the Book of Proverbs (659-60) and Holcot “vpon sapience” (681) that he who swears falsely “to God doth opinly treason” (700) and he who swears falsely on the Bible “to the fiend for euer he doth hym take” (707). Although one may defend oneself against arrows (667) or even a sword (668), there is no defence against a “false iurrowr” (669). The narrator suggests that they should be gelded to prevent progeny:

But ageyn a iurrowr there were no bettir obstacle

Than to geld hym yong, hys venym to declyne,

That no false braunche myght spryng of his lyne. (675-77)

In the following ten stanzas (7 lines each) the narrator expresses his indignation towards the false witnesses. The final three stanzas, then, pick up the same curses, only this time they are ascribed to Aesop. Having bullied, condemned and even damned the false jurors for almost 100 lines, at the close of the fable, oddly enough, the narrator seems to be reminded of Christian mercy and salvation as an after-thought. Hence he points out that the false jurors may in fact be saved if they “have repentaunce, / or make restitucioun, or do som penaunce” (748-49). This is really pathetic and irresponsible.

Although the narrator explicitly condemns false witnesses and warns against transgressing honesty, he fails to make better use of a number of teaching topoi that the fable clearly presents. The faithful wolf and the gentle kite of the fable must remind the reader of the ravenous wolf of “Wolf and Lamb” and the indifferent kite of “Frog and
Mouse.” The death of the sheep through the unjust verdict of the court here echoes his same end outside the court in “Wolf and Lamb.” The innocence of the sheep in both cases is more than suggestive, while the wolf is either directly or indirectly the cause of his death. The reader must now recall that the wolf’s pretentious and ironic appeal to law in “Wolf and Lamb” was not altogether alien to the corruption of the judiciary system in this fable. Thus there is enough evidence here to read some criticism of the legal systems, civil and ecclesiastical, as the original audience must have been familiar with. It is unfortunate however that the narrator fails to elucidate any of these critical motifs. The final unprepared-for resolve that there is yet hope for the corrupt to be saved is also counter-productive, since it denies justice for the innocent victims in this world. In “Wolf and Lamb” the fact that a lamb could be served at a king’s table was seen as more than an honour, in fact a reward. The wolf there was not even worthy to be fed to the dogs. In contrast here, although the hound is satisfied with the sheep’s wool and does not seem to be interested in his carcass, the other two culprits feast upon it. Hence the sheep does not enjoy the honour of being served at a royal table; neither is he spared from being devoured by the wolf after his death by the same enemies that he had when he was alive.

Furthermore, false human jurors are represented by the wolf and the kite who, having done harm not only to the sheep both before and after his death, but also to the credibility of the legal system, are given the promise of salvation. This is really outrageous. While in principle one may well agree with the narrator that there must be a way for man to purge himself of his sins to deserve God’s grace, such a final resolution in the context of an unjust court and at the expense of the innocent simply does not work.
In fact, as Pearsall observes, due to Lydgate's ignorance of both law and human reality, his poem never comes close to a real law-suit in the way Henryson's does. Finally, unlike what we have in the *Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep* (to be discussed later), Lydgate's references to the sheep's golden fleece here and in "Wolf and Lamb" do not necessarily suggest that he has an eye on the wool trade in England of the time.

The teaching voice here is the same as the previous fables. Although several times the narrator ascribes his resentment of the false jurors to Aesop, he is definitely thinking in a contemporary Christian context. Neither the narrative nor the commentary, however, provides enough clues to read any satire or even specific criticism of the time and place of the poem. Pedagogically the fable is at odds with any fair legal system. It is one thing for the oppressor to abuse his might as in "Wolf and Lamb," it is something totally different to have the support of the court to do so. To evade such a pessimistic conclusion, the narrator repeatedly resorts to cursing the false jurors, as if the more he says it is wrong, the more people will believe him.

**FABLE V. ["WOLF & CRANE"]**

"How the Wollffe diseyvyd the crane, Isopus, translatyd by Iohn Lydgat."

This and the following two Aesopic fables are not only shorter than the previous ones, but also maturer in design, language, and vision. It is suggested that Lydgate must have worked these out much later in his days at Oxford. However, this fable further emphasises the theme of falseness demonstrated by the three culprits of the previous

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23Pearsall 197.

24See, amongst others, Schirmer 23; Pearsall 192.
fable. It is a fable about the vice of “wnkynd[enesse]” (751); it is, as the narrator claims he has found in Aesop, “of engratytude, ioynyd to falsenesse” (753). Here the wolf, who is choking on a bone, promises the crane a great reward to remove it from his throat. Yet no sooner is he relieved from his deadly trouble than he proves “false” and “wnkynd” (756). He even argues that the crane must be lucky for not having been eaten while picking the bone, “‘It suffisith, ... / ‘Out of his mouthe that he scapid with his lyffe’” (776-77). He also argues that the crane must be particularly thankful to him:

For whiche thow art boundyn in speciall
To thanke me thow scapidest withe thy lyff,
Owt of my iawes, sharper than file or knyff. (794-96)

The narrative likens the oppressive tyrants to the wolf and the poor to the crane:

The tyraunt hathe possescions and riches,
The poure travelythe for meate, drynke, & fode,
The ryche dothe the laborar oppresse,
For his labour denyethe hym hys lyflode. (806-809)

In the “Moralization” the narrator further elaborates on the dichotomy of the unjust tyrants and the unfortunate poor. The poor must obey their betters and risk their lives to save their superiors; but they should never expect any gratitude even if promises are made because “Fayr behestes makythe foles ofte-tyme blythe”25 (826). Since the rich man “hathe all,” but “no-thynge he departythe” (833) and since “with tyrauntes merci ys wncothe” (840), it is best for the poor to avoid the tyrants at all costs:

25Compare with Gower’s “Adrian & Bardus”.
To pley withe tyraunts I holde it is no iape,
To oppres the poure they have no concience,
Fly frome daunger, yf ye may askepe. (841-43)

Both the narrative and the moral focus on the theme of the ingratitude of the tyrants and the rich. In an aristocratic society, “Prayer of princes is a commaundement,... (813-14). Here tyrants will have their will (817) as the wolf did while the poor, like the crane, go rewardless (819). Although the fable does criticize ingratitude, it preaches only submission as if that is the only lot of the poor. The wolf categorically represents the villain, here as elsewhere, while the crane shares his suffering with the lamb of “Wolf and Lamb” and the sheep of “Hound and Sheep.” Although the narrator demonstrates how despicable the tyrants are for their lack of conscience, their mercilessness, and their distrustfulness, he does not focus on these topoi. The audience is only inadvertently invited to have a glimpse at such ills in the world at large. Should the reader be alert enough to read between the lines for himself, he may learn his lesson not to be ungrateful like the wolf. However, what the fable states as its moral lesson is to escape from the danger of your betters if you can. Learn from the crane’s story not to be fooled by golden promises.

The teaching voice of this tale is that of the narrator endorsing Aesop’s point of view throughout. The intended audience is everybody in general and nobody in particular. In the context of the story itself, however, the real audience is the crane who learns more than one lesson. By experience he learns that he was a fool to believe the wolf in the first place. He also realises that he had really underestimated the danger of
thrusting his head and neck into the wolf's mouth between his sharp teeth for only an uncertain reward. Since the crane represents the weak and the wolf those in power, it is safe to speculate that the intended audience of the fable is twofold -- both the weak and the strong. There is no single lesson for both, however; each category is presented with a piece of advice suitable to its status. On the one hand, the weak are told to exercise caution when dealing with their betters. On the other hand, the strong are given an example of the unkindness which they should always avoid, although this is never explicitly articulated. Despite himself, the wolf does the crane two distinct favours. First he elucidates the danger of playing with the unkind folk as the moraliser does at the end of the fable; and second he actually allows the crane to pull out his head and neck safely from between his jaws. Unlike the wolf of the second fable who would not even let the lamb finish his sentence, here he actually makes his point to the crane. By analogy then, the poor are warned against more oppressive and less grateful conditions. Although the wolf does not keep his promise and the crane gets no reward for his labour, the very devices of reward and punishment are ever present throughout the fable. If you believe in grand rewards like the crane, you will regret it; you are a fool. Tyrants do not know mercy; neither do they have any conscience, hence if you ever trust them, you will soon find them great hazards like the wolf.

**FABLE VII.**26 "HOUND & CHEESE"

"Thys fable is of pe hound that bare the chese, grounddyd on Isopus agaynst covetousness, translatyd by Iohn Lydgat, made in Oxforde."

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26 Fable #6 is not an animal fable and hence it not discussed here.
This fable, which focuses on the topos of “covetyce” (933), is the shortest of all Lydgate’s fables. Its structure is very simple. The first two stanzas of the total four lay bare the narrative and the other two comprise the commentary. A great hound carrying a large cheese in his mouth is going over a bridge and sees his own reflexion in the water. Imagining that there is another cheese there, he opens his mouth and thus loses “both twayne” (945). The commentary likens covetous men to the hound and argues that covetousness “faylyth offt in fere” (948). This is followed by a number of proverbs illustrating the same point:

One man allone may not all purchace,
Nor in armys all the worlde enbrace,
A meane is best withe good governaunce. (949-51)

The readers are advised that it is best for them “withe lytill be content” (954). The last two lines of the fable emphasize that those who are not content with what they have, like the hound who was “not content withe one chese” (958), will neither get what they desire nor be able to maintain what they already possess.

Although Aesop is again held responsible for the fable and the poet merely assumes the role of the translator, the teaching voice remains Lydgate’s. The hound demonstrates his covetousness, and by analogy that of the insatiable man who is never happy with his status quo. The intended audience here is all-encompassing. Like the hound who loses his cheese, we all may lose everything when aspiring for more, especially when our expectations are unreasonable.

To sum up, although Aesop’s name appears in each fable, he does not interact
with the narrative or enhance the moral teaching. He is simply there as an assumed authority. The fables follow a general pattern: they all have a full title, they generally begin with an introductory prelude and end with a stated single moral. However, they differ greatly in size and style. “Hound and Sheep,” the longest, is 224 lines whereas “Hound and Cheese,” the shortest, is only 28 lines. The moral part is sometimes separated from the narrative and is given a sub-title: “Lenvoy” in “Cock and Jewel” (at 204), “Conclusio” in “Wolf and Lamb” (at 337) and in “Frog and Mouse” (at 305), “Moralization” in “Wolf and Crane” (at 813), and nothing in either “Hound and Sheep” or “Hound and Cheese.” In the first 4 fables too much space is dedicated to the moral commonplaces and too little to the narrative proper. This ratio is greatly harmonized in the final two fables where almost the same number of lines are given to the narrative and the moral. Although the sly fox of Henryson is absent in Lydgate, it is by no means uncharacteristic of the fable collections in general. In fact, it is Henryson who introduces the fox into “The Sheep and the Dog” — commonly with no fox in it -- and manipulates the hound and cheese fable into his Fox and Wolf and Husbandman.

Lydgate’s fables may be good versification, but they fall short of providing either any real entertainment or serious and challenging teaching. They especially suffer from tedious repetition, commonplaces, and lack of a clear vision. Moreover, Lydgate’s animals are neither human-like nor real animals with beastly traits. Furthermore, these fables do not enlighten the reader as to any real or specific time or place; hence they cannot be read as social criticism. While at times they do focus on one vice or another in individuals or even groups, they are too general to be informative or to lead to any clearly
intended audience. In general, in all of them the author plays the role of the teacher teaching an unspecifiable audience. His methods of teaching are repetition, examples, and a reward-punishment strategy, but unfortunately none of these is ever convincing.

**THE CHURL AND THE BIRD.**

"Incipit de Aue & Rustico."

Although in the *Churl and the Bird* (*Churl*) Lydgate is primarily concerned with the moral impact of the tale, his artistic achievement in creating a more engaging tale than all his other fables is undeniable. Like the rest of his fables, the *Churl too* is a translation or rather an adaptation from a French version of the *Disciplina Clericalis*.\(^\text{27}\) It is a tale about a bird who is trapped by a churl, but will not sing for him in captivity. Yet in exchange for her liberty, she gives the churl three wisdoms worth more than gold: never be credulous, never desire the impossible, and never grieve over your losses. Then she begins taunting the churl for foolishly letting her go because she has a precious jewel of magical properties within her body. The gullible churl believes her and laments over his loss only to have the bird reprimand him for ignoring her wisdom.

