# REFLECTIONS ON WILLIAM CAXTON'S 'REYNARD THE FOX'

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Caxton's **Reynard the Fox** (RF) is a translation of the prose **Die Hystorie van Reynaert die Vos** printed by Gerard Leeu at Gouda in 1479. This prose version is itself based on the earlier poetic **Reinaert II** from the fourteenth century. Caxton's version follows the Dutch text fairly closely and narrates how Reynard is summoned to Noble's court to answer charges brought against him and how he manages to outwit his opponents. RF has consequently always appeared the odd man out among Caxton's printed books. It does not fit in with the courtly and religious material emanating from the press, because it is regarded as the only work which is comic and satirical; and it does not fit in with the translations from French for it is the only book translated from Dutch, and Dutch was not such a courtly language as French. The contrast between RF and the rest of Caxton's output has been highlighted recently by the emphasis upon Caxton's links with Burgundy. He spent long periods of his adult life in Bruges and other cities of the Low Countries, which then formed part of the Duchy of Burgundy. The dukes were ostensibly vassals of the French crown, but they had extended their dominions so extensively through marriage and appropriation that by the fifteenth century they acted as independent rulers. Increasingly the dukes identified themselves with the Low Countries which formed the wealthiest part of their duchy as a result of the mercantile development of the Flemish and Dutch towns. About 1462 Caxton became Governor of the English Nation at Bruges, a position which he resigned only in 1471 when he went to Cologne to acquire a printing press. As governor he was involved in diplomatic negotiations between England and Burgundy over trade, because England supplied much of the raw material for the Flemish weavers. Because of his position he probably attended important Anglo-Burgundian events such as the marriage of Charles Duke of Burgundy and Margaret, the sister of Edward IV of England, at Damme in 1468. This marriage symbolises the political and cultural link between England and Burgundy.

When Caxton produced his first printed book in 1473/4, **History of Troy,** he dedicated it to Margaret of Burgundy and because of various expressions he used in the prologue to that work it was until recently widely accepted that he had been in her service. The two usual suggestions were that he acted as her secretary or her librarian. If this were so, it would mean that Caxton left his position as Governor of the English Nation earlier than is supposed in order to join the household of Margaret of Burgundy, and it might imply it was at her request or command that he went to Cologne to learn printing. However, there is no evidence that merchants were employed in this way by members of the nobility like Margaret, and as there is evidence that Caxton was governor until at least 1470, there is little time for him to have been in Margaret's service since he had arrived in Cologne by June 1471. In addition, the use of such words as 'servant' to describe his relations with Margaret does not imply that he was in her service, for words like that were employed then as marks of deference—as was still true until recently, for example in letters which might end 'your obedient servant'. Even so the dedication of **History of Troy** to Margaret does indicate that Caxton was aware of the presence of the Burgundian court and wished at the least to use its name or at best to attract its patronage. Therefore the question of how RF fits in with the rest of Caxton's output needs to be considered.

Caxton's career proceeded in this way. After being apprenticed to Robert Large, a mercer and ultimately Lord Mayor of the City of London, he became a mercer and merchant adventurer. As such he took part in the cross-Channel trade and spent long periods of time in the Low Countries, particularly in Bruges. He evidently prospered and about 1462 he was elected by his fellow merchants to be Governor of the English Nation in Bruges. In this role he became involved in diplomatic negotiations, but he also continued to make his living as a merchant. One of the items of trade he dealt in was manuscripts, because Flanders contained at that time the most important scriptoria for producing illuminated manuscripts in Northern Europe. In 1469 Caxton started to translate the **History of Troy** from the French prose version by Raoul Lefèvre. The French version had been made for Duke Philip of Burgundy, for Lefèvre was a secretary at the ducal court. Caxton gave up the translation after he had completed a few quires and laid the work aside for two years. Then in 1471 he mentioned his translation to Margaret of Burgundy, who ordered him to correct his style and to complete the translation. In June 1471 he went to Cologne to acquire a printing press and the staff to run it, and while there he finished his translation of **History of Troy.** Shortly after his return to Bruges in 1473 he printed **History of Troy** at his own expense, as he says. The only other book he printed in English before he left Bruges for England was his own translation of **Jason** which was translated from the French version also by Raoul Lefèvre. Jason had particular links with the ducal

house of Burgundy which traced its genealogy back to him and had as its chivalric order the Order of the Golden Fleece.

