

OF CABBAGES AND WINE: POPULAR BELIEF OR SCIENTIFIC TRADITION IN THE ROMAN DE RENART

John F. Flinn—University of Toronto

One of the most amusing and curious of the original branches of the **Roman de Renart**, "Les Vêpres de Tibert" — Branch XII in the Martin edition(1) — is also one of the most satirical and one of the richest in references to contemporary events. The poet, Richard de Lison, tells us in the opening lines that he has translated an old story into French; the first part of his poem, however, is a tale, perhaps inspired by a real incident, upon which the poet has used his fertile imagination to satirize the lower clergy, and in particular the rural priests, who are depicted as ignorant, ill-prepared for their task, and fonder of the hunt than of their spiritual duties. The introductory episode recounts the misfortunes of the priest who covets Tibert's hide, is bested in a Latin competition, loses his missal, psalter, vestments and horse to the wildcat, and is obliged to return to his parish on foot. His babblings about losing his belongings to Tibert inspire the mockery of his parishioners, who come to a logical but uncharitable conclusion:

"Dan prestre, il est la feste as fox.
Si fera len demain des chox
Et grant departie a Baieus." (11.469-472)

In the edition by Mario Roques(2) this passage is somewhat clearer:

"Danz prestre, il est la feste as fous
Si fera on demain des chous
Grant departie a Bahieux." (11.11937-39)
["Sire prêtre est à la fête des fous, et demain on fera une grande distribution de choux à Bayeux."]

I have explained elsewhere(3) that Richard de Lison had without any doubt based his whole poem on certain customs of his period and probably on his personal experience: the second part of the poem is introduced here by the reference to the "feste as fous," the celebrated and notorious Feast of Fools so popular throughout the Middle Ages, and of which the incident of the **Vêpres** is an echo. It seems to me highly probable that Richard de Lison had witnessed the Fête des Fous, if indeed he had not taken part in it in his younger days, quite possibly at Bayeux as well. This riotous and fundamentally blasphemous festival was the occasion of, among other things, much feasting and drinking — in the Glossary to the Roques edition we find for "chou" the explanation "mets de bombance." The history of the cabbage, however, in no way suggests that this vegetable was ever highly esteemed solely as a festive dish — quite the contrary would seem to be true, as we shall see. It

is to be noted furthermore that our text specifically indicates that the "grant departie" of cabbages was to take place on the day following the Fête des Fous. The meaning of these lines is certainly to be sought elsewhere, and it is in a belief or rustic saying popular throughout the Middle Ages that we find the answer: cabbage was long considered to be an excellent remedy, as I have explained in my earlier work, for drunkenness — both for preventing it and for helping to recover from it. This belief was linked with the idea, perhaps supported by actual farming experience, that the vine and the cabbage were "enemies" and would not grow together. Our text indicates therefore that the villagers who encounter the unfortunate priest after his defeat at the hands of Tibert believe that he is drunk and will consequently have to eat cabbage to recover, as is the custom after the excesses of the Fête des Fous.

What evidence do we have of the existence in the Middle Ages of any such beliefs? The incompatibility of the vine (and wine) with cabbage is mentioned in various languages and under various forms. In his **Livre des proverbes français**(4) Le Roux de Lincy gave a common 15th-century proverb on this subject:

Quand le chou passe la soy
Le vigneron meurt de soif.

[When the cabbage spreads beyond the hedge, the grape-grower dies of thirst.]

In the following century this proverb seemed to receive official sanction in more scientific form in the first edition of **L'Agriculture et maison rustique** by Charles Estienne, "docteur en médecine," and published in Paris in 1564(5): under the heading "Inimitié entre la vigne, le vin et le chou" (p. 39b) we read:

Surtout, le chou ne doit estre planté pres de la vigne, ny la vigne pres du chou, car il y a si grande inimitié entre ces deux plantes, que les deux, plantees en un mesme terroir, ayant prins quelque croissance, se retournent arriere l'une de l'autre, et n'en sont tant fructueuses: qu'il soit vray, si lon mesle du vin tant soit peu au pot ou cuira le chou, le chou ne cuira par apres, et si il corrompra sa couleur.