The fable proper is prefixed by five stanzas drawing not only on the Biblical proverb of the trees trying to choose a king for themselves (6 ft.), but also on discussions of the genre of fable and its usefulness. The central teaching of the fable, which is repeated over and again, is that there is nothing in the world comparable to freedom. This is what the bird says and strives for, despite the churl who ceaselessly attempts to capture

her at any cost. The narrator also focuses on this in his commentary. When she loses her liberty, the bird vows that she will never sing again: "'Adieu my song & al my notis cleer
/ Now that I haue lost my liberte’" (87-88). She argues that although a lion and an eagle may well be kings of the wood and the sky, once in chains and cage, they are nothing (106-10). She warns the churl that unless she is free she will never sing again:

To syng in prisoun thou shalt me neuer constreyn,

Tyl I have fredam in woodis vp and don,

To flee at large on bouhis rouh & pleyn. (135-37)

Although the churl threatens that he will kill the bird if she does not sing for him, she is resolved not to sing at all unless she is set free. So the narrator is resolved toward the end of his commentary that freedom is the best thing one should ever wish for: "Better is freedam with litel in gladnesse, / Than to be thral in al wordly richesse" (377-78).

Nonetheless, there are certainly more didactic elements to the fable than the importance of freedom. Not only do the three wisdoms occupy the better part of the fable, but they are also central both to the bird’s argument about freedom and to the narrator’s comments on it. If freedom is the best thing in the world, one should not forget that it cannot be gained except in exchange for a large ransom -- her “grete wisdames” (159).

Although these three wisdoms are primarily meant to bring freedom to the bird, they also potentially provide the churl with the necessary means to free himself from pride, greed, ignorance, and domination.

The fable, strikingly, provides a balance between the narrative proper and the didactic elements. Both the churl and the bird are well-developed characters. The ironic
contrast between a smart bird and a dull-witted churl serves best to demonstrate the importance not only of freedom but also of the three wisdoms. Both of them make mistakes; however, whereas the bird learns from experience not to be caught again, the churl proves to be a slow learner. When the bird is advocating freedom, the churl is boorishly thinking of killing and eating her. Unlike the clever bird, the stupid churl, who agrees with the bird that there is little meat on her bones, fails to realise the impossibility of the existence of an ounce of gold within her body. The gold imagery in this fable provides another sharp contrast between the bird and the churl. Whereas the bird would not sing in captivity even if her cage were made of gold (92), the churl is obsessed with material wealth -- first with the golden colour of her feathers and later with the imaginary gold within her body. The bird also proves to be a stronger character than the churl when she manages to take her revenge on the churl by reducing him to tears for the loss of an imaginary stone which could supposedly bring him kingly riches and comfort (288 ff.). Being talkative, especially when she is at large, the bird floods the churl with all kinds of commonplaces such as “like to like” (348), “each to his trade” (354), or “all birds are alike to a churl” (358 ff.). She further humiliates the churl when she calls him names: he is mad because he has forgotten the wisdoms (335-36); he is really a “dulle cherle” (299) because he cannot distinguish reality from appearance,

"All is nat gold that shewith goldish hewe,
Nor stoonys all bi natur, as I fynde,
Be nat saphires that shewe colour ynde." (306-308)

Moreover, the bird proclaims it madness for a “for-dullid asse” to play a harp (340),
which is only comparable to "a fool [singing for a] a masse" (341) but worst of all it is "To teche a cherl termys of gentilnesse." (343). However, the final blow to the churl comes when the bird concludes that she is wasting her time trying to talk sense into him: ""I lese my tyme any moor to tarye, / [To telle a bovir of lapidarye]"" (265-66). She observes that the churl’s ears are deaf to her wisdoms, ""Like an asse that listeth on a harpe"" (275). She would rather ""syngyn on thornes sharpes, / Than in cage, with a cherl to karpe"" (277-78). Moreover, it is ironic that not even for a brief moment does he miss the bird as a beautiful, singing, and wise companion. He desires the stone no matter at what cost. The churl is demoted from a man, first to a fool, then to a boy, and at last to an ass — the dullest animal. The bird, in contrast, is elevated from a singing bird to a moralising philosopher and an advocate of freedom. Her status is further enhanced to the level of an experienced teacher with an important point who is confronting a very slow learner. It is this last notion which brings the bird, and by extension Lydgate’s fable writing, further in line with Aesopic tradition and with the importance of fables as teaching devices.

Unlike most of Lydgate’s fables, here the moral part is very brief and to the point. First in "Verba auctoris," the readers, “Ye folk that shal this fable seen & rede” (365), are warned against covetousness as illustrated in the churl, because it brings nothing but sorrows and unhappiness:

Coveitith no-thyng that may nat bee,

And remembrith, wheer that euer ye gon,

A cherlis cherl is alwey woo-begon. (369-71)
Second the "Envoy" focuses on freedom and resolves that freedom is the best thing one should ever wish for and "Better is freedam with litel in gladnesse, / Than to be thral in al wordly richesse" (377-78). The narrator then provides two further proverbs concerning the great sorrows and mischiefs of bondage: "A childis brid, and a knaves wyff / Have oft[e] sithe gret sorwe & myschawnce" (374-75). Finally, the poet asks his "litel quaiier" to recommend him to his "maistir" with humble affection (379-80). Some critics have taken this as a dedication to Chaucer, whose influence on him in general and this fable in particular is undeniable.  

The teaching voice in this fable is a little more sophisticated than in the rest of Lydgate's fables. In the narrative, or rather the debate between the churl and the bird, it is clearly the bird who teaches and the churl who is to learn but fails to do so. The bird moralises on hidden perils, "'Whoo dredith no perel, in perel he shal falle'" (183). She advocates freedom, and this is the major lesson which she reinforces in many words and elaborates on quite extensively. She also teaches the churl the three wisoms. Again in her capacity as teacher, the bird tests, scolds, and even flunks the churl. She begins as an unfortunate captive and ends up as an Aesop incarnate with a wealth of teaching materials in stock. However, the bird's teaching session is encompassed between an introductory elucidation and a concluding elaboration in both of which it is the poet who assumes the role of the teacher.

Although at the outset Lydgate disclaims his authorship of the fable and presents the poem as a straight translation:

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28Hartung 6: 1822; Pearsall 200; Schirmer 37; Ebin 110.
And heere I cast unto my purpoos
Out of Frenssh a tale to translate
Which in a paphlet I rade and sauh but late (33-35)

the ultimate teaching voice of the fable is that of Lydgate alone. In fact he is responsible for a number of changes that he has introduced to the original poem as well as producing the first English version of it.²⁹ Besides, before he gives us his story of the churl and the bird to argue how valuable freedom is, he discusses the importance of the fable as a traditional teaching device. He also points out some Biblical proverbs as well as commenting on the status of the classic fabulists. His fable proper with all its teaching materials serves as his major topos: freedom is better than anything else. Again in the commentary it is Lydgate who teaches his readers not only to appreciate the value of freedom, but also avoid churlish stupidity.

As for the audience of this fable, Lydgate does not seem to be really concerned with any particular intended audience though it is a multiple one. Whereas the dedication is clearly to a single peer, and the bird definitely addresses a foolish churl, it is not easy to establish any specific audience for the fable as a whole. After all both the freedom motif and the three wisdoms can be beneficial for the rich as well as the poor, the elderly and the youth, men and women, high and low. In fact “Ye folk that shal this fable seen & rede” (365) does indicate that he has no particular audience in mind.

Pedagogically, the fable presents several teaching strategies such as lecturing, exemplifying, taunting, and repeating. It is not only the author who lectures his readers in

²⁹Wolfgang 10-22.
the beginning of the fable, but also the bird who would not miss a single opportunity to expound her convictions, concerns, and wisdoms to the churl. As the author gives a fable to back up his definition of the fable, so does the bird support her theoretical wisdoms with a practical case when she tells the churl a make-believe story. Both human and bird teachers warn their students against foolishness. The bird taunts the churl, reprimands him, and humiliates him; likewise, the author advises his readers to avoid churlish behaviour. He seems to imply that one may lead either a bird-like diligent, vigilant, honest, practical, and, especially, wise life; or be a greedy, gullible, inconsiderate, and ignorant churl-like person. If the bird manipulates animal imagery to make her point (the churl is likened to an ass), so does the narrator speak of thralldom metaphorically not only as a whole (by telling an animal story), but also in the proverbs he incorporates within his fable. Both the bird and the poet repeat themselves over and over believing that the more repetition, the more seriously one will be taken. Neither the bird nor the poet seems to be interested in concise or anecdotal strategies. The bird gains her freedom and flies to the expanse of the skies; the fable too is dispatched to a better hand seeking compassion and correction. By analogy the reader is given a chance of freedom should he choose to follow the bird and not the churl. Whereas the bird’s student proved to be a slow learner and a worse one to apply any wisdom to his life, the readers of the fable, the author’s students, have more than one set of examples of pitfalls before them to avoid. They have both the bird’s churl and the poet’s churl; they also have the bird’s stories to learn from.

THE DEBATE OF THE HORSE, GOOSE, AND SHEEP.
"A Disputation between a horse, a sheepe and a goose, for superioritie."

An allusion to the Duke of Burgundy's attack on Calais in 1436 (413) has led Lydgate scholars to believe that the poem must have been composed sometime between 1437 and 1440. The traditional debate among animal characters, especially on such a topic as which is more useful to man is common in the Middle Ages. Lydgate's animals present their cases with a wealth of curious detail, though they remain mere animals throughout the poem. Indeed the poem is not concerned with the animals or their characteristics, rather with what they have to say; otherwise they do not have any other ambitions. As Walter F. Schirmer has pointed out, the fable is based on either the Gesta Romanorum or a fable of Marie de France. Lydgate does not assume the role of a mere translator here, unlike both his other Aesopic and non-Aesopic fables. Instead he tells us that he has actually seen a painting of a trial with the lion and eagle as the judges and the horse, goose, and sheep as petitioners (16 ff.).

The horse intelligently refers to his famous ancestors who have aided many a "worthi knyght" (42) -- Alexander's Bucephalus (45), Hector's Galathe (51), Perseus's Pegasus (54) -- "the horse of Fame" (56) -- Chaucer's "stede of bras" (77) in Squire's Tale and Zachariah's vision of "steedis four" (78 ff.). The horse then alludes to horses of "lower degrees" (106) and their many roles in everyday life -- those who move the


[31] The best example of such debates and most probably the prototype or model of all English debates is The O&N.

plough (108) or the cart (112); those who carry the corn for the poor (117-190); those who carry fuel, food, wine, and oil in winter (120-22); those who drag hay and oats to granaries (127-29), and bring home the sheaves of corn in autumn (134-40); those who carry water (141), “leede, ston, and tymbre” (143). The horse thus believes that he is the most useful animal to man both in war and in peace and expects to hear this confirmed by the “prudent jugis, the Egle & the Leoun” (148).

The goose, though less ambitious and prestigious than the horse, assures the judges that every part of her body serves a purpose for man. Goose-grease is good for gout (176-77), goose-feathers are used for arrows (181-82), goose-quills are good for drawing and writing (184), goose down makes “pilowe and fether-beddis soft” (192), even goose-turds -- unlike horse-dung good only for furnaces (202-203) -- are used in curing burns. (199) Also, unlike a dead horse which is only a carcass (204), a “fatt goos” (206) is served at a “kingis table” (208). The goose concludes that the best English arrows are made with the feathers of geese, swans or peacocks; and have won “meny gret” victories for Englishmen (211 ff.). Hence based on her argument that her arrows have played a vital role in victories, from the siege of Rome (240) to the time when “at Peiters toke the kyng of Fraunce” (229), she believes she is superior to the horse with his claim to wars to his credit.