Both these books then were translations of works by Raoul Lefèvre who was a secretary to the Duke of Burgundy; and both had a close link with Burgundian culture. The dukes had a library which was vernacular rather than Latinate and which contained many prose works. Since the **History of Troy** was dedicated to Margaret Duchess of Burgundy, it is natural to assume that in choosing these books Caxton was influenced by Burgundian taste and was trying to introduce an English public to the sort of book fashionable among the Burgundian aristocracy. The dukes had built up one of the finest libraries in Northern Europe, and its contents are documented from the inventories made at the deaths of certain of them. It has, therefore, been possible to suggest that Caxton's output can be measured against the holdings in the ducal library.[1] Thus although the library contained no copies of the Dutch **Reynaert** whether in prose or verse, it did contain copies of the French Roman de Renart which was the ultimate source of the Dutch versions. It could be assumed that Caxton imitated the Burgundian taste for Reynard material which was exemplified by the presence of the French poem in the library through his translation of the Dutch prose version. That he translated from Dutch rather than from French could be accounted for by the existence of the prose version in Dutch, for there is no prose version in French. Since Caxton found it easier to translate prose rather than verse, he used the Dutch text as a matter of convenience rather than from any conviction. Such an approach makes the general background and origin of a text more important than the particular text itself, for the Dutch prose **Reynaert** is in fact very different from the **Roman de Renart.** Caxton was influenced in his choice of material by what was up-to-date and by the prejudices of fashion.

However, it has recently been questioned how far Caxton was really influenced by Burgundian ducal taste.[2] The word 'Burgundian' has been used rather loosely as a generic name for many influences coming from Europe into England. We have been dazzled by the work of Huizinga into assuming that everyone was so struck by the ducal culture and ostentation that they tried to emulate it.[3] It is true that the first two books translated by Caxton had close links with the ducal court in their origin, but it need not follow that he translated them because of that link. They survive in multiple copies, many of which cannot be associated with the ducal library. Caxton's version of the **History of Troy** contains three books, but the first two form one section and the third a separate part. At the end of book two Caxton introduced an epilogue which seems to indicate that it was his original intention to translate only the first two books. In that epilogue he refers to the **Troy-Book** by John Lydgate, then England's most popular poet and the one best known to Caxton. He wrote 'And as for the thirde book which treteth of the generall and last destruccion of Troye, hit nedeth not to translate hit into Englissh for as moche as that worshipfull and religyous man Dan John Lidgate, monke of Burye, dide translate hit but late, after whos werke I fere to take upon me, that am not worthy to bere his penner and ynkehorne after hym, to medle me in that werke.' (p. 99).[4] It could well be that Caxton intended his translation to be an introduction or complement to Lydgate's poem, which was evidently widely read if the number of manuscripts is any guide. Although he dedicated his **History of Troy** to Margaret of Burgundy, the matter is firmly linked with Lydgate and English poetry. He may have chosen to translate Lefèvre's work not because it was specifically linked with Burgundian culture, but simply because it was available to him in Bruges when he started translating. It was also modern and probably unknown in England in that version, though associated with famous English literary works.

In commenting on the concept 'Burgundian' as far as Caxton is concerned, Dr. Hellinga has emphasised that it need not be the same as 'ducal'. Although some books were found in the ducal library, they were also read outside it; and some books were not in that library at all. The problem is that our knowledge of the contents of other libraries is much more limited. Of the four other books (all in French) printed by Caxton in Bruges before he set up his press in England, one was not found in the ducal library at all, though it is recorded in its Latin version in several monastic institutions in the Low Countries. The other three are found in the ducal library, but they are also recorded from other libraries in the Low Countries. When Caxton returned from Bruges to Westminster he continued to make translations of French texts, but few of these were actually written, copied or printed in the Low Countries. France was naturally the place where most writings in French originated and Caxton could hardly ignore that fact. Indeed, during the 1470s many books in French were printed at Lyons, and Caxton used editions from there as the basis for several of his own translations. These texts include **Paris and Vienne, Four Sons of Aymon** and **Eneydos,** but many other translations may have been modelled on French printed editions, though it is not possible to be definite about this as insufficient textual work has been done on them. Caxton preferred to use a printed book rather than a manuscript, possibly because it was cheaper and so needed less careful handling; it was also easier for him to use than a bulky manuscript, and the existence of a text in a French printed version did after all provide him with some guarantee that the work was suf-

ficiently popular to appear in printed form. If this was a consideration, as I am sure it was, it suggests that he was concerned with works that had a wide appeal, that is with books that would sell well.