The author returns to the subject in the same volume, adding the laurel and hazel to the enemies of the vine but insisting above all on the nocivity of the cabbage:

Aux vignes semblablement nuisent beaucoup le laurier, couldrier, et les choux plantez en leur gueret, et principalement les choux qu'elle hait sur tout...

In subsequent editions, in which Estienne was joined by another doctor, Liebault, the same admonitions appear. In the second edition in 1583 it is again stated that "sur tout la vigne hait les choux." In this connection it is perhaps the moment to note that this idea was not limited to France: under "cabbage" the New English Dictionary for example cites a phrase from Lily's *Euphuus*, written in 1580: "As little agreement... as is betwixt the vine and the cabish." This idea is repeated by Randle Cotgrave in his *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611), and it would doubtless be possible to multiply the references.

What is, however, more important for us is the idea of cabbage being an antidote for drunkenness — either to prevent or cure it. Indeed, this idea appears in further mentions in *L'Agriculture et maison rustique*. The two ideas, the enmity between vine and cabbage and the cabbage as a preventive or cure for drunkenness, perhaps originally a rather logical development one from the other, are closely associated. In the first edition we find under "Yvrongnes sobres":

Pour faire que les yvrongnes deviendront sobres, leur faut manger des choux et confitures faites de miel...

In the second edition, under the heading "Inimitié entre la vigne, le vin et le chou," the two authors develop their remarks on the curative powers of cabbage:

... ceux qui veulent boire beaucoup de vin, sans estre yvres, doivent manger avant des choux cruds, comme ont de coustume faire les Alemans quand ils veulent boire a plein godet, et faire partie à qui boira le mieux.

This observation also indicates that the Germans shared this belief. Later in the same edition the remark on the harmful effects exercised on the vine is completed by an observation that combines the "mortal enmity" of the two plants and the medicinal qualities of the cabbage:

Aux vignes semblablement nuisent beaucoup le laurier, coudrier et les choux plantez en leur gueret, et principalement les choux qu'elle hait sur tout, estant une antiphatie naturelle et exitiale entre ces deux plantes, et que le chou est un vrai antidote de l'yvrongnerie, ainsi que dirons tantost.

A few pages later more details are added:

Vous osterez la force du vin, si vous mettez dans le vin du jus de choux, lesquels auparavant vous aurez maschez et en aurez tiré le jus.

Pour boire grande quantité de vin et ne s'enyvrer point, faut manger du poulmon de chevre rosti... ou autrement mangez des choux cruds avant que de boire, et vous ne vous enyvrerez point.

Pour faire que les yvrongnes deviendront sobres,

leur faut faire manger des choux et confitures faites de miel...

Our 16th-century French doctors do not reveal their sources; were they simply repeating popular traditions, or did they not feel it necessary to indicate the authorities from whom they derived their wisdom? The latter would seem to be the case, for similar affirmations from around the same time are indeed accompanied by the names of their sources. In 1655 John Goodyer produced an English version of the *De materia medica* of Pedanios Dioscorides. The work of this illustrious physician and pharmacologist, which was written around 77 A.D., was, according to one of Goodyer's modern editors, "for over 15 centuries the leading pharmacological text" in Western Europe(6). In Book 2, Section 146 of Goodyer's version of Dioscorides's work we can read under the heading "Krambe Emeros. Brassica cleracea — Cabbage":

Brassica, that is sown or sett (Somme call it Crambe Cepaea, i.e. garden Brassica, the Latines Brassica, is good for the belly... But the Summer Brassica is naught for the stomach, and sharper, but that which grows in Egypt is unedible for its bitterness. Being eaten, it helps such as are dull-sighted, and such as are troubled with tremblings; being taken after meate, it doth extinguish the maladies that come of gluttony, and wine.

An earlier English Herbal, John Gerard's *Historie of Plants*(7) published in 1597, also refers to this source:

Dioscorides teacheth, that the Colewoort being eaten is good for them that have dim eies.

It is reported, that the raw Colewort being eaten before meate, doth preserve a man from drunkennesse: the reason is yeilded, for that there is a naturall enmitie betwene it and the vine, which is such, as if it grow neere unto it, forthwith the vine perisheth and withereth away; yea, if wine be poured unto it while it is in boiling, it will not be any more boiled, and the colour thereof quite altered, ... yet doth not Athenaeus ascribe that vertue of driving away drunkennesse to the leaves, but to the seeds of Colewort.