The sheep is so meek that the ram speaks for him. The ram’s use of Latin jargon is stimulating. He first associates the sheep with Christ (301) anticipating his final argument about peace. While the horse is proud of his genealogical ancestors amongst the horses of great men of antiquity, the sheep can be identified with Jesus, who is the
descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (325-26) Having explained the spiritual side of what the sheep represents, the ram enumerates his many and varied usefulnesses in the common weal. If the horse is satisfied with his pride on the battlefields,

"This gasty Lamb hath doon a gret bataile;

Bi His meknesse He offred vp for man,

Clad in pur purpil venquysshid hath Satan." (341-43)

More importantly, despite the goose's cackling and the horse's prancing (344), "his wolle is cheeff richesse / In prys surmountyng euery othir thyng" except of course for corn (351-53). He goes on to say,

"Wolle is cheeff tresour in this lond growyng:

To riche & poore this beeste fynt clothying:

Alle naciouns afferme vp to the fulle,

In al the world ther is no bettir wolle." (354-57)

Then he expounds on the importance of the skin of the sheep which provides, amongst other things, parchment “To write on bookes in quaiers many fold” (368). Besides his mutton is also wholesome “aftir gret siknesse” (373). The ram also says that “Of the Sheep is cast a-way no thyng” (379): neither his horns, bones (380), dung (381), fat (382), guts (383) nor “his hed boiled [holl] with wolle & all” (384). Then he reminds the judges that contrary to the natural animosity of the wolf, the sheep “Louyth no debat, for with eche creature, / For his party, he wol lyve in rest” (395-96). Thus he concludes that since “pees is bet than werre” (399), the sheep should have the prize (403).

Here the horse protests against the ram and accuses the sheep of being the main
cause of war (409-10). He believes that it is for the sheep's wool that the Duke of Burgundy attacked Calais (413-14). Addressing the sheep, he says: "'Causist werre, seist thu louest pees'" (425). According to the horse, where wool is plenty there is profit, hence war; without war then "Lityll or nouht gret Hors[is] shuld availe" (427). The goose also disagrees with the ram and argues that without war neither her "ffetheris white" (428) nor "hookid arwis" (430) shall save the nation from its foes. Both the goose and the horse maintain that war and not peace is essential to "deffende a-geyn [their] mortal foon" (434). In the absence of wars, the armourers, daggers, bows, and crossbows will be lost (442 ff.). And neither will "Knyhthood ... flouren ... in his estat" (450). The horse concludes that peace brings about riches, riches are the cause of pride, pride entails wars, and wars produce poverty and only when people are poor do they cry out for peace; hence the sheep and his wool are the main causes of man's miseries. The ram finds the horse's argument sheer madness because the sheep should not be blamed for man's shearing him and fighting for his wool (491 ff.). Whether men are for peace or war, the sheep stands for peace and deserves the prize (496-97).

The narrator then reports the verdict passed by the eagle and the lion: all three animals are useful to the state (504). He then maintains that all is for the best: "Al-vey remembryling how God and Natur, / To a good ende made euery creatur" (517-18). Here he moralises that "And thouh oon be more than an othir strong, / To the febler do no froward duresse" (521-22), "Odious of old been all co[m]parisouns, / And of comparisons is gendrid hatereede" (526-27), "who that hath grettest part / Off vertuous yiftis shold with his freend depart" (531-32), and that "That no man hold of othir ha
disdeyn” (539).

The Debate comes to a close with “The Auctour Makith a lenvoie upon all the mateer be-fore said.” Thus the envoy sums up the moral of the fable in a repeated refrain: Do not despise your neighbour (547, 563, 579, 611, 619, 651, 659), your dependents (571), the poor (587), and your subjects (643). The conclusion, the final stanza, summarises the same message in much the same words.

Although “the argument,” as Pearsall, talking of Lydgate’s merits, aptly points out, “is not his forte,” the title animals, the judges and the narrator do raise a number of stimulating points: in variety there is merit; each individual may be as useful as anyone else; one should love one’s neighbour and avoid pride, arrogance and enmity.\textsuperscript{33} Peace is the single most important theme in the animals’ debate; nonetheless, other motifs such as the defence of the homeland, the distribution of earthly goods, the uncertainty of fate, and the equality of all in death are touched on in the poem as a whole. Also, the rulers and princes -- especially, as Schirmer observes, the usurpers -- are singled out in that they are warned against arrogance.\textsuperscript{34} Finally the wool trade and Englishness -- if not English nationalism -- receive special attention.\textsuperscript{35}

The lion and the eagle represent more than judges in the animal kingdom. They are in fact there to guarantee what is good for man, not only in what the lower animals have to offer but also what sentence fables provide for man. Although these judges do

\textsuperscript{33}Pearsall 200.

\textsuperscript{34}Schirmer 230.

\textsuperscript{35}Renoir 110; rejected by Pearsall 200.
not comment on the details of the debate, and especially do not say even a word about the animals' dispute over peace and war, their very silence suggests that — whether in war or peace -- what counts most is for man to act rationally and avoid arrogance. Although Lydgate implicitly touches upon the motif of justice by writing in the framework of a court with judges and petitioners as well as in his sermon-like comments and refrains and tells the rich, the rulers, and the sponsors not to despise their inferiors, the miseries of the commons, poverty, cruelty, and injustice are never raised and never become focal in his poetry.

Whether Lydgate has meant it or not, this useful suggestion that people should avoid waste is there in each animal's argument. Each of the three animals in question tries to justify the usefulness of every bit of their material existence. They do not forget anything, even their dung. The implied message then is: nothing is to be wasted. Moreover, although the non-speaking eagle and lion sound as if they are individuals, the three title animals speak for their kinds rather than for themselves. Their final judgement at the end, too, is passed not on the representatives but on their species. This verdict further packs the animals under the same umbrella, denying superiority of any individual over others, especially when it comes to the question of usefulness to man. By extension, then, no man is superior to anyone else before the eyes of a greater judge and God. The judges do not seem to assume any superior status for themselves and in fact let the human narrator announce what they have determined. In the absence of any other witnesses or attorneys, the whole scenario invites the reader to a quiet pondering over his own place in the world, rather than engaging or elaborating and seeking pros or cons. No
matter who you are and where you are, you have come from dust, you will go to dust. Be kind. Be useful. Do not seek superiority.

The debate structure of the narrative potentially creates multiple layers of audiences. In the centre it is the horse, goose, and sheep -- rather the ram as his representative -- addressing the judges -- the eagle and the lion. In other words, it is the weak before the strong, the petitioners before their judges, the subjects before their rulers. Here the petitioners are competing with each other in servitude; and the rulers, though they sound just and well-meaning, are exploitive if not deceptive. Ironically, however, while the animals are engaged in proving who is more useful to man, men are shown as unappreciative, exploitive, arrogant, and reckless. The narrator, in all likelihood the poet himself, both introduces the animals in the beginning and comments on their debate at the end. In his envoy, in particular, he actually assumes the role of a teacher or rather a preacher with a wide variety of audiences in mind. His message is very simple: do not despise others, especially your inferiors. However, he actually addresses different classes of readers as his potential audiences, such as princes (643), the rich -- by implication -- (587) or those in authority (571). His sympathy with one's neighbours is too broad and general to imply any specific category of audience. If anything, there is just one single fact about his audience and that Lydgate expects to be read rather than listened to: “But this fable which that ye now reede” (530).

Unlike his other fables, in the Debate the poet chooses a different strategy to make his point. Instead of giving a straightforward narrative, he engages them in a dispute. However, each animal simply tries to defend his own status and prove that he is
the most useful to man; the debate does not create a realistic situation in which one could witness the pros and cons. Except for a brief moment when the ram, speaking in behalf of the sheep, and his opponents -- the horse and the goose -- are engaged in the serious discourse about peace and war, the rest of what they say is nothing more than pompous bluff. As in the other fables, however, the narrator reinforces his point by repeating it over and over again. Not only his commentary but also each animal's discussion of the usefulness of each part of his body, as well as the abundance of examples that each one of them has in stock, are all part of the teaching strategy of the author. The end of the fable marks a point of reconciliation amongst the disputing animals. Neither reward nor threat is part of the narrator's strategy here, because apparently both are discriminatory at least in the context of this fable. The animals begin with dispute and arrogance and they end with reconciliation and understanding. The audience is thus persuaded to enjoy the fruit of friendship with these animals, and to think of the possibility of a world in which not only should one not despise his neighbour, but also a world where the wild beasts and domestic animals may live in peace together.
VII. THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE & THE FABLE

The Owl and the Nightingale (O&N) is extant in two manuscripts: MS. Cotton Caligula A ix in the British Museum [(C)] and MS. Jesus College, Oxford 29 [(J)], copied some fifty years apart from a lost original which is generally believed to have been composed sometime between 1189 and 1216.¹ We know next to nothing about the author of the poem who may or may not have been the Master Nicholas of Guildford alluded to as the umpire of the debate between the Owl and the Nightingale, both early in the poem (191-216) and at the end of it² (1745-83). Some scholars have suggested that a loyal and enthusiastic friend of Master Nicholas must have written the poem. There are even strong suggestions that the poet might have been a Benedictine nun of royal background familiar with the pains suffered by women separated from their lovers or husbands.³ Despite their disagreement about the date and the authorship of the poem, the O&N scholars in general believe that the poet’s ultimate purpose in writing this poem


²Eric Gerald Stanley, ed., The Owl and the Nightingale (London: Thomas Nelson, 1960) 55,100-101. All references to and the quotations from the poem are from this edition. Line numbers are given in parentheses.


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was to impress the ecclesiastical superiors with the worth of some local clergyman — be it the poet himself or a friend of his/hers — so as to gain preferment for him in the Church.¹

Although the O&N is praised almost by every commentator for its high literary merit,² no two scholars seem to agree on what it really means. The speculations range from a treatise “beneath all didactic,”⁶ to “a finely crafted argumentative equilibrium.”⁷ J.W.H. Atkins, amongst others, finds the poem an allegory in which the Owl and the Nightingale represent “religious poetry of the old tradition” and “the secular love-poetry of the new” respectively.⁸ E.G. Stanley, however, sees the two birds as representatives of “solemnity and light heartedness.”⁹ Douglas L. Peterson is convinced that the poet’s intentions are “expressly didactic” and that “the debate is, as an exercise in dialectics, similar in both purpose and method to Abelard’s Sic et Non, and that by applying dialectic to the arguments advanced by the debaters, the reader is expected to arrive at a

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²Lumiansky 411.

³John Edwin Wells, ed., The Owl and the Nightingale (Boston: Heath, 1907) xxxvii.


⁶Stanley 24.
final verdict in accord with the poet's sympathies." However, many critics have raised concerns about any seriousness in the poem. They are mostly convinced that the ultimate goal of the poem is merely entertainment. John Gardner, for instance, believes that "the whole poem is a comic burlesque, didactic only insofar as comedy is intrinsically didactic." Constance Hieatt, too, contends that the poem is simply a "mock-debate." For her, "it is not just a parody of the form but a satire on human nature." Finally, although the poem is, in essence, a straightforward debate, it also presents some echoes of natural history on the one hand, and a number of fabular characteristics on the other.

It may be argued that the O&N is not a fable. It is undoubtedly a bird debate -- a characteristic literary form in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Besides, it neatly follows the Abelardian dialectic in which the pros and cons of an issue are raised by different contestants not necessarily to prove either side to be right or wrong, rather to improve the art of sharpening one's wit. The debate in this poem, then, is much less about the resolution or solution of anything as much as it is for the sake of the argument itself. The Owl and the Nightingale each represents one such argumentative stand. While the former stands for asceticism, gravity, philosophy, and the didactic poet, the latter

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13For more on Abelardian dialectics see, especially, Atkins, xlvii-liv.
represents pleasure, gaiety, art, and the love poet. Not surprisingly, the poem does not provide the solution to what the two birds dispute over, although different readers have spotted hints here and there where they speculate that the poet must have been in favour of one of the two. Moreover, unlike mainstream fables which are short, non-allegorical, richer in action than talk, and with some stated moral lesson, the O&N is relatively long (1794 lines); it easily lends itself to allegorical interpretations; there is much talk and little action in it; the poem ends with no resolution let alone presenting a specific moral lesson. However, although it sounds plausible to dismiss the poem as non-fabular, there are reasons to believe that it may well be categorised as a fable. As for its length, amongst others, Chaucer’s NPT, though not an orthodox fable either, is a longer poem than the O&N. Besides, not all fables defy allegorical interpretation; Langland’s and Gower’s fables, for instance, are as much allegorical as they are realistic. Furthermore, action is not necessarily a definitive yard-stick by which to define a fable. Lydgate’s Debate, Henryson’s “The Two Mice,” and “The Wolf and the Wether,” amongst others, are full of dialogues with relatively less action. Finally, as for the tagged moral lesson, Chaucer’s NPT and ManT do not present any cogent or even clear lessons; Henryson’s “The Fox and the Wolf” gives at least two different, if not conflicting, morals; Langland’s “Belling the Cat” and Gower’s “Adrian and Bardus” do not explicitly state

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14For a brief summary of the arguments about what the two birds stand for, see Lumiansky 411-17.

any moral at all. One cannot dismiss the *O&N* as non-fabular on these grounds alone.