One important point arises from this discussion, and that is what Caxton's relations with the aristocracy were. Did they act as his patrons and what do we mean by patronage? Caxton dedicated printed books to Margaret of Burgundy, George Duke of Clarence, Queen Elizabeth Woodville, Anthony Earl Rivers and the Prince of Wales among others. If these people had a hand in choosing these books, then Caxton must have been imitating aristocratic taste at least to some extent. However, he also refers to many merchants and civil servants in his prologues and epilogues, and these may possibly have had different ideas about reading matter. The multiplicity and diversity of the names he introduces as patrons in his works suggest that he was not influenced by the tastes of his readers, but followed his own inclinations in the choice of material. He introduced the names to promote an interest in his books. This naturally raises the question of why he chose to print **Reynard the Fox** which is frequently regarded as satiric and anti-chivalric, whereas much of his output is courtly in nature. We might start then by considering what Caxton's attitude to chivalry actually was.

Caxton published a variety of chivalric romances such as **Blanchardin and Eglantine** as well as books that are more instructive in intention such as the **Order of Chivalry** and **Feats of Arms.** It is generally accepted that the latter books are didactic and moralistic in conception and intention. It is sufficient to mention that in the **Order of Chivalry** there is a chapter on the service proper to becoming a knight. As part of this service a sermon is preached which includes the articles of faith, the commandments and the sacraments, and hence the Christian and moral leanings of chivalry are heavily underlined. The former books might seem less didactic, though this is not in fact the case. The most famous example is Malory's **Morte Darthur,** and this example is particularly interesting because Caxton edited it for printing. The work was divided up into books and chapters, each of which has a heading. This has the effect of breaking the material up into short exempla each of which has some kind of moral purpose to it, for the 'material which seems to have attracted Caxton was the moral and religious'.[5] He saw in works of this kind material which was didactic rather than courtly or chivalric.

This attitude is further exemplified by the prologues and epilogues he included with the chivalric works. In the prologue to his edition of the **Morte Darthur** he notes that many gentlemen complained that, although he had printed lives of some of the Nine Worthies, he had not printed anything about King Arthur who was one of the Worthies and an Englishman. Caxton replied that there were doubts of the historicity of Arthur, so the proofs for a historical Arthur are then paraded. The conclusion is that there was a person called Arthur and that there are many books about him in English and Welsh as well as in French. Caxton therefore decided to publish a version of the story written by Sir Thomas Malory from a copy loaned to him so that we can learn how in the past virtuous deeds were rewarded and wicked ones punished. The book describes chivalry and courtesy which will show us how we ought to behave. The book is thus published for the benefit of ladies and gentlemen who should profit from reading it. We may note at once that there is nothing about the glory or prestige of chivalry or indeed anything about the magnificence of Burgundian chivalry. The principal concerns are whether Arthur is historical and the exploitation of historical example as a guide to contemporary behaviour. This brings **Morte Darthur** into line with the view of history expressed in the prologue to his edition of the **Polychronicon.** 'For certayne it is a greete beneurte unto a man that can be reformed by other and straunge mennes hurtes and scathes, and by the same to know what is requysyte and prouffytable for his lyf and eschewe suche errours and inconvenytys, by whiche other men have ben hurte and lost theyr felycyte' (p.129). The **Morte Darthur** is history, and history is a mirror in which contemporary men can see the certain result of any given action. The book is instructive and didactic rather than merely a chivalric romance. A similar sentiment finds expression in the epilogue to the **Order of Chivalry.** There Caxton laments the passing of true chivalry in contemporary England. He encourages his readers to become familiar with accounts of the Holy Grail, Lancelot, Galahad and Tristram as well as with those dealing with past English history including the deeds of Richard I, Edward I and III, Sir John Hawkwood and Sir John Chandos among others. The participants in the Arthurian story are put on the same level as those from earlier English history: they are examples of behaviour which can provide a guide to those who live in the present. Chivalry means moral and virtuous actions, which are best exemplified through historical personages.

In this connection it may be worth mentioning that Caxton dedicated several editions to Anthony Earl Rivers, who had in fact translated the works from French. In his prologues Caxton gives many details of Rivers's career, but it is significant that all these details are moral or religious in tone. Rivers had been on pilgrimages, he had won an indulgence from the pope, and he had translated many moral treatises from French. These details would be as appropriate to a cleric as to a leading member of the English aristocracy and the brother of the queen.

Caxton gives no details of any chivalric actions accomplished by Rivers. He had, for example, taken part in well-publicised tournaments with the Bastard of Burgundy. Caxton has nothing to say on this or on any other political and cultural events of his own day. His interest in literature is as a guide to moral behaviour. It would seem as though he had little interest in purveying Burgundian culture in England; he saw his role more as an educator. He did not use the names of aristocrats in his dedications to imply that he was providing aristocratic reading material, but merely as a means of guaranteeing the stylistic elegance of his editions. We may remember that Margaret of Burgundy had corrected his style in **History of Troy**; she made no comment on the subject matter. Lydgate was a more important influence on the kind of material Caxton published, but we will return to Lydgate shortly.