Here we note again the association of the enmity of the two plants and the cabbage as a antidote for drunkenness. Of Athenaeus we shall hear more later. Again, in Richard Banckes's *Herbal* printed in London in 1525(8), we have a similar observation on "Colewortes":

This herb is good to cleanse fresh wounds... and to help sore eyes that be almost sightless... The juice tempered with alum and eisell (i.e. vinegar), it assuageth the leprosy, and it is good to keep a man from drunkenness. It is hot and dry.

It has been suggested that Banckes's *Herbal* probably derived from an unknown medieval manuscript, and perhaps even from various sources. Gerard

undoubtedly drew his references to Dioscorides from the **Stirpium historiae** of the Dutch botanist Rembert Dodoens which was published in 1595. Going farther back, to the Middle Ages, we find another reference to the curative or preventive powers of the cabbage in a Middle Dutch treatise which is contained in two manuscripts, one dated 1377, the other being from the end of the 15th century(9). Under the heading "Van caulis" we read:

Caulis romana die in grix brassica heyt; Dats coel in dietsche. Catoen die meyster seyt dat die van Romen wel .vj. hondert jaer te voren eer dit boec maket wart hadden in ghewoenten dit cruut in medicinen te nemen.

Die des daghes eerst van desen coel et cume (sic) voelet hy des daghes dronckenscap.

[**Caulis** in Latin, which is **brassica** in Greek; that is cabbage in Dutch. The master Cato said that for six hundred years before this book was made the Romans were accustomed to using this plant as a medicine.

He who eats this cabbage first thing in the day, hardly feels drunkenness during the day.]

This Middle Dutch work was supposedly derived from the **Circa instans** or **Liber de simplici medicina** of Matthaeus Platearius, a renowned Salerno doctor. His Latin text was probably composed around 1140, and it has been described as one of the three leading medical and pharmaceutical texts of the Middle Ages; L.J. Vandewiele states further that it consistently appeared on the list of six books required of every apothecary by municipal ordinances. At this point it might be noted that another of the three principal texts used in the Middle Ages, the **Antidotarium Nicolai**, written around 1100 and probably even more famous than the **Circa instans**, makes no mention of the curative powers of the cabbage. In view of the obvious errors in our Middle Dutch text, we may have some doubts about the linguistic competence of its author, but the reference to Cato is the first of several that we shall encounter.

Let us return at this point to our original French passage from the **Roman de Renart**. What was the origin of Richard de Lison's reference to cabbages, a reference the meaning of which had long escaped medievalists but which had presumably been quite clear to the medieval audience? It is now obvious that the enmity between the vine and the cabbage was proverbial in the 15th century and later. As for the medicinal virtues of the cabbage, learned references seem to be somewhat rarer in French than in other languages in the earlier period. Despite much searching I have turned up only two medical or semi-medical recipes involving the cabbage, both from the South of France. One appears in a collection of medical, alchemic and astrological recipes of the 15th century in Gascon dialect(10):

Embriayc. Item, qui manga cal cru in degu, purgua lo cap el den(ega), e tol que hon ne se embriaygue, per embriaygua.

[**Drunkness.** He who eats raw cabbage on an empty stomach, clears the head and counteracts it, and prevents himself from getting drunk through drinking.]

This book of recipes, be it noted in passing, is attributed to a certain Doctor Arcemis, and at the same time it is stated that he received his information from a very high source indeed:

Ayso es lo libre que fec lo mege Arcemis de las vertutz de las erbas las cals vertutz li foro manifestadas e reveladas per l'angeil de nostre senhor en la manieyra que s('en sec).

[This is the book that the doctor Arcemis made on the virtues of herbs, which virtues were shown and revealed to him by the angel of the Lord as follows.]

The other recipe is more ancient and comes from a collection of medical recipes gathered by a certain Peire de Serras, a merchant, in 1353 and 1355 and written in the Provençal dialect. In his edition of the collection Clovis Brunel(11) suggested that these recipes came from several different sources. No attribution — other than the very lofty one given in the introduction to the manuscript — is ascribed to the recipe that interests us:

Az aquels que son enebriatz.