Apart from the direct influence of Marie de France, Alfred’s proverbs — the backbone of Marie’s fables — and the inclusion of at least three mini-fables of “The Falcon and the Owl,” “The Cat and the Fox,” and “The Knight and the Nightingale,” as well as other animal anecdotes, the *O&N* as a whole is a fable in that its protagonists are two anthropomorphs — birds with human characteristics. Besides, despite its seemingly dramatic form, it is a narrative with a clear, though not transparent, teaching voice; it has its layers of audience; it also teaches specific lessons, though indirectly and by way of examples, reference, and argument. Note that, in contrast to the dramatic present tense, the grammatical tense in this poem is past as in any other fable. The reader does not directly hear the birds talk, rather he is told of their dispute by the narrator whose governing voice is ever-present throughout the poem. This is the ultimate distinction between a purely dramatic debate poem and a fabular narrative. The poem’s didacticism, too, may appear shabby and scattered, but, nonetheless, it is a major concern of the poem no matter what genre it belongs to.

Although the *O&N* is neither a sermon from a pulpit nor a straight-forward didactic piece, it does provide both religious and secular edification. It gives, among other things, advice about right and wrong, wisdom and alertness, and perseverance and honesty. “The advice,” as Jane Gottschalk observes, “is offered indirectly through the comedy of its subject matter and directly through dialogue and proverbs.”16 The central

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theme of the poem -- which describes itself as a ‘plait’ (5) in its opening lines -- is the opposition of contrary views of life. Despite the fact that the two birds’ attitudes as regards the relationship of man to man, man to his society, and man to religion are, in Peterson’s words, “irreconcilable,”¹⁷ the Owl and the Nightingale simply advocate two different outlooks upon experience which are not always mutually exclusive. Although the Owl appears to be logical and in line with Christian ethics, unlike her opponent who seems to be a sophist and even, at times, a heretic, both ultimately address “different emotional stresses and different ranges of literary and spiritual associations.”¹⁸

The debate proper begins with the Nightingale who for no apparent reason starts taunting the Owl calling her a monster and accusing her of being ugly with a big head, blind during daytime, and eating vile things (32-40, 61-81). The Owl, in her turn, threatens that she would make the Nightingale sorry if she only ventured out of her nest (51-54). Very soon they realise that unless they begin to reason, neither will be able to make a point. Thus they agree to present their case to an outside human judge and have him decide which one of them is to be preferred. In the course of their debate, the two birds touch on a variety of moral and philosophical topoi in different ways -- commonplaces, such as avoiding “sottes” (297) and fools (301) as well as solemn issues, such as fate and prophecy (1233-56). Not only do the contestants articulate serious moral issues such as piety, expediency, blindness, usefulness, naturalness, hygiene, healthy diet, appropriate house-keeping and child-raising, and avoiding “wraēbe” (945, 954), amongst

¹⁷Peterson 15.

other things, they also imply what qualities an umpire — and by way of extension any reader or critic — should have. They manipulate pedagogical proverbs, edifying fables, pointed arguments, and, above all, exemplary dramatic presentations. It is as if all borders between the world of human beings and that of the beasts are totally removed. At times the birds follow man’s example and build their nests according to man’s architecture (649-50). At other times, they expect man to follow their way in matrimonial matters (1469-70). The two birds stress the importance of wisdom; each one tries desperately to prove that she is wiser than the other one (757-60, and elsewhere). However, both agree that wisdom, and not strength, counts both in peace and at war. The Nightingale argues, for instance, that a horse, though much stronger than man, is easily led by a human child who is wiser than the horse (773-82). In fact, she stresses that man has managed to subdue all creatures through his wisdom and not necessarily through his strength:

“Mon deþ mid strengþe & mid witte
µat oþer þing nis non his fitte:
Þþe þe alle strengþe at one were;
Monnes wit þet more were;
Vorþe mon mid his crafte
Ouerkumeþ al orþliche shafte.” (783-88)

Surprisingly enough, while the two birds are seriously engaged in a breath-taking dispute and a seemingly uncompromising series of conflicting attitudes, they lay bare that there exist fundamental issues that both beast and man should respect. Despite their
animosity and tricks and counter-tricks, they stress the importance of truth, religious 
virtues and moral etiquette. Their quarrel is simply about means rather than ends. 
Although they utterly disagree as to which one is a better model, they are full-heartedly 
agreed on almost all religious codes and philosophical issues raised. They may go on 
accusing each other of lechery, trickery, dishonesty, and cowardice, yet they never fall 
short of advocating piety, truthfulness, honesty and bravery. They start a foolish quarrel 
over the question of which one is a better bird and more useful to man and their problem 
is never solved. Yet their ideas as well as their ideals never lose colour. The old dicta of 
compassion, love, and hope that the two birds advocate will definitely leave their lasting 
impact on the reader. Although they fundamentally disagree as to who is a better bird, the 
substance of their allegations and defences is always the same. They do not have any 
problems with the basics. They generally -- though by no means entirely -- stick to the 
rules, advocate truth, and avoid irrationality. And that is what they teach. Moreover, they 
are far from being dogmatic; they are open to criticism; they respond to each other’s 
accusations in a, more or less, law-abiding way; they leave the final decision to an arbiter 
and promise to follow his ruling. Finally, it is not the moral lessons that they disagree 
about; what they quarrel over is that each one considers her opponent to be without the 
best qualities of which she herself is an emblem.

The birds quote a number of authentic and un-recorded proverbs to elaborate on 
what they deem to be politically correct codes of behaviour such as: “‘Ne mai no 
strengbe aȝen red’” (762), or “‘Sel[d]e e[re]ndeð wel þe lœpe, / An selde plaideð wel þe 
worþe.’” (943-44) The Nightingale also believes in the power of words and the
superiority of tongue over swords.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{quote}
‘Wel fiȝt ȝat wel spe濄p,’ seip in þe songe.

Of hire tunge ho nom red;

‘Wel fiȝt ȝat wel spe濄p,’ seide Alured. (1072-74)
\end{quote}

But the bulk of their teaching comes in their debate. Amongst other things, they particularly emphasise hygiene, proper house-keeping, appropriate child-raising, and fidelity.

One of the first lessons, in so far as the birds’ actual debate is concerned, comes from the Nightingale who taunts the Owl for being unclean and failing to perform her duties as a caring mother:

\begin{quote}
Þu cuȝest þat þu art on vnwiȝt.

Þu art lodlich & unclene –

Bi þine neste ich hit mene,

& ek bi þine fule brode:

Þu fedest on hom a vvel ful fode.

Vel wostu þat hi doþ þarinne:

Hi fuleþ hit up to þe chinne. (90-96)
\end{quote}

In her turn, then, the Owl accuses the Nightingale of not being “clene” (584), always shunning away from “clene stede” (590) and feeding on:

\begin{quote}
Bute attercoppe & fule uliȝe
\end{quote}

& wormes, ȝif þu miȝte finde

Among þe uolde of harde rinde. (600-602)

If anything, what the two birds suggest is that one has to be clean, keep one’s place clean, and follow a clean diet. Although we have no way of deciding which bird is cleaner, we cannot miss their point. Both birds are positive that cleanliness is vitally important, especially when it comes to a mother’s job of keeping her babies and house in order.

In the course of defending her merits, the Nightingale accuses the Owl of being blind both literally and figuratively. She wonders why her opponent always flies at night (238) while by day she is “stareblind” (241). She also associates the Owl’s daily poor sight and nightly flights with the evil man “Pat noȝt ne suþ to none gode” (246). Although the Nightingale, too, may fly at night, “in classical antiquity one association of the owl,” as John C. Hirsh suggests, “was with Nyctimene, who was changed into an owl after incest with her father.”20 She even calls the Owl the messenger of bad news (1145-74). The Owl then bounces all these back at the Nightingale saying it is her opponent who cannot see beyond the everyday and the ordinary -- not a match for her insight (382-90) -- it is her opponent who lures man away from attending to his salvation to worldly pleasure (331-54), and it is her opponent who is the cause of bad news (1043-66). By implication, then, although the two birds disagree as to who is right and who is wrong, both advocate vigilance.

Then the Nightingale taunts the Owl for her size and appearance:

The Owl, in her turn, does not lose any chance to make fun of the Nightingale's size and appearance in much the same way as she herself is teased:

\[ \begin{align*}
& \bpu \ art \ lodlich \ to \ biholde, \\
& \& \bpu \ art \ lo\beta \ in \ monie \ volde: \\
& \bpi \ bodi \ is \ short, \ bpi \ swore \ is \ smal, \\
& \Grettere \ is \ b\pin \ heued \ \bpan \ bpu \ al; \\
& \bpin \ e\betaene \ bob \ colblake, \ & \& \ brode \\
& \Rist \ svvo \ ho \ weren \ ipein \ mid \ wode. \\
& \bpu \ starest \ so \ bpu \ wille \ abiten \\
& \Al \ \bat \ bpu \ mist \ mid \ cliure \ smiten. \\
& \bpi \ bile \ is \ stif \ & \scharp \ & \hoked \\
& \Rist \ so \ an \ ovvel \ \bat \ is \ croked. \ (71-80)
\end{align*} \]

Nonetheless, the Owl agrees that she does hide herself by day (265) but she argues that it is not out of blindness; rather, it is part of her nature. Moreover, despite the Nightingale's allegations that the Owl's nestlings befoul their nests, the Owl argues that this too is quite natural not only of her children but of all babies -- of beast and man alike:
Hit is fale oþer wiȝte imene,
Vor hors a stable & oxe a stalle
&þ al þat hom wule þar falle,
An lute children in þe cradle --
Boþe chorles an ek aþele --
&þ al þat in hore þoþe
Þat hi uorletþ in hore duþeþe.
Wat can þat ȝongling hit bihede? (628-35)

However, whereas the Nightingale tries to stress the importance of vigilance, the Owl emphasises yet a more essential lesson: no one is responsible for the work of nature.

To be held responsible for what one does, even thinks or feels is one thing, to be accountable for one’s shape, size, and natural behaviour is something totally different. It is not the Owl’s fault that she has poor sight during day time or that she appears ugly to some beholders as the Nightingale believes. Existentially speaking, one is born with inherited features which cannot be altered and for which one is not to blame. No one chooses his/her gender, colour of skin, general shape of body, and the like. These come naturally and there is no way to prevent them or alter them. The beautiful and the handsome are surely luckier than the ugly ones, but they should not be credited for what they have not earned. Neither are the ugly to blame since they are not responsible for how they look. No one should be held responsible for what nature has given him/her. In

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21Ironically, however, the Owl forgets that she herself blames the Nightingale for being feeble and weak (579).
contrast, one is always responsible for one’s acquired habits, one’s behaviour, and one’s attitudes. No one is accountable for what he or she has not chosen freely.

The other major issue that the two birds dispute is the importance of their song and its relevance to man. Their implied lesson is that man must praise God and worship Him. The Nightingale claims that unlike her own song which introduces spring and fertility and brings happiness to all creatures (433-49), that of her opponent is of woe (412, 414), misery, anger, melancholy, and lamentation in a manner “pat hit is grislich to ihere” (224). The Owl, however, stresses the orthodox distinction between sensual pleasure and eternal happiness. According to her, the Nightingale’s song is an earthly pleasure gratifying man’s lower nature only, while hers is not only a comfort to man in his distress, but also an invitation to rejoice in the Nativity (473-96). Whereas eternal joy is all welcome, pleasures of the world, the Owl suggests, must be avoided because they are obstacles to the quest for salvation. In her anger, the Owl likens the Nightingale’s song to the chattering of “on Irish prost” (322), while hers is an asset to mankind (323-30). She also argues that God did not create man for such ephemeral happinesses of the world which are but hindrances to man’s salvation, but rather for eternal and everlasting happiness:22

> An eurich mureʒbe mai agon,
>
> ʒif me hit halt eure forþ in on –
>
> Bute one: ṭat is Godes riche,

---

22For more on the birds’ argument about their usefulness, see especially Peterson 17-19.
Defending the superiority of her song, each bird tries to prove that she and not her opponent is of better service to mankind. Both of them seem to suggest that the best way to praise God and thank Him is to serve others. Whereas the Nightingale believes that by making man happy, she serves him best, the Nightingale thinks she is more useful because she helps him in his quest for salvation:

Ich warni men to here gode
Þat hi bon blipe on hore mode,
An bidde þat hi moten iseche
Þan ilke song þat euer is eche. (739-42)

Yet, the Owl charges the Nightingale of being useless: “Þu nart noþt to non óþer þinge” (559) and wonders, other than sensual pleasure, what else she can offer man: “Wat dostu godes among monne?” (563). Her own song, the Owl argues, does man much good, especially if he pays attention to it:

Ich do god mid mine þrote
& warni men to hore note.