In most lists of Caxton's published work RF is described as a satire,[6] presumably because this is true of the French **Roman de Renart.** Although the story is humorous and grotesque, it does not follow that Caxton regarded it as satirical. In the prologue to RF, which is translated direct from the Dutch original, Caxton notes that the book is 'maad for nede and prouffyte of alle god folke/As fer as they in redynge or heeryng of it shal mowe vnderstande and fele the forsayd subtyl deceytes that dayly ben vsed in the worlde/ not to thentente that men shold vse them but that euery man shold eschewe and kepe hym from the subtyl false shrewis that they be not deceyuyd'.[7] A similar sentiment is expressed at the end of the book, though that also is translated directly from the Dutch original. The book is fictitious and contains many examples or parables of how people were deceived by the guile of the fox. The purpose of the examples is to put people on their guard so that they are not tricked by wicked people. Although these views come from the Dutch prose version Caxton translated, there is no reason to doubt that they represent his own views. RF is in the same mould as **Morte Darthur,** except the latter shows both good and bad behaviour and the former concentrates only on the bad. The purpose of both is the same: to advise the reader how to behave.

That was not the intention of the **Roman de Renart,** and it may be useful to trace the steps which led to the use of the Reynard story for a different purpose. Although it is a matter of dispute how many steps lie between RF and **Roman de Renart,**[8] as far as the present study is concerned we may confine our attention to the texts which survive. The relationship of the **Roman de Renart** to earlier Latin versions of the fox story and to oral tradition is disputed. What is important for our purpose is that as it exists today the **Roman** consists of a collection of stories brought together in the thirteenth century in which the principal motif is the everchanging relationship between the fox and the wolf. The earliest branches of the **Roman** show how the fox worsts the wolf, but is himself worsted by animals weaker than himself. The poem is both a **conte à rire** and a satire in which the author pokes fun at medieval feudal society and the ideals characteristic of courtly romances. The popularity of this first part of the **Roman** led to the writing of continuations and ultimately of different poems using the same characters. Although the continuations tend to keep the same satirical tone, some of the other poems have a noticeable shift to allegory and moralising. The fox and the wolf were also frequently used as themes in didactic and moralising literature, including sermons.[9] The satirical strain was quickly overlaid by didacticism even in France.

The first branch of the **Roman de Renart,** the **branche du Plaid,** was used as a model by the author of the Middle Dutch **Reinaert I,** probably from the thirteenth century. The poem is built round the summons of Reynard to Noble's court and remains largely satirical in its intention. A continuation of this poem was made in the fourteenth century in what is now called **Reinaert II.** This continuation repeats the framework of the first part, for Reynard is summoned again to court; it is therefore somewhat repetitive. More importantly it includes much material which is not directly linked to the Reynard story; these include exempla and other fable material. The tone of this second poet is openly didactic, for he suggests how the material should be understood in a moral way. Comments on the habits of particular classes of society also appear. The prose version of the Dutch poem printed by Gerard Leeu at Gouda in 1479 follows the poetic version closely, and Caxton's own translation is similarly faithful to its source. The development in Dutch therefore is for a poem which was comic and satirical to be turned into moral allegory. The fox and the wolf become little different from the animals in didactic fables such as the dog with the bone. The prose version is also broken up into chapters and this is a process which helps moralisation, since each chapter can be directed to a particular moral reading. We have seen that this is how Caxton treated the **Morte Darthur,** and the handling of that text gives us some insight into his reactions to the Dutch prose version.

The trend towards moralising in the development of the Reynard story continues in both English and Low German. RF was reprinted many times during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the story was changed and given a more didactic dress. Moral interpretations found their way into the margins of the editions, and soon these aditions were incorporated into the text itself. At the same time the audience addressed sinks lower in status until we reach the situation in which the Reynard story is considered a suitable text for children. When it gets to that position, satire has vanished completely to be

replaced by moral teaching laced with humorous example. Much the same development can be traced on the Continent.[10] Reynard was seen as part of popular literature which was published in books having a wide sale. The story was used for instruction and sermonising. Again the satirical side of the beast epic became less prominent as the stories of the animals became more like moralised fables.