Adz aquels quesson enebriat. Beva grana de cals am d'aigua ho folhas de betonica verda, e fa ne anar lo 'nebriar.

[For those who are drunk. Let him drink cabbage-seed along with water or leaves of green betony, and he will dispel the drunkenness.]

If it has been impossible to discover similar references in medieval French, there does remain, nevertheless, a major source of such information in France. The **Speculum maius** of Vincent de Beauvais was unquestionably the greatest encyclopedic work that the 13th century produced, and in the **Speculum naturale** the author draws on many sources for his knowledge. Thus in Book 10, Chapters 33 and 34, under the heading "De Brassica," he refers first to the enmity between the vine and wine and the cabbage, and again we find Cato being treated as the authority on the matter:

Sylvestris sive erratica effectus laudat Cato, ita ut hanc alii petream vocant inimicissimam vino, quam praecipue vitis fugiet, aut moritur si fugere non possit...

[Cato praises the properties of the wild, or stray, cabbage. Some call this variety rock-cabbage, which is extremely antipathetic to wine, so that the vine flees it in particular, or dies if it cannot flee.]

In Chapters 45 and 46 Vincent de Beauvais returns to the subject under the headings "De calua, et eius cultura et disciplina" and "De virtute caulis in medicina." He attributes to Avicenna the information that boiled cabbage or its seed prevent drunkenness: "Iterum eius decoctio ac semen tardant ebrietatem," and to Dioscorides the information that "the bitter cabbage grown in Egypt is good for dim eyes and when it is eaten raw it prevents drunkenness after feasting":

Qui nascuntur in Aegypto amari sunt et si commesti fuerint caligines oculorum detergent. Typicis prosunt crudi commesti ebrietatem in convivio non admittunt.

The popularity of Vincent de Beauvais's work would in itself have been enough to ensure that the double idea of the enmity of the vine and the cabbage and the medicinal properties of the cabbage was widely disseminated in medieval medical and pharmaceutical treatises, and with its attribution to a series of learned and respected authorities, Platearius, Avicenna, Dioscorides, and Cato, no doubts could linger in the medieval mind about the validity of the idea.

Cato's name has appeared in several of the quotations discovered to date. His only work that has survived in its entirety is precisely the **De agri cultura**, also called the **De re rustica**. This "farmer's notebook" was the first in a series of Roman works on agriculture, and in it Cato speaks at great length of the cabbage, its cultivation and its medicinal value. In Chapter 156(12) he informs us:

De brassica quod concoquit. Brassica est quae omnibus holeribus antistat. Eam esto vel coctam vel crudam. Crudam si edes, in acetum intinguito... Si voles in convivio multum bibere cenareque libenter, ante cenam esto crudam quantum voles ex aceto, et idem, ubi cenaveris, comesto aliqua V folia; reddet te quasi nihil ederis, bibesque quantum volus.

[Of the medicinal value of the cabbage: it is the cabbage which surpasses all other vegetables. It may be eaten either cooked or raw; if you eat it raw, dip it into vinegar... If you wish to drink deeply at a banquet and to enjoy your dinner, eat as much raw cabbage as you wish, seasoned with vinegar, before dinner, and likewise after dinner eat some half a dozen leaves; it will make you feel as if you had not dined, and you can drink as much as you please.]

It is immediately obvious on reading the various details contained in Cato's text that this was the source of most of the medieval and later texts that we have examined. This is particularly true of the medical virtues mentioned in the text of Vincent de Beauvais, and Cato's "reddet te quasi nihil ederis" validates the interpretation given to a doubtful phrase, "cume voelet," that occurs in our Middle Dutch quotation and that I have translated by

"hardly feels." A century and more after Cato wrote his **De agri cultura**, Pliny repeated and completed Cato's remarks in his **Naturalis historia**, in three separate chapters of Book 20(13). In Chapter 33 he cites some more ancient authorities:

It would be a long task to make a list of all the praises of the cabbage, since not only did Chrysippus the physician devote to it a special volume, divided according to its effects on the various parts of the body, but Dieuches also, and Pythagoras above all, and Cato no less lavishly, have celebrated its virtues; the views of the latter it is meet to set forth all the more carefully for the sake of learning what medicine the Roman people used for six hundred years.