......................

Ich folzi þan aȝte manne,
An flo bi niȝte in hore banne. (329-30, 389-90)

The Owl, however, believes she is more useful because she teaches man to avoid sin:

“Ich wisse men mid mine songe, þat hi ne sunnegi nowiht longe” (927-28). Moreover, the Owl believes in moderation as exemplified in her own sporadic and purposeful
singing. She strongly condemns her opponent’s ceaseless chattering because even the best of harps and pipes “Mislikeþ ȝif hit is to long” (344). The only exception that she admits, however, is God’s everlasting bliss “þat eure is svete & eure ilikihe” (358). Finally, the Owl turns the table against her opponent and makes good of her charges as regards her feeding on mice. She eats mice and rids man of a nuisance and the church of uncleanliness:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Vor ich an lok} & \text{e manne wike;} \\
\text{An mine wike bopl wei gode,} \\
\text{Vor ich helpe to manne uode.} \\
\text{Ich can nimen mus at berne} \\
\text{An ek at chirche ine þe derne:} \\
\text{Vor me is lof to Cristes huse,} \\
\text{To clansi hit wip fule musse.} (604-10)
\end{align*}
\]

What the two birds lay bare here is that to be useful to others must always be their priority. Their worth is evaluated by their usefulness to others.²³

Contrasting her own song with that of the Nightingale, the Owl stresses that she helps man in his quest for salvation: “Ich rede þi þat men bo ȝare / An more wepe þane singe” (860-61). Her song both helps the good with pure hearts, who long for heaven (881), to weep for others, and teaches the sinful “ware is wo” (892). Note that the birds’ claims aside, not only are lust and impiety despised in their disputes, the importance of seeking salvation through atoning for oneself and caring for others is highlighted. It is not

²³ For more on the birds’ usefulness, see Palmer 314-19.
the serious and strong-minded Owl alone who preaches atonement; so does the
Nightingale know that man “mot biwepe his miscdede” (980), although she practically
represents gaiety and joyful life. Both of them would have man praising God and His
grace; yet each in her own way, one by pleading the other by rejoicing.

The discussion proper about carnal love and caritas begins with the Owl bringing
countercharges against the Nightingale concerning not only her own sexual morality
(489-98), but also her encouraging of women to be unfaithful.\footnote{For more on this, see Eadie 474.} According to the Owl, not only is the Nightingale guilty of what Monica Brzezinski Potkay calls, “a sinful and
bestial lechery,” but also “she expresses that lechery in her song, thereby exciting human
beings to commit ‘An vnriʒt of hire licome’: ‘þu draʒst men to fleses luste, / þat welleþ
þine songes luste’”\footnote{Monica Brzezinski Potkay, “Natural Law in The Owl and the Nightingale,”} (1054, 895-96). The Nightingale denies this and defiantly argues
that no matter what she sings, people may always misconstrue her intentions. However,
instead of pushing the matter any further, she defends women, especially young women,
against the charges brought against them by men. She goes beyond this and accuses men
of being the prime sinners. If women, she argues, because of their fragile physique,
commit the sin of flesh (1387-90), men do it through pride (1413-16); it is always men
who lead women astray (1435-40). Nonetheless, although she does not endorse such
lustful activity, the Nightingale maintains that, unlike more serious sins of spirit, such as
anger, pride, and envy for which there is no remedy, women’s sins of the flesh may be
excused since the church may purge them through the bond of marriage:

Sei me soop, 3ef þu hit wost,

Hweþer deþ wvurse, flesche þe gost?

þu miȝt segge, 3ef þu wult,

þat lasse is þe fleshes guþt. (1407-10)

Thus the Nightingale cannot help pitying women in general and the young in particular:

Ne mai ich for reoþe lete,

Wanne ich iseþe þe tohte ilete

þe luue bring[þ] on þe þunglinge,

þat ich of murȝþe him ne singe.

Ich teache heorn bi mine songe

þat swucch luue ne lest noȝt longe. (1445-50)

As for married women, the Nightingale plays a harsher tune. Whereas she accepts
that she sings to excite love, she distances herself from lechery. What she wishes to
inspire is the love between husband and wife, or that which eventually leads to marriage,
or “rihte luue”:

Ah sop hit is, ich singe & grede

þar lauedies beþe & faire maide.

& sop hit is, of luue ich singe:

For god wif mai i spusing

Bet luuien hire oȝene were

Þane awer hire copenere,
An maide mai luue cheose
Dat hire wurpschipe ne forleose,
An luue mid rihte luue
Pane pe schal beon hire buue.
Swiche luue ich itache & lere,
Perof leop al mine ibere. (1337-48)

Otherwise, she finds their indiscreet way of life loathsome (1468) and even wishes them
to take heed of her abstinence from singing when she comes to breed (1469-70). Yet, all
in all, she is more strongly critical of men for their lechery than women, who sometimes
have to cope with loveless, wretched, and ill-bred husbands (1491-94).

The Owl, then, in an unexpected move, shows how pleased she is with her
opponent’s views as regards young women (1511-14). Even more surprisingly, she finds
the Nightingale’s criticism of married women unreasonably harsh. Although she readily
sympathises with all animals given to lust during fine weather (489-98), she cannot
understand human adultery 26 (1473-75). According to her, men, and not women, are to
blame for their failed marriages. She believes that the husbands who leave their lawful
wives at home and pursue other women where they have no right (1520-26), simply to
satisfy their own carnal desires, are the root of all marital problems. Although the Owl
admits that there are some happily married couples, there are always failed marriages
with the wives as helpless victims. It is in such cases, as she claims, that she gives her ear
to so many abused wives whose spouses inflict all kinds of oppressions and atrocities on

26For more on this, see Potkay 373; Wells xlvi.
them (1527-40). Thus, the Owl suggests, it is quite understandable why ill-used wives seek their pleasures elsewhere. Not that the Owl condones married women’s ignoring their marriage vows and committing adultery, rather she pities them and promotes a better understanding of their situation:

Me hire mai so ofte misbeode
pat heo do wule hire ahene neode.
La, Godd hit wot! Heo nah iweld
pa[h] heo hine makie kukeweld. (1541-44)

Both birds call for campaign against men, and an effort to understand women in general and wronged and fallen women in particular:

It is not only in the comic disputes and quoted proverbs that the birds offer direct didactic and moral lessons; they also indirectly do so by listing the qualities of their umpire, and by extension, the reader. After the initial disorderly skirmish, the Nightingale proposes that their contest be brought before Master Nicholas of Guildford for arbitration because of his wisdom, discretion, honesty, and experience:

‘Maister Nichole of Guldeforde.
He is wis an war of worde.
He is of dome supe gleu,
& him is lop eurich unpeu.
He wot insi3t in eche songe,

27See Salter 44.
28See Eadie 476-77.
Wo singet wel, wo singet wronge;
& he can schede vrom þe riȝte
þat woȝe, þat þuster from þe liȝte.' (191-98)

After pondering for a while, the Owl agrees with the choice although she is aware of
Master Nicholas’ earlier flaws and sympathies with the Nightingale:

`Ich granti wel þat he us deme,
Vor þeȝ he were wile breme,
& lof him were niȝtingale
& ôber wiȝte gente & smale,
Ich wot he is nu suȝe acoled;
Nis he vor þe noȝt afoled,
þat he for þine olde luue
Me adun legge, & þe buue.
Ne schaltu neure so him queme
þat he for þe fals dom deme.
He is him ripe & fastrede,
Ne lust him nu to none unrede:
Nu him ne lust na more pleie,
He wile gon a riȝte weie.' (201-14)

Although the reader never gets a chance to hear the umpire’s verdict, at least he knows
what necessary qualities he has. The reader is thus given not only the umpire’s strong
points, such as wisdom, honesty, and justice, to follow, but also his weakness(es), such as
youthful passions and immaturity, to avoid. The reader has also been witness both to what the birds teach and to the extent they put their teachings into practice themselves. It is now for the reader to follow the good example of Nicholas and avoid the bad examples each of the two birds may have set.

Apart from the proverbial commonplaces, dialogical elaborations, comic exemplifications, and the list of recommended qualities seen in the umpire, there are at least three mini-fables in the poem which are meant to intensify the importance of some of its major teachings. The first of these, “The Owl and the Falcon” (99-138), comes from the Nightingale in her initial unprovoked attack on the Owl. This fable also highlights both the theme of cleanliness and of maternal responsibilities. “From this bit of bird-lore,” as Tamara A. Goeglein observes, “the nightingale fashions a moral that tells us as much about her exegetical style as about owls or falcons”.

Also hit is bi þan ungode
þat is icumen of fule brode
& is meind wit fro monne,
Euer he cub þat he com þonne,
þat he com of þan adel eye
þeʒ he a fro nest leie. (129-34)

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29This is originally one of the fables of Kalilah and Dimnah elaborating on the theme of ingratitude. Cf. Gower’s “Adrian and Bardus.” According to Atkins, in medieval times, this ingratitude “generally took the form of defiling the nest.” Atkins lxiii.

Here the Owl is a negative example to mankind, as a type of the “ungode” (129, 245); not only her way of laying eggs, but also her natural flying at night — as discussed earlier — are symbols of immoral behaviour in humans.

The second fable, “The Cat and the Fox” (809-37), is also told by the Nightingale, emphasising the importance of wit in the face of all other skills. The fox, despite all his skills, falls at the mercy of the hounds because “Ne kan he hine so bipenche” (828). The cat, however, equipped with one skill only, saves his hide because “he kan climbe supe wel” (833). Here, as in “The Owl and the Falcon,” the Nightingale identifies herself with the cat and claims that although she can only sing, she is better off than her adversary: “Betere is min on þan þine twelue” (836). According to Atkins, this fable illustrates “the fact that tricks are valuable only in so far as they are successful.”

The third fable, “The Knight and the Nightingale” (1048-66 and 1075-1110), told by the Owl, emphasising the result of faithfulness but it ends with the Nightingale’s dictum that justice always prevails. According to the Owl’s reading, a nightingale is justly put to death because she brings a knight’s wife to shame (1049 ff.). The Nightingale first agrees, but then turns the table on the Owl and reminds her that when the good King Henry discovered this pathetic situation, he not only banished the husband as an outlaw, but also rewarded the Nightingale’s heirs with wergild:

31 The fable of “The Cat and the Fox” too is originally an Indian one which is also found in both the Greek tradition and the Anglo-Latin Romulus. It appears in Marie de France’s Ysopet as well. For more about this fable, its sources, analogues, and versions, see Atkins lxv-lxvii; Cf. Chaucer’s NPT; see also Hugenir 16.

32 Atkins lxvi.
`bat underyat þe king Henri –
Iesus his soule do merci!
He let forbonne þene kniȝte,
þat hadde idon so muchel unriȝt
Ine so gode kinges londe:

.............................
Hit was wrpsipe al mine kunne,
Forþon þe kniȝt forles his wunne
An ʒaf for me an hundred punde. (1091-95, 1099-1101)

What all these three fables share is that they basically teach by way of contraries rather than as direct pedagogical lessons. In the fables that the two birds tell, as Potkay observes, “animals function only as emblems of human vice.” Neither bird ever holds up “animal behaviour as a model for humans to imitate.” Nonetheless, they offer their moral lessons in a variety of ways. They tell each other stories, they advocate ideas, and they provide an exemplary type of debate worthy of close attention because of both its matter and manner. The Owl is the Franciscan-like priest who, celebrating the rule of law despite her physical superiority (51, 1689-96), enhances the cause of atonement and pious devotion. The Nightingale, on the other hand, standing for Benedictine ecstasy and joy of life, advocates the cause of love and happiness.