We come back, then, to the question of why Caxton should have translated this text. We must accept that, as a translation from Dutch, it was less courtly than the translations from French, though Caxton was influenced more by courtly style than courtly subject matter. Continental scholars have a tendency to posit an earlier prose version between **Reinaert II** and Leeu's Gouda edition, and to claim that Caxton used this text which could have been available only in manuscript form. The reason for this claim is that on a few occasions Caxton's English seems closer to **Reinaert II** than to the Gouda edition, although for the most part his text keeps extemely close to the latter. This claim ignores the facts that RF is a translation and so cannot reproduce its original faithfully, and that Caxton worked in haste. Odd departures from the original may sometimes coincidentally resemble **Reinaert II**, but are probably not significant. As we have seen, Caxton found it easier to work from a printed book so he is more likely to have used the Gouda edition than a manuscript. Furthermore, he liked to be up with the times, and the virtue of the Gouda edition was that it had only just appeared when Caxton translated it. It parallels many of the translations made from French texts printed in Lyons, for the majority of those had appeared in an English format within two years of their being published at Lyons. Although there may have been an early Dutch prose version, its existence cannot be inferred from Caxton's edition. Caxton almost certainly used the Gouda edition and in doing so exhibited his typical opportunism. It was the recent appearance of the text in print which attracted him.

That the original was in Dutch may have seemed less important. Caxton offered no apology for the style of his translation, although he did not indicate it was from Dutch. What is also interesting is that Caxton did not find it necessary to add a prologue or epilogue of his own. He repeats the purpose of the book found in the Dutch text and he adds that he himself has translated the book. He does not include a dedication to any member of the aristocracy. From this it may be inferred that he was not too concerned about the book's appeal. Although the story was new in England, it presumably fell into a recognisable genre which he felt would expedite its sale. What genre was that and how did it develop in England?

In addition to RF, Caxton published three books which exploit animals in a didactic and moralistic manner: **Aesop's Fables, Churl and Bird,** and **Horse, Sheep and Goose.** It is significant that two of these were poems written by John Lydgate and the third, **Aesop's Fables,** was translated from a French edtion printed at Lyons in 1480, though Lydgate also wrote a metrical version of some Aesopic fables. Like RF, none of these texts has prologue or epilogue and none is dedicated to a member of the aristocracy. His edition of Aesop's fables contains an incipit which mentions that the book was translated from French by Caxton in 1483; it also has an explicit which mentions that it was printed on 26 March 1484. It is possible that the last two fables in the edition were added by Caxton from some other source. Like RF, **Aesop's Fables** was a popular work which was reprinted many times in England and in most Continental countries. **Churl and Bird** and **Horse, Sheep and Goose** were sufficiently popular that they were reprinted by Caxton, as is true of RF. If we consider these reprints, we can understand that Caxton produced quite a number of moralised animal texts. This output and the association of the genre with Lydgate indicates that works of this kind were popular and widely read.

**Churl and Bird** and **Horse, Sheep and Goose** were printed early in Caxton's career at Westminster, perhaps in 1477, and they indicate that Caxton was using two popular concepts to launch his printing press in England, namely the poetry of Lydgate and animal literature with a moralised content. **Churl and Bird** survives in at least nine manuscripts and was printed shortly after Caxton's death by de Worde (twice), Pynson, Mychel and Copland. It opens by noting the usefulness of fables which purvey moral truths and **sententiae** based upon the Bible. It goes on to mention those which use animals as their subject matter:

> And semblably poetes laureate,
> Bi dirk parables ful convenyent,
> Feyne that briddis & bestis of estat —
> As roial eglis & leones — bi assent
> Sent out writtis to hold a parlement,
> And madde decrees breffly for to sey,
> Som to haue lordship, & som to obey. (15-21)[11]

What is interesting in this stanza is that Lydgate refers to the opening scene found in the Reynard story when Noble the lion sends out his messengers to announce the holding of an assembly of the animals. The type of story represented by RF is already prefigured here in Lydgate's poem. The poet goes on to suggest that poets in general do good by writing about morality under the allegorical cover of animals, and therefore he will himself write a story based on a version he has translated from the French. The French version he claims to have read recently in a booklet. These are the sort of comments that Caxton himself frequently made in his own prologues and epilogues. They show that he had read Lydgate carefully and to a large extent imitated much of what he wrote. It seems natural to suppose that he also

took over his interest in moralised animal literature. The story of **Churl and Bird** is that the churl captures a bird that sings beautifully and puts her in a cage. The bird stops singing and pleads for its freedom. In order to win its freedom it gives the churl three pieces of good advice. After obtaining its freedom the bird both sings and tests the churl, who reveals that he has not taken the good advice of the bird to heart. The poem ends with the words of the author underlining the moral to be extracted from the story:

Ye folk that shal this fable seen & rede,
New forgid talis counceilith yow to flee,
For losse of good takith no gret heede,
Beeth nat to sorwefful for noon aduersite,
Coveitith no-thyng that may nat bee,
And remembrith, wheer that euer ye gon,
A cherlis cherl is alwey woo-begon. (365-71)

Fifteenth-century English readers were evidently quite familiar with reading moral lessons into animal fables long before Caxton started printing.