The end of this quotation seems to have inspired the writer of our Middle Dutch text, who cited Dioscorides as his authority. Had Dioscorides drawn his material from Pliny, rather than from Cato? In Chapter 34 Pliny attributes to the Greeks some of the opinions enunciated earlier by Cato:

Just because we have dealt with Cato it is well to put down now the views of the Greeks also, limiting ourselves to making good Cato's omissions. If not overcooked, they think that cabbage brings away bile, also that it loosens the bowels... As cabbage is the enemy of the vine, they say that it opposes wine; that if taken in food beforehand it prevents drunkenness, taken after drinking it dispels its unpleasant effects.

These medical virtues, despite Pliny's remarks, are all found in Cato's work, but the belief in the enmity of the vine and the cabbage, which Pliny here attributes to the Greeks, does not in fact appear in the **De agri cultura**. In his Chapter 36 Pliny gets around to this question:

Cato gives vastly higher praise to the wild, or stray, cabbage, so much so that he asserts that the mere powder of the dried vegetable, collected in a smelling-bottle, or the scent only, snuffed up the nostrils, removes nose-troubles and any offensive odour. Some call this variety rock-cabbage; it is strongly antipathetic to wine, so that the vine tries very hard to avoid it, or if it cannot do so, dies.

A comparison of the Latin text of the final sentence from Pliny reveals clearly that Vincent de Beauvais seems to have copied it virtually verbatim, adding weight to the suggestion earlier that our medieval references to Cato go back rather to Pliny in several instances.

Where then did Cato's ancestors acquire their knowledge about the virtues of the cabbage? Again we find a learned tradition: Pliny refers, as we have seen, to two Greek writers, Pythagoras, and Chrysippus, who had been almost a contemporary of Cato, both of whom had mentioned the virtues of the cabbage. Another Latin text, written in Rome not long

after 228 A.D. by the Egyptian-born Greek Athenaeus, gives us some further indications on the subject. In his *Deipnosophistae*, or *The Sophists at Dinner* (14), Athenaeus gave many curious pieces of information about eating habits, citing more than 1,500 works that we no longer possess. From his remarks on cabbages we may infer, however, that he was familiar with the observations of Cato and Pliny, but he also included other authorities in support of his assertions:

That the Egyptians are wine-bibbers is indicated also by the custom, found only among them, of putting boiled cabbage first on their bill of fare at banquets, and it is so served to this day. Many even add cabbage-seed to all remedies concocted against drunkenness. Wherever cabbages grow in a vineyard the wine produced is darker. Hence the Sybarites also, according to Timaeus, used to eat cabbages before drinking. Alexis: "Yesterday you took a drop, and so today you've got a headache. Take a nap, that will stop it. Then have some boiled cabbage brought to you." And Ebulus somewhere says: "Woman, you must think I am a cabbage, for you try to shift all your headache upon me, so I believe."... Amphis: "There's no cure for being drunk, it would seem, so potent as the blow of sudden grief. It drives drunkenness away so forcibly that cabbages seem ridiculous by comparison." On the subject of this effect caused by the cabbage, Theophrastus also has written; he alleges that even the growing vine loathes the smell of cabbage.

Theophrastus seems then to have been our most ancient authority on the enmity of the vine and the cabbage. But to conclude this long list of commentaries let us look at what the most eminent authority and guide for the Middle Ages, Aristotle, wrote about cabbages, in his *Problems*, Book 3, Chapter 17(15):

Why does cabbage prevent headache after drinking? Is it because it has a sweet and purgative sap (and so physicians wash out the abdomen with it), and it is naturally cold? Here is the evidence: doctors use it in severe cases of diarrhoea, boiling it thoroughly, and then drawing off the juice and cooling it. In the case of those who are suffering from headache after drink, the juice of the cabbage descends into the stomach and draws off the moisture, which is vinous and unconcocted, and remaining itself in the upper abdomen it cools the body. As it cools, moist and light parts descend into the bladder, so that in these two ways the moisture is carried through the body, and as the body grows cool, men naturally cease to have a headache; for wine is wet and hot...