In the world of the poem different layers of narrative hierarchy are at work. The two birds are both the narrators and the audience of their fables. Moreover, each fable

33Potkay 374.
offers at least one clear moral. Incidentally, in all three fables, along with other threats and penalties, death is punishment of the wrongdoer. In the fable of “The Owl and the Falcon” the Nightingale reprimands the Owl for her maternal failure and her whole species’ ingratitude. In the position of teacher, she reminds her adversary of the tragic end of the baby owls. Whereas the nestlings are thrown out of the usurped nest, the mother owl not only suffers the loss of her babies, but also earns the blame of others. In the fable of “The Cat and the Fox” the Nightingale reminds her adversary of the importance of using one’s skills and not merely accumulating them. In this fable the fox is killed because, despite all his skills, he cannot outfox the hounds. Finally, in the fable of “The Knight and the Nightingale” there are two teaching voices: first, that of the Owl who highlights the justification of the punishment of those who encourage unfaithfulness, and second that of the Nightingale who reminds her opponent what oppressions entail. Punishment, especially by death, is the predominant teaching methodology in all these fables.

Other than their fables, the Owl and the Nightingale offer more pedagogical lessons both in what they dispute about and how they enhance their ideas, as well as by their convictions about their arbiter. But in all these cases, be it their fables, proverbs, subjects of dispute, or their umpire’s qualities, there is always a wider layer of narrative, that of the narrator who monitors their acts, arguments, and even sub-conscious leanings. Interestingly enough, the same narrator is the audience of the whole debate process and fable presentation. He can even read the mind of each bird; he evaluates the birds’ honesty, expediency, and all their feelings. He sees the reaction of the rest of the birds
even before the verdict is pronounced. On a yet wider layer of narrative, there is a potential parliament of birds listening enthusiastically to the Nightingale and the Owl. Although the two contestants do not seem to be aware of the presence of other birds and their eavesdropping, they are not surprised at the end of the poem to discover that, in fact, an assembly of birds have been listening to them all the time. The birds’ choral noise celebrating the Nightingale’s assumed victory – to the Owl’s displeasure of course – on the one hand, and the Wren’s mediation that the contestants had better keep their promise and take their case to Master Nicholas, on the other, indicate who the first-hand audience of the debate was.

Whether the narrator is Master Nicholas or his friend or even an old mistress is beside the point. What matters here is that the two birds have rehearsed their arguments, and Master Nicholas will hear the summary of the court hearing as the Owl will report to him later on. It is important, however, to notice that the poem is, in essence, a test and trial for Master Nicholas’ preferment. By implication then, on a higher layer of the narrative there must be a patron or an interested body of audience to judge the merits of the poem. As such, beyond the assembly of birds and the human observer of the debate, there is this immediately-intended audience as well as a host of other potential readers. The narrator hears the birds and the patron/audience hears both the birds and the narrator. Likewise, the contemporary readers were audience to all these other layers of narrative. Take judgement as an example: the birds judge people; Master Nicholas judges the birds; the narrator is in a position to judge both the birds and Master Nicholas; the patron/audience judges all these as well as the poet; finally, the readers judge the birds,
the narrator, Master Nicholas, the poet, and the contemporary reception of the poem.

Although the narrator of the poem disappears during some longer dialogues between the two birds, his distinctive voice as mediator is always present from the beginning to the end. Nonetheless, instead of merely reporting the incident or assuming the position of teacher, he rewrites the story while adding his own interpretation and analysis much in the same way as the narrator of a main-stream fable does.\textsuperscript{34} However, unlike the impartial narrator of conventional fables, he is neither consistent nor reliable. Like the judge of the poem — enamoured by the Nightingale’s music in youth and more attentive to the Owl’s message in age — the narrator has divided sympathies towards the two birds. At times he distances himself from them, at others he is seriously involved with the action of the poem. Whereas initially he cherishes the Nightingale and her call for sensuous pleasure, later on he sides with the solemnity of the moral Owl, and just before the close of the poem he assumes neutrality. “In the beginning,” as R. Barton Palmer observes, “he makes us believe that the proceeding at which we are imaginatively present is humorously incongruous. Later, however, he suggests that the debate is a search for truth and justice.”\textsuperscript{35} Finally, failing to accommodate the reader with the verdict, the narrator leaves the credibility of the moral of the poem an outstanding question.

Although in all likelihood the identity of the poet may never come to light, a few

\textsuperscript{34}For more on the function of the narrator, layers of audience, and manipulation of language, see Nancy M. Reale, “Rhetorical Strategies in The Owl and the Nightingale,” *PQ* 63 (1984): 417-27.

\textsuperscript{35}Palmer 311.
critics have suggested the possibility of a woman having written the *O&N*. Alexandra Barratt, for instance, contends that the poem was written “for and by a religious community of women.” More explicitly, J. Eadie remarks that the poem basically reflects “a woman’s point of view,” especially as regards the two subjects of women and love about which the two birds do not disagree. Eadie reminds us that “it is always the feelings of women that the poem is interested in, never those of men. Men are referred to merely as the oppressors of women, or as their faithful husbands. The poem never asks us to feel pity for the plight of men in love as it does for women because in this poem it is only women who love and suffer and it is only the emotional well-being of women that the poem is concerned with.” Eadie also speculates that “the name Nicholas could derive from the Nicolaitans, the collective name used for married clergy from about the eleventh century onward.” Thus whoever Nicholas of Guildford might be, the poet might have been a close woman friend although we may again never discover the relationship between the two. Furthermore, not only are the Nightingale and the Owl concerned with the sufferings of women, whether maids or wives (1331-1602), they are also particularly preoccupied with what are generally deemed to be house-wife’s chores

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37 Eadie 476.

38 Eadie 476-77.

39 Eadie 477n.

40 Eadie 477.
and maternal cares, such as the behaviours of their baby birds (91-138; 625-38) and the
domestic arrangements in their nests (615-24). Finally, the Nightingale charges the Owl
with witchcraft, “a predominantly female crime”\(^{41}\) (1295-1301) and “inadequate
learning, an inevitably female shortcoming”\(^{42}\) (1325-30) as well as her own limited
“native wit”\(^{43}\) which are further intimations that we are dealing with a work from a
woman’s point of view.

The teaching voice of the poem can ultimately be boiled down to an impersonal
cry for justice and fairness. Although the poem, as Palmer suggests, “might be an
interrogative text whose ‘meaning’ resides precisely in an unwillingness to provide final
answers and resolve contradictions,”\(^{44}\) its teaching lessons are too general to be
controversial. It does not necessarily take an ordained priest to preach atonement or a
philosopher to teach cleanliness. At the end of the poem, the reader is much less
concerned with the teaching voice — be it that of the poet or otherwise — than the lessons
themselves. The teaching voice of the poem may have provided more of the *dulce* than
*utile*, yet he or she has managed to make a case for a good number of moral lessons. This
voice does not come from the pulpit, neither is it a pedantic one. Rather, it is a cry from
within — it is an invitation to oneself. It is more of a challenge to examine the
unexplored. The teaching voice may well be the echo of the reader’s own thinking aloud

\(^{41}\)Barratt 477.

\(^{42}\)Barratt 477.


\(^{44}\)Palmer 307.
about more internalised concerns. In its broadest sense, there is no teacher in this poem.

The debate format of the poem is ultimately of the nature of a dramatic monologue revealing the I and the Ego of the reader side by side. The conflicts it presents are thus internal and the drive to win the argument psychological. The teaching voice of the poem is in fact the sum of all plausible possibilities. The teacher is neither the Nightingale nor the Owl, neither Master Nicholas nor the poet; rather, it is the reader himself who is thrust into a situation to teach himself by wondering, doubting, questioning, and arguing. The birds may provide a few clues and the narrator may allude to some dialectical possibilities, but no solution is available, and hence the reader is left to himself to find the way.

In the world of fiction, the most immediate audience of the poem is the assembly of birds of which the contestants may or may not be fully aware. The only human audience they hope to secure, however, is a Master Nicholas who is absent, and therefore they will have to go through the details of their debate all over again once they find him in Portesham. The birds are also unaware of the presence of the narrator who happens to be the sole human audience to their debate. In his turn, this narrator hears the imaginary debate between two birds as if he were dreaming, and lets himself be carried away by their disputation. The reader is ultimately the audience of an unconfessed dream-vision.

Judging from what the governing concerns of the poem are, its immediate audience must have been a wide range of people in general and women in particular.45 Jane Gottschalk, amongst others, suggests that the poem is meant "to give moral

45Barratt 474-8.
instruction to a mixed popular audience living in the world." According to Gottschalk, "though the poet of The Owl and the Nightingale may not have found a "profitable" audience in polite French or Latin circles, he had a ready-made audience among common people who were accustomed to sermons in English, and particularly among women, who were likely to be a large part of this audience. The profit would be for the audience of common people who could find delight while essential Christian ideas were being restated." Wells, too, stresses that "in spite of the subtleties which many commentators have found in The Owl and the Nightingale, neither the teaching nor the method of presentation is learned. Both are popular." Nonetheless, judging from the "covertness of all its allusions," Pearsall speculates that the poem could be written for "perhaps the household of some church dignitary or a school of more than usually secular canons." So does Barratt think that the immediate audience of the poem might well be a tightly knit community of nuns who were socially superior to the poet, whom they well knew "for his lofty opinion of his own virtues and for his frequently voiced sense of grievance at the frustration a career which had once been so promising."

The fact that the poet did not write in Latin, French, or even in Anglo-Norman,

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46 Gottschalk 657.
47 Gottschalk 659.
48 Wells xxxviii.
50 Barratt 477.
which would impress his church superiors but could be understood only by the elite and
the clergy, suggests that he must have had a general public on his mind to begin with.

Both the language and the substance of the poem indicate the fact that the poem was
primarily addressed to the English speaking folks — though not necessarily the “common
people,” as Gottschalk suggests. Moreover, although it does not pretend to be strictly
religious, the poem does instruct Christian morality and social behaviour in a much more
relaxed and informal way. Finally, as Stanley remarks in his edition of the poem, the
presence of other didactic and religious works in both extant manuscripts suggests that
the poem was meant to edify the reader though informally. Salter also argues that “The
Manuscripts of The Owl and the Nightingale reinforce this general impression of
associative process at work in the literary background of the poem, but in a more precise
way — giving us some facts about ... its probable original reception by an early thirteenth-
century reading public.” Both (J) and (C), as Salter continues, “contain a mixture of
Anglo-Norman and English works, with one Latin item in the Oxford manuscript. ... The
contents of these miscellanies are interesting for a number of reasons — all relevant to
argument in favour of a thirteenth century reading public of comprehensive tastes.”

Whereas most critics have cautiously accepted the possibility of a group of nuns
as the audience of the poem, J.C. Russell argues that “the principal patron of the poem

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52 Stanley 24-25.

53 Salter 39-40.
was probably Geoffrey, son of Henry II and Archbishop of York, 1189-1212, the Master
Nicholas of Guildford was Master Nicholas of Aquila, a canon lawyer and professor, and
that the poem might have been written for an Oxford audience which included Geoffrey
in December 1189. According to Russell, “the poet also presents ideas which would
probably have appealed to the non-academic side of both the students and townspeople.
The unfavourable remarks about the backwardness of the north, Scotland and Norway
sound much like the usual student insults to regional ‘nations.’ ... And the poem certainly
has a rural background. The long section on forms of love was probably much like the
usual student discussion of love and sex life, while the eulogy of married love and the
devoted wife would please a lay audience and even suggests the presence of women. Less
admirable activities such as cock-fighting (1619) and gambling (1666) presumably also
interest members of a town-gown assembly: the ‘merchant, knight, bondmen’ (1340-49)
as well as the guild of professors and students.”