**Horse, Sheep and Goose,** which survives in eleven manuscripts and the prints of Caxton and de Worde, deals with a debate among these three animals before the eagle and lion as to which of the three was the most useful animal to man. Each parades his virtues and the shortcomings of the others. The judges decide that each is useful to the state and so each should continue giving his own particular benefits to it. Comparisons are not helpful and so should be avoided. The poem finishes with an envoy in which the author comments upon the subject matter, drawing out the moral interpretation:

Off this fable conceivith the sentence;
At good leiser doth the mateer see,
Which importith gret intelligence
Yiff ye list take the moralite
Profitable to euery comounte,
Which includith in many sondry wise,
No man shuld of hih nor lowe degre,
For no prerogatiff his neihbore despise. (540-7)

Every man has some good and so no man should be despised. Later in the envoy Lydgate refers to Aesopic fables and says how many poets have been able to use animals in an allegorical manner to chastise tyrants and other oppressors. People evidently expected to read through animal impersonations to the message which the poet concealed under their shapes.

Lydgate's **Isopes Fabules** was less well-known than his other two poems, for it is found today in only three manuscripts and was apparently never printed. The poem starts with an introduction in which Lydgate praises the acquisition of wisdom. Aesop had taught wisdom through using fables based on animals. Lydgate has therefore decided to translate a version of his fables, and although he does not say from which language he is translating it must have been French. Several collections of versified fables in French survive from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[12] Lydgate's collection consists of the cock and the jacinth, the wolf and the lamb, the frog and the mouse, the hound and the sheep, the wolf and the crane, the sun's marriage, and the hound that stole a cheese. Each fable consists of a narrative followed by a moral interpretation. Thus the moral of the cock and the jacinth is that men should be diligent and receive whatever God sends them in their station in life.

These three texts are important in showing the impact that Lydgate had upon Caxton, and Lydgate in his turn mediates traditional material. Aesopic material formed part of school instruction and the habit of allegorizing natural phenomena was part of the Christian interpretive tradition. In choosing to publish RF, Caxton can have had only its place within the Lydgatian tradition of medieval animal moralising in mind, and this is why he did not need to compose a publisher's blurb in the form of prologue or epilogue. Although the words indicating a moral reading of RF are translated from Dutch, they nevertheless represent how Caxton and most English readers for that matter would have understood the text. We have been too bemused by the concept of beast-epic and have assumed that Caxton and his public were concerned with aristocratic and chivalric satire, though this seems to have been far from his mind.

There is in fact little evidence that the cyclical **Roman de Renart** or its derivatives were known in England before Caxton's RF was published in 1481.[13] The thirteenth-century **The Fox and the Wolf** resembles fable literature rather than the **Roman** in its brevity, in its introduction of the animal participants without naming them (though they are named incidentally in the course of the poem), and in its presentation of the material to underline the moral that those who succumb to temptation will be deceived. A poem called **A Song on the Times** from British Library MS Harley 913 contains a complaint about the perversion of justice through bribery and influence — a perversion which is illustrated through a fable containing animal characters. The subject matter and its handling echo the Aesopic fables by Lydgate. The most important English text before Caxton's time to deal with a Reynard episode is Chaucer's **Nun's Priest's Tale,** though it should also be remembered that Chaucer's **Manciple's Tale** is also an animal fable, though not one from the Reynard cycle. What is important about both these tales is how Chaucer finishes them. In the **Nun's Priest's Tale** he ends his mock-heroic story with an injunction to the reader to look for a moral:

But ye that holden this tale a folye
As of a fox or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralitee, goode men.
For seint Poul seith that al that writen is

To oure doctryne it is ywrite ywis. (10:3410-4)[14]

Chaucer has his joke by suggesting that his tale is meant to be read as a serious piece of moral didacticism, and in doing so he can poke fun at the cult of fables in which such bizarre stories were indeed interpreted allegorically. He compounds the humour by linking this suggestion with the proverbial Pauline statement that everything is written for our instruction — a sentence that was indeed frequently used in justifying moral interpretations of Aesopic fable. The **Manciple's Tale** relates the story of the crow who told its master of his wife's infidelity. That also ends with a suggestion as to how the story should be understood:

Lordynges, by this ensample I yow preye
Beth war and taketh kepe what I seye:
Ne telleth neuere no man in youre lyf
How that another man hath dight his wyf;
He wol yow haten mortally certeyn. (11: 309-13)

He then goes on to provide a list of moral platitudes which seem to have little relevance to the tale which has just been told. In both these cases the important point is that the tradition of reading animal fables in a moral way enables Chaucer to burlesque it. He can rely upon his audience's knowledge of this type of material to respond to the delicate humour which he extracts from it. Chaucer's writings confirm that there was a tradition which Caxton would have known and which help us to place his edition of RF.