A close comparison of the passage with Cato's commentaries on the cabbage reveals that the essential elements appear in both texts, and it is not too

much to believe that Cato, despite his antipathy for all things Greek, may well have been familiar with the writings of the Greeks, just as Pliny was. We are consequently in the presence of an uninterrupted literary tradition extending from the fourth century B.C. to the 12th-century text of Richard de Lison and beyond. Now, since the beginning of studies on the *Roman de Renart* the question of its origins has been the subject of a sustained and on-going argument between the tenants of an oral, popular, folklore tradition, defended at length by Léopold Sudre, and the tenants of a learned, written tradition, whose principal exponent was Lucien Foulet. Despite the efforts of the folklorists, from Jakob Grimm on, to establish links between the *Roman de Renart* and popular, oral literature, the starting-point for the principal branches of the *Renart*, and many of the incidents in them, are to be found in earlier medieval works such as the *Ysengrimus*, the *Ecbasis captivi*, the *Poenitentarius* or shorter Latin tales, and in the medieval fable collections, which in turn go back in large part to the Latin and Greek fabulists. Upon discovering the key to the meaning of Richard de Lison's lines in Branch XII, one was tempted to assume that the medieval belief in the enmity of the vine and the cabbage, quite apart from a question of simple husbandry, or at least the further idea of cabbage as an antidote for drunkenness, were founded on popular folklore tradition. It is, however, quite clear that the two ideas had a long literary and—at least for the times — scientific tradition behind them, which confirms the argument that the *Roman de Renart*, even in small details, was above all inspired on the one hand by local events, and on the other by a literary tradition that extends back to antiquity in many instances.

As a footnote to these remarks on a medieval text, we might add that Aristotle's reasoning, and that of a long succession of ancient and medieval physicians, botanists, and pharmacologists, is receiving some support in modern science, which suggests that cabbage can indeed relieve the effects of drunkenness by neutralizing the toxins that cause our nausea and headaches!

(1) *Le Roman de Renart*, publié par Ernest Martin, Strasbourg, 1882-1887.

(2) *Le Roman de Renart*, édité d'après le manuscrit De Cangé par Mario Roques, Paris, t.IV, 1958.

(3) J.F. Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart dans la littérature française et dans les littératures étrangères au Moyen Age*, Toronto & Paris, 1963, pp. 78-91.

(4) Le Roux de Lincy, *Le Livre des proverbes français*, Paris, 1859, I, p. 63.

(5) Charles Estienne, *L'Agriculture et maison rustique*, Paris, 1564; 2e éd. 1583.

(6) Robert T. Gunther, *The Greek Herbal of Dioscorides...Englished by John Goodyer A.D. 1655*, New York, 1959.

(7) Marcus Woodward, *Gerard's Herball, The Essence thereof distilled ... from the Edition of Th. Johnson, 1636*, London, 1927.

(8)Sanford V. Larkey, **Banckes's Herbal** — printed in London by **Richard Banckes, 1525**. Edited and transcribed into Modern English with an Introduction, New York, 1941.

(9)L.J. Vandewiele, **Een middelnederlandse Versie van de Circa Instans van Platearius**, Oudenaarde, 1970.

(10)Clovis Brunel, **Recettes médicales, alchimiques et astrologiques du XVe siècle en langue vulgaire des Pyrénées**, Toulouse, 1956.

(11)Clovis Brunel, **Recettes médicales d'Avignon en ancien provençal**.

(12)Marcus Porcius Cato, **On Agriculture**, with an English Translation by William Davis Hooper, revised by Harrison Boyd Ash, London & Cambridge, Mass., 1954.

(13)Pliny, **Natural History (Naturalis Historia)**, with an English Translation by H. Rackham and W.H.S. Jones, London & Cambridge, Mass., 1951.

(14)Athenaeus, **The Deipnosophists**, with an English Translation by Charles Burton Gulick, London & Cambridge, Mass., 1951.

(15)Aristotle, **Problems**, with an English Translation by W.S. Hett, London & Cambridge, Mass., 1953.