Pedagogically, unlike any mainstream fable the O&N employs the Abelardian
techniques to make a point. Instead of stating explicitly the moral lesson or lessons of the
fable, the narrator creates, or more precisely reports, a debate in which the pros and cons
of different topics are examined. It was Abelard’s Sic et Non that gave rise and popularity
to an already well known and well practised methodology of dialogism. According to
Abelard, as Atkins observes, “doubt should precede all search for scientific truth; doubt


55 Russell 184.
leads to inquiry and inquiry leads to truth."\textsuperscript{56} The search, rather than the truth itself, is of primary importance. By way of extension, it does not matter which of the birds is right and which one is wrong; what matters is their endeavour and their perseverance in making their case.\textsuperscript{57}

It is interesting to note that each of the two birds is much more interested in winning than anything else. In fact, pedagogically speaking, the manner of the debate is more important than its matter. It is not the moral teachings of the poem that the two birds disagree about or are really concerned with; their conflict is best seen in their tactics of attack and counter-attack. Though they try hard to abide by the law, each bird attempts to disqualify her opponent and establish a better footing for herself. Each one tries to prove that she is the best, whatever the matter.\textsuperscript{58} The two birds' obsession with winning, however, is not necessarily a natural phenomenon; rather it is a mimesis of what human beings normally do. As John Gardner observes, the poem "presents, centrally, a comic view of man, whose concern is too often -- and all too understandably -- not with truth but with winning. ... The Owl and the Nightingale are both like us proud. The Owl goes so far as to hint that she is a kind of Christ figure: not only does she return

\textsuperscript{56}Atkins xlviii.

\textsuperscript{57}For more on the Abelardian dialectic debate, see Jay Schleusner, "The Owl and the Nightingale: A Matter of Judgement," \textit{MP} 70 (1973): 185-86.

\textsuperscript{58}For more on the winning theme, see Schleusner 185; Michael A. Witt, "The Owl and the Nightingale and English Law Court Procedure of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," \textit{ChauR} 16 (1982): 282-92.
good for evil (1615), she sheds her blood for mankind (1616).\textsuperscript{59} Even though there are serious challenges and moral lessons involved, the Nightingale is more interested in establishing her superiority via her cunning rhetoric, rather than “distinguishing between right and wrong or good and evil.”\textsuperscript{60} So does the Owl desire wholeheartedly to win the contest by means of her logic. Whereas the Nightingale defends a Christian heresy, the Owl defends “the traditional Christian doctrine in the best scholastic fashion, attacking her opponent’s position and defending her own with Christian dialectics.”\textsuperscript{61}

While abiding by law is part of the pretension of the poem, the Owl and the Nightingale cheat whenever they can. The question that the Nightingale raises toward the end of the poem concerning who will report the details of their debate to Master Nicholas also undercuts the reliability of the narrator, who may well have introduced his own bias into the poem. Such scepticism is also part of the strength of the poem. After all, it is meant to be a debate and not a sermon. The reader is invited not only to come up with a verdict, but also to verify the reliability and adequacy of everything he reads. The reader is challenged to a similar exercise of the debate format with himself to ascertain his convictions. The rejoicing of the assembly of birds at the assumed victory of the Nightingale is yet another psychological test for the reader, to see for himself to what extent he may be affected and influenced by the pressure of community. More often than not it is the more skilful debater who wins the contest, and not the one who is more

\textsuperscript{59}Gardner 12.
\textsuperscript{60}Peterson 21.
\textsuperscript{61}Peterson 22.
truthful. Hence oration in general and the manipulation of language in a persuasive way in particular are among the strongholds of the pedagogy of this poem. The reader, in turn, is well-advised not to be misled by the false Muses. Here the language and the presence of an audience, as two powerful influential factors in shaping one's mind, are highly emphasised.\textsuperscript{62}

Whereas in more conventional fables, reward and punishment strategies prevail, in the \textit{O&N} the dialectic approach is the predominant tactic. The debate format applies to all layers of the narrative. At times the two birds dispute over what may be termed as natural -- here they remain birds who represent different types of human beings debating about what is exclusively human -- natural or otherwise. The fables they tell each other, in particular, resonate with such human concerns as motherhood, wisdom, and justice. If the presence of the other birds is not mentioned almost to the end of the poem when they rejoice in the assumed victory of the Nightingale, so is the reader kept at bay until the poem comes to an end and he finds himself in a situation in which he has to decide which bird is the winner. The poem ends with more questions raised than answers provided. Will the poem make any difference in the career of Master Nicholas? Will the audience appreciate the subtleties of the poem even though it is only in the vernacular? Will the intended audience of the poem discern the complaints of a forsaken beloved? This too is part of the pedagogical strategy the poem employs to engage the reader in a dialectic rather than giving him the final word.

In sum, not only is the debate poem of the \textit{O&N} enriched by the fables included

\textsuperscript{62}For more on the use of language as a persuasive device, see Reale 424.
within it, but the poem as a whole functions as a fable with a narrative, its audience, and a number of lessons. Although not a conventional fable, the poem is not all that dissimilar to Lydgate's *Debate*, Henryson's "The Two Mice," or Chaucer's *NPT*, in all of which dialogue and not pure narrative is the dominant technique. However, the dialectic form of the teaching process in the poem, which is its most obvious sign of deviation from conventional fables, is in fact its point of strength, in that it introduces a much less dogmatic and more challenging moral. Instead of offering any ready-made practical advice, the poem encourages the reader to study conflicting possibilities in any given situation. Apart from issues raised in the poem, its very form too becomes an issue. The form becomes its subject. Hence, not only can the *Od & N* be better understood as a fable rather than merely as a debate poem; moreover, this poem helps the reader yet better to appreciate the dialectic potentialities in the more orthodox fables.
VIII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, in the Middle Ages, animal fables continued both to delight and to serve as an instructive device as they had done in different parts of the world for centuries. The O&N poet, Langland, Gower, Chaucer, Lydgate, and Henryson all experimented with this genre and enriched it in a variety of ways. At times they had an eye on the popular Aesopic, then the Romulus collections. At others, they worked with the sermon and public exempla collections in Latin. They also had access to some of the fables of antiquity in Latin translation. Moreover, the Crusades and commerce had introduced the rich repertoire of Oriental animal fables to the West with which our fabulists also had some familiarity. Finally, the other two major kinds of animal stories of the time, i.e., the encyclopaedic bestiary and the Reynardian beast epic, were sources of inspiration for our authors as well. Such a vast spectrum of possibilities as was available to our fabulists gave rise to some of the best animal fables of all times in Middle English.

The O&N poet was amongst the pioneers writing didactic animal fables in Middle English. He was also among the first generation of poets who used the debate form in the vernacular, and secular poetry for teaching purposes. Although itself not a mainstream animal fable, the poem gives the two title birds the opportunity to quote other animal fables to press their instructive message. Langland’s “Belling the Cat” depicts the corruption of both the state and the church and at the same time challenges the reader for some remedy. Lydgate’s fables, Aesopic or otherwise, all advocate orthodox Christian morality. Gower’s “Adrian and Bardus” emphasises the unnaturalness of human
ingratitude, and his “Phebus and Cornide”, like Chaucer’s *Man T*, condemns anger as well as jangling. Chaucer’s *NPT*, on the other hand, like Henryson’s “Cock and Fox”, exposes man’s pride, blindness, and hypocrisy.

Middle English fabulists used familiar birds and animals and relied heavily on their conventional traits and traditional symbolism. From the pensive Owl and the amorous Nightingale to the innocent Lamb and ferocious Wolf, from the indiscreet Crow to the quiet and much feared yet grateful Snake, and especially the conceited Cock and the sly Fox, all are familiar characters in Middle English fables. Animal fables, however, did not hesitate to introduce human characters along with animals. In fact, the anthropomorphs and their human counterparts live on the same level of narrative. *The Churl and the Bird* is probably the best example of such interrelation. The Wether and the Wolf and the Fox, Apollo and the Crow, Master Nicholas and the Owl and the Nightingale, and Chauntecleer and the widow are other such instances where the world of the beasts and that of man are either juxtaposed or simply merged into one unified milieu where all boundaries are removed. Although this does not necessarily mean, as much as one might wish otherwise, that our authors mean to bridge the gap between the two worlds on the literal level of their fiction, animals are not promoted to human station, but on the figural level man is demoted to the state of his winged and the four-legged cohabitants on the earth or, in some cases, even lower. As Henryson has it, while in the world of fiction animals behave like man, in the real world human beings behave much like beasts. The co-existence of animals and man in fables, where they are treated as equals, further emphasises the call for the much-needed moralisation and edification
as a remedy for the vices of both the individuals and the society at large. Moreover, such an assimilation also indicates that animals and humans have more in common than man is ready to admit. As such, even the hierarchical superiority of man over animal is somehow questioned, despite its rigidity. Man may indeed exalt himself and prove to be better and higher than animals but he has to earn this; it is not bestowed upon him.

Whether they tell the same tale or not, each poet has his own agendas and each tale teaches either a different lesson or the same lesson in a different way. Nonetheless, what all these fables have in common is a desire to entertain their audiences with some teaching lesson and to instruct them in an entertaining way. These fables are concerned with the same pedagogical, moral, and social issues as any other didactic genre of the age. They deal with questions of predestination and free will, with the controversial issues of sovereignty and feminism, with virtues such as truth, honesty, wisdom, vigilance, contentment, justice, honesty, restraint, and hygiene, and with vices such as anger, avarice, corruption, cruelty, lechery, adultery, dishonesty, gluttony, ignorance, short-sightedness, flattery, and above all pride. They are not dry sermons, rather an invitation to a better appreciation of life and what it has to offer. They encourage their readers to strive to find practical solutions for their problems, to avoid common pitfalls, and above all to be wary both of the near and distant future. They concern themselves with the darker side of man in general, and that of the statesmen and the clergy in particular.

The Nightingale’s restless effort to win the contest foreshadows the Manciple’s expediency; the theme of ignorance, hyperbolically demonstrated in Henryson’s “Cock
and Jasp" echoes not only the same cock’s ignorance in Lydgate’s “Cock and Jewel,” but also Chauntecleer’s vainglory in Chaucer. All these fables call for justice one way or another. Whereas at one end of the scale, the legalistic style and language of the O&N as well as its subject matter aim at justice, at the other end of the scale, Henryson’s MF as a whole enhances the same motif in individual fables. “Belling the Cat” is primarily concerned with justice and its implementation. Gower’s Justinian becomes the agent of due justice to Bardus. Both Gower and Chaucer emphasise the disastrous consequences of Apollo’s injustice. In the later Medieval Ages, both Lydgate and Henryson turn the moral fable into a vehicle of social protest. In both of these poets, the rich are criticized for their irresponsibility, the friars for their indiscreet behaviour, the church and the state for failing to bring true wrongdoers to justice, rather than taxing the already deprived. Our authors, thus, not only point to the vice of injustice and its origins, but also try to propose some remedy. Justice, they contend, begins with the individual, it comes from within. Ignorance, pride, and condescension are the main sources of injustice.

One of the most compelling themes in medieval English poetry, fables included, is the quarrel between the two sexes over their claim to superiority. The NPT, though the most complex expression of this idea within the genre, is not the only fable to pick on the issue of feminism with Chauntecleer and Pertelote at the centre of a fuming debate. So are the harem of Henryson’s Chanticleir engaged in an amusing, yet an altogether pointed, argument about the place of each sex at home. Both ManT and Gower’s “Phebus and Cornide” touch on the same everlasting battle though mainly by way of implication. Related to the topos of sovereignty by way of extrapolation is the sin of cupiditas
highlighted particularly in the *O&N, ManT*, “Phebus and Cornide”, and the “Trial of the Fox” in all of which spouses are reprimanded for their inconsistency and infidelity. The brutes, once again, illustrate how unnaturally human beings may behave.

Next to *cupiditas* come pride, anger and gluttony. These are the most appealing themes to our fabulists who elaborate on them first in their narratives and then gloss them in their moralising. The medieval authors consciously draw on the deadly sins in keeping with the demand of their audience and the expectations of the clerics. True, they mean to entertain their readers, yet more so do they want to warn them against the sins of both the flesh and the soul. Their fables are meant to instruct those who care about more serious issues in life. In short, they teach man to lead a morally better life.

These fables also teach the reader something of rather a different nature, i.e., how to read between the lines. Both in the Middle Ages and in later periods, Aesopic fables were part of the students’ primers. Simple, short, and almost always with a tagged moral, these fables proved to be an excellent device to teach not only reading and writing, but also rhetoric. Students were sometimes expected to draw their own moral conclusions from these fables as a mental exercise. Yet apparently these pedagogical concerns are not what our animal fable writers have in mind. Henryson apart, there is no indication that any of them actually pretends to the position of a grammarian. What our fabulists try to achieve is, in essence, on an entirely higher level of readership. They engage their intended audience in a dynamic discourse; they create certain expectations; they draw on a wide range of folklore, proverbs, literary allusions; they challenge their readers to crack the shell of their fables and extract their kernel of wisdom. They teach their audience
how to respond to metaphorical writings. They teach their readers how, and not necessarily what, to think.