The way Caxton expected his text to be understood can be gauged to some extent from the reception it received. Some indication of this is provided by the way it was used by other people. There are two important examples of this treatment: one in Bristol cathedral and the other in Henryson's **Fables.** There is a series of misericords in Bristol cathedral which date from 1528, and this series contains scenes from the Reynard story as well as scenes from other animal fables. This series is the only unambiguous example of the Reynard cycle in carving in England, and it is significant that it dates from after the publication of Caxton's edition. Although Professor Varty has expressed reservations as to whether the misericords are based on Caxton's version rather than a Continental one, their date and the close link which some scenes have iconographically with woodcuts in some of the English reprints of Caxton's edition suggests that there is a close connection between the two.[15] Perhaps, though, what is more important is that the Reynard cycle should be portrayed in a church and closely associated with other animal iconography. It is clear that the carver, whether he was using Caxton's edition or not, associated the Reynard story with other animal allegory and used it to portray certain vices and virtues. It is quite improbable that he saw in the Reynard cycle a satire of chivalric behaviour and wanted to decorate his church with satirical portraits. It is true that many modern interpretators of animal carvings in churches see in them the way in which the medieval carvers could get their own back on the rigidity of ecclesiastical teaching, though this is surely a modern, romantic view. The widespread use of bestiary material in carvings and the essentially allegorical and moral nature of the bestiaries reveal that animal pictures were almost always intended to convey some form of teaching to the observer.[16] Bristol itself was a port with a flourishing mercantile population, which one would expect to have more sympathy with the traditional moral teaching of the church than with aristocratic satire. It may be accepted that in the early sixteenth century Caxton's **Reynard the Fox** or some closely related version was accepted as part of the animal fable tradition and was used artistically in the same way as, for example, the bestiaries. Because the story was available in printed form, it had the virtue that it might be more widely known and so would be more readily intelligible to any observer.

There is also dispute as to whether Henryson was familiar with Caxton's **Reynard the Fox.**[17] RF was printed in 1481 and Caxton's **Aesop's Fables** in 1484. Unfortunately the dates when Henryson's works were produced are not known and it may well be that some of his fables were written before 1481. Many scholars, however, assume that they were written shortly after 1481 and that Caxton's edition reached Scotland very shortly after it was printed. Henryson used as his main source a French **Isopet** and he may have had access to Lydgate's **Isopes Fabules.** It is also clear that he used material which comes from the Reynard cycle and which was not readily available in other sources, particularly Aesopic fables. Whether he got this Reynard material from Caxton or some other source is less easy to decide, though it has been widely assumed that Caxton did provide him with this information.[18] Possibly significant is the name Waitskaith which occurs both in Henryson and Caxton. Several other incidental details in Henryson could also have been taken by him from Caxton, though conclusive proof is lacking. Henryson's **Fables** start with a prologue in which the moral teaching of fables is underlined:

And als the caus quhy thay first began
Wes to repreif the of thi misleuing,
O man, be figure of ane vther thing. (5-8)

The fables are then given and they follow the same pattern used by Lydgate. The narrative comes first and then its **moralitas.** The moral is usually relevant to human moral behaviour, though those given by Henryson are not necessarily identical with those provided by Lydgate. Among the stories which Henryson includes there is a fable of the trial of the fox, which is directly related to **branche** I of the **Roman de Renart** and which forms the central element in all its derivatives including Caxton's version. In the moral interpretation at the end the fox is

likened to temptation:

> This tod I likkin to temptationis,
> Beirand to mynd mony thochtis vane,
> That daylie sagis men of religiounis,
> Cryand to thame, 'Cum to the world againe! (1132-5)

Although this particular interpretation is not found in Caxton's version, it is not too far away from Caxton's reading of the Reynard cycle. Once again we can see that the Reynard cycle has been joined to fable material and interpreted in a moralistic way. Although we cannot prove that Henryson actually followed Caxton in this poem, it allows us to see that Caxton's book would have been read and understood in this way. It was not read as satire or as a commentary on chivalric ideals; it was seen as a collection of animal stories which could be interpreted allegorically to provide guidance for human beings in their own behaviour.

Because **Reynard the Fox** has been grouped under the beast-epic genre, it has been customary to regard it as something different from other animal literature. This is partly because the **Roman de Renart** is such a lively text in which satire and humour predominate. It has therefore been felt that all later adaptations of it share the same characteristics. This is not the case, for even in French many of the later developments of the Reynard cycle are allegorical and didactic. These later versions are less frequently read or studied and consequently their different nature has attracted less attention. In England there is no evidence that the **Roman de Renart** or its derivatives were known until Caxton produced his translation of the Dutch prose version in 1481. Before that time animal allegory was familiar through adaptations of Aesopic fables and through bestiaries, which were particularly common in England. It was these which were used in Church decorations and as school texts, and it is likely that animal stories were much better known than the extant literary remains suggest. Both Chaucer and Lydgate were influenced by this tradition of allegorised animal fables. It has been accepted in the past that Caxton was influenced by Burgundian taste in his choice of books and that his translation of Reynard was an expression of Burgundian chivalric ideals, although in a satirised form. It was natural, consequently, to assume that the book was aimed at an aristocratic audience and that Caxton was introducing something that was new in England. In fact it now seems likely that he was more influenced by Lydgate and traditional English material than was previously recognised. His choice of RF falls in with the other animal fables he published and indicates a debt to Lydgate's example. The audience for books of this kind is likely to have been the educated middle classes and the intention of the books was didactic rather than satirical. It was for this reason that Caxton did not have to provide them with introductory material, for he knew that his audience would accept them as part of their traditional reading matter. The history of animal literature in England and the reception of Caxton's edition show that his audience accepted RF as an animal fable with a moral message. It was of course no worse for being entertaining as well. Far from being the odd man out in his publication list, RF is part of a recognised genre in medieval English literature. Its foreign origins are far less important and significant than its links with other English works, particularly those by Lydgate.

[1]N.F. Blake, 'William Caxton: His Choice of Texts,' **Anglia** 83 (1965), 289-307.

[2]L. Hellinga, 'Caxton and the Bibliophiles,' in **Actes du XIe Congrès International de Bibliographie Bruxelles 1979** (Brussels, 1981), pp. 11-38.

[3]J. Huizinga (trans. F. Hopman), **The Waning of the Middle Ages** (London, 1924); see also G. Kipling, **The Triumph of Honour** (Leiden, 1977).

[4]Quotations from and references to Caxton's prologues and epilogues are to N.F. Blake, **Caxton's Own Prose** (London, 1973).

[5]S. Shaw, 'Caxton and Malory,' in **Essays on Malory**, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford, 1963), p. 121.

[6]For example. H.B. Lathrop, 'The First English Printers and their Patrons,' **The Library**, 4th ser. vol. 3 (1922-3), 69-96, particularly p. 78.

[7]N.F. Blake, **The History of Reynard the Fox**, EET 263 (London, 1970), p. 6.

[8]For a recent review see N. Witton, 'Die Vorlage des Reinke de Vos,' in **Reynaert, Reynard, Reynke** ed. J. Goossens and T. Sodmann (Cologne and Vienna, 1980), pp. 1-159.

[9]J. Flinn, **Le Roman de Renart dans la littérature française et dans les littératures étrangères au moyen age** (Toronto, 1963), particularly chapter xi.

[10]See for example H. Menke, 'Populäre "Gelehrtendichtung" im Dienste der reformatorischen Lehre. Zur Sinndeutung und Rezeption der Rostocker Überlieferung des "Reineke Fuchs," in Goossens and Sodmann op. cit. pp. 249-81.

[11]References to and quotations from Lydgate's poems are to H.N. MacCracken, **The Minor Poems of John Lydgate**, pt ii, EETS 192 (London, 1934).

[12]J. Bastin, **Recueil général des Isopets**, 2 vols (Paris, 1929-30).

[13]For an account of pre-Caxtonian fable literature see N.F. Blake, 'Reynard the Fox in England,' in **Aspects of the Medieval Animal Epic**, ed. E. Rombauts and A. Welkenhuysen (Louvain and The Hague, 1975), 53-65.

[14]References are to N.F. Blake, **The Canterbury Tales** (London, 1980).

[15]These misericords are illustrated and discussed in K. Varty, **Reynard the Fox. A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art** (Leicester, 1967), plates 48-52 and pp. 45-8.

[16]See E. Mâle, (trans. D. Nussey), **The Gothic Image** (London, 1961).

[17]See D. Fox, **The Poems of Robert Henryson** (Oxford, 1981), pp. xliv-1. Quotations from Henryson are from this edition.

[18]Cf. G. Kratzman, **Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430-1550** (Cambridge, 1980), p. 6 'It is not possible to date Henryson's **Morall Fabillis** with absolute precision, but he must have obtained copies of both Caxton's **Reynard** and his **Aesop** within a short time of their coming from the press.'