Although our fabulists have a lot in common, every one of them manipulates the genre in his unique way. Whereas Lydgate’s Isopes Fabulis provides the most straightforward animal fables with some clear morals appended much in line with the traditional Romulus collections of the time, Henryson’s use of the fable form is much more sophisticated. His use of the Reynardian stories as well as the Aesopic tales, his shift of emphasis from the narrative to its moral interpretation, his allusive approach to the genre in general, and his sequential attitude in the tales and their interrelation are all part of his experimentation and his ultimate complexity. If Lydgate is the least interesting and the least appreciated of all fabulists, Henryson is one of the most intriguing. If Lydgate is pedantically interested in the morals of his fables, Henryson is the master of his narrative. Where Lydgate’s versification is not tightly controlled, Henryson’s poetry is always closely in check. Finally, whereas Lydgate does not have a clear picture of either his subject of teaching or his audience, Henryson manages to manipulate both his ideas and his audience in a variety of ways.

Whereas both Lydgate and Henryson focus on their animal fables and generally follow the mainstream conventions of the genre, neither Langland nor Gower isolates his fables from the contexts in which they are embedded. Langland’s “Belling the Cat” is an incidental fable in PP almost exactly like Hesiod’s fable of “The Hawk and the Nightingale.” In fact, although Langland’s use of animal imagery is not restricted to this single fable, he does not seem to be enthusiastic about the genre. Neither does Gower
seem to be really keen about it. If Langland is content with one animal fable, two will suffice for Gower. Again as in Langland, Gower’s “Adrian and Bardus” and “Phebus and Cornide” are tightly interwoven in the larger picture of CA. In fact, Gower is too concerned with making his points to stop and fret about the aesthetics of the genre. Finally, both PP and CA are undeniably highly moral works in which ethics are obviously more important than entertainment.

Chaucer, as always, is different from the rest of our fabulists in that he stretches every aspect of the genre to a new limit and twists it in such a way that his final work is not like anything written before or after him. He manipulates the plot, the characters — man and beast alike — the narrator, and the audience on several layers of his narrative. He plays with the language, pulls his audience’s legs, and parodies the genre. He sometimes sounds ironic and at others, indeed satiric; he juxtaposes the two worlds of man and beasts to experiment with how man is perceived by an outsider, just as man perceives the animals. Moreover, the narrative frame of the CT provides an excellent opportunity for the author to introduce two microcosmic worlds of his fables into the larger macrocosm of the book as a whole. After all the interrelation between man and beast is not lost on the pilgrims on their way from Tabard Inn to Canterbury. It is even more than a mere coincidence that in the final episode of this journey the Parson, like many other pedantic clergy of the time, should denounce the fable as not befitting such an occasion.

Likewise the O&N is a much more problematic case. It is generally, and quite justifiably, categorised as a bird debate. Nonetheless, apart from its embedded fables, it is a fictitious narrative which is didactic and has non-human anthropomorphs for its
characters. The poem is of particular interest to this study because it is the first of its kind in the English language, and it defies all expectations as to both its matter and manner. It is certainly amusing and instructive yet the Aesopic tradition has little bearing on it. It raises more questions than it provides answers. Its debate form is exploited by almost all the rest of our fabulists. Unlike any other fable, despite its length, the poem begins in the animal world and ends there, bracketed only by a narrator in the beginning and an absent umpire at the end. This allows the poet to create a fascinating mirror image of human life in the character of his two birds and in what they have to say and how they behave.

The teaching voice in all these fables is ultimately that of their authors. Whereas this is invariably true in the case of Lydgate with almost no reservation, it is more controversial – at least more problematic – in the case of Chaucer where a certain degree of discretion must be exercised. Where Lydgate is straightforward, Henryson is more playful. Or unlike Gower’s and Langland’s strong morality, Chaucer is ironic and Henryson satiric. The O&N poet is a manipulator of contradictory voices; he is rather a dialogician. At times the teaching voice is simply reporter-like, at others, it comes from a teacher or even a preacher. If Lydgate does not deviate from his monk-like approach, and if Gower and Langland are to the point, Henryson does not shrink from assuming all kinds of stands and Chaucer never spells out his teachings upfront. The O&N categorically defies any clear and singular teaching voice.

It has always been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine the audience of the medieval poetry with any degree of precision. Certain facts, however, have come to light. It is common knowledge, for instance, that Chaucer read his poems
to a courtly audience. Likewise, Henryson's more social fables imply a humbler audience. Although the patron of the O&N poet, the dedicatee of CA, and a few of those who commissioned Lydgate for one poem or another are identified, the historical audience of almost all of our fables must remain a closed book. The clergy and the nobility alike could have heard these fables. Since literacy was a gradually increasing phenomenon, it may be surmised that the earlier fables such as the O&N and the "Belling the Cat" must have had a much limited circulation, but the later medieval fables of Lydgate and Henryson must have been appreciated by a larger public audience. What is certain, however, is that in all these cases, one way or another, the poet himself is the most immediate audience of his fable. Chaucer, for instance, is a pilgrim amongst others; Amans is no one but Gower himself; both Henryson and Lydgate admit that they are translating their Aesop; it is also difficult to dissociate the O&N poet from either the narrator who is eavesdropping or Master Nicholas who will hear the report of the birds' debate. Moreover, one may also -- however cautiously -- infer from the limited information in the corpus of medieval English literature that such fables were ultimately meant to be read to or by both the nobility and the larger community of lettered men, both aristocratic and bourgeois. Besides, there are enough internal signals as well as modes of address in these fables to provide some clues to their authors' imagined or intended audience. Although many were not literate, nor could all the literate afford manuscripts, there is no reason to doubt that by the time some of these fables were printed, they had already found their ways into the hearts and the memory of several generations. Although these fables were not meant to function as sermons and their
embedded exempla did, based on the scholarship on these fables and their reception, our poets seem to have far exceeded their goals and to have been appreciated by many more than they could have ever imagined.

One of the frequent stylistic techniques used by almost all our fabulists is multiple layers of narrative. Such an idea allows the poet to provide a clear and well-defined audience at least on one level of the story. Thus, at least, on one such fictional level of the narrative, not only the teaching lesson is expounded, but also the audience is identified. This, in turn, allows both the poet and the intended reader to evaluate the merits of giving and taking advice. In the NPT, for instance, both Chauntecleer and Daun Russel learn something from their ordeal and adventure. The pilgrims who listen to the Priest then are advised to take the moral lesson of the story of the Cock and Fox -- whatever that moral lesson may be. On the highest level of this hierarchy, Chaucer’s readers should be able to discern for themselves how the multiple lessons of the poem are appreciated by the audiences of the lower levels.

Although these fables employ different methodologies to convey their lessons, the reward and punishment strategy is the most common. In addition, Henryson is especially fond of the surprise motif. The pedagogical debate form is exploited especially by the O&N poet. In fact, a certain degree of debate can be found in almost all of our fables, particularly in Lydgate’s non-Aesopic fables, in Chaucer’s and Gower’s fables with their extended debate passages, and in Langland’s and Henryson’s more limited ones. Most of our fables teach by way of examples of negative behaviour, though positive examples also occur. Whereas in the Middle ages, fabula could mean anything from romance to
exemplum, and hence it was not a well-defined genre, the idea of “ensample” was what most of our authors had in mind and that is the term they employed to characterise their fables. Yet whether their lessons were taken or not is beside the point. That is left for their readers to decide, not so much to judge the past as what is at hand.

The history of animal fables goes as far back as the Sumerian culture of the third millennium BC. In the East, *Kalilah & Dimnah* with its onion-like layers of narrative and predominantly educative mission, marks the peak of this enterprise. Geographically, this monumental work was conceived apparently in Sanskrit in India; translated into Old Persian, rendered into Arabic, adopted by both the Greeks and the Latinists, and finally hosted by the West in the Middle Ages. In the West, the legendary Aesop is generally acclaimed to be the father of animal fables. Phaedrus, Babrius, and Avianus put the Aesopic fables on paper in Greek and Latin. The diverse *Romulus* editions of the Middle Ages marked the culmination of this enterprise in the West. Our authors borrowed the *Romulus* fables, reshaped them, and produced something unlike what had come before. Yet this is not the end of the fable story. They continued to impress great writers of all times. In later periods, La Fontaine of France, Kirolov of Russia, and Thurber of America, amongst others, continued to both rewrite old animal fables as well as compose new ones. Although Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is by far one of the most famous and popular fables of our age, T.F. Powys’s fables have again played the same old tunes. Once more, despite the common belief that animal fables are now a vehicle to teach children, Powys’s fables primarily address adults. Where is the boundary between the animal world and that of man, if there is one?
Out of necessity and not choice, Marie de France at the one end and Caxton's *Fables of Aesop* at the other of the spectrum are excluded from this study; each one of them necessitates an entirely different study of the same magnitude. Although much ink has been spilt on the Aesopic tradition in general, there is still much to know about the history of English animal fable in particular. Moreover, although there are some scattered studies on the Oriental -- Indian and Arabic -- sources and analogues, some deeper cross-cultural scholarship is lacking. Oddly enough, little if any endeavour has been exercised in the East to bridge the literary gap of the Middle Ages. Except for Chaucer, the rest of our fabulists are hardly known by anyone there; similarly Rumi, Saadi, Attar, and Zakani have rarely enjoyed any serious attention here. *Kalilah & Dimnah, Tuti-nameh, Gulistan*, amongst other fable collections, call for closer examination especially in relation with their medieval English counterparts.

Comparative literature includes also studies on texts in the same language sharing certain commonalities, or deviating from certain conventions. Although some of our fabulists have enjoyed some such comparative analyses, no comprehensive study has been undertaken to put our fabulists in a more global perspective. Most of the recurrent anthropomorphs, such as the Fox, the Cock, and the Wolf, may be studied comparatively not only in the medieval fables, but in uses of animal imagery of all times. Such a study might conveniently include both the bestiaries and the beast epics. It might also draw on other animal lore such as the literature of medieval heraldry, or the modern literature of the wild. Although it is almost unanimously agreed upon that fables are meant to teach, there is no convincing study of how consistently they have been used and how successful
they have been.

Another point lacking in our scholarship is how each fable functions in the context of the larger work in which it is embedded. Unlike the Aesopic and Sermon collections, in which isolated and unrelated fables are accumulated, our fables in general appear in larger contexts such as the CT, CA, PP, and MF. Finally, it must be fruitful to try to see how biographical facts about our authors inform the shaping of our fables. Lydgate and Langland were clerics, the O&N poet seems familiar with the world of the clerics. Gower and Henryson had definitely received church schooling. Finally, Chaucer was quite familiar with the ecclesiastical tradition. All of our authors, one way or another, were also familiar with both the civil and the ecclesiastical legal systems.

Whereas the intended audience is taken into account here, a different approach is still possible. Who actually read these fables or listened to them? Diaries, the manuscript ownership, and the history of the libraries containing them must be explored. If the fables themselves do not pose any serious puzzles, the manuscripts in which they have survived, and inevitably the lost ones too, raise challenging questions which need to be addressed. There is the possibility of proofs surfacing that the fables were sometimes read in a more congenial family atmosphere where a parent was literate and could afford obtaining a manuscript. Still there is much to know about the reception of such fables in church congregations. Once we know more about the definition of a child, the borderline between generations, the specifics about the pupils of the time, we should be able to assess the didactic and pedagogical uses of the fable much more fully and accurately.

Is there any way to link the fable as a teaching device to the progress of the
relationship between man and animal? Is there any way to assess man’s achievement in this respect? Foxes were hunted as game in the past and so are they at present. Wolves have always been despised and feared. Is there any change the in man’s attitude towards animals? Man and beast are on the same level in their endurance of fate and the predicament of nature and society in fiction and the real life. Yet, because of his carnality and depravity, fallen man is usually equated with the wildest of the brutes in the fable. Is there any hope for man to give more serious thought about his future? Will he ever pause to look? The fables should help. If Langland’s Cat never bore the bell, Joyce’s Cat, in his *The Cat and the Devil*, is sacrificed at the temple of the Devil and a bridge materialises.¹ Such charming animal stories have always been with man and will always be.

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