



## HUMAN-ANIMAL TRANSITIONS IN ROBERT HENRYSON'S "MORALL FABILLIS"

ROBERT HENRYSON'IN "MORALL FABILLIS" ESERİNDE İNSAN-HAYVAN DEĞİŞİMLERİ

Ulaş ÖZGÜN 

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### Abstract

Fable is a literary genre that is structurally bipartite, and the anthropomorphised characters in the narrative part illustrate a truth in the moral part. Traditionally the moral part of the fables has received closer scrutiny compared to the narrative part. Scottish poet Robert Henryson, who regards the fable genre as a serious form of literature, does not refrain from modifying the genre for his needs in his work entitled *Morall Fabillis*. Accordingly, to convey his thoughts about the sinful condition of humankind, he employs the concept of the Great Chain of Being in his fables. Thus, the characters in the narrative part become a blatant criticism of humans' indulgence in their carnal appetites as a result of which they become indistinguishable from animals. To this end, this article argues that in the narrative parts of the selected three fables, namely, "The Cock and the Jasp", "The Fox and the Wolf" and "The Sheep and the Dog" Henryson does not confine himself only to animal-like characters of the traditional fable, but creates two additional character types which can be called hybrids and human-like. The hybrid characters function as a kind of experiment to show how chaotic the world would be if the animals assumed the roles of humans. The human-like characters become tools to display how people are indistinguishable from animals when they yield to their earthly desires. Diversification of the character types helps Henryson transpose the collection's overarching theme of subjection to carnality instead of spirituality to the narrative part and establishes equality and unity between the two parts of the fable genre.

### Öz

Fabl yapısal olarak iki bölümden oluşan bir türdür ve anlatı bölümündeki insanlaştırılmış karakterler ders bölümünde bir hakikate işaret eder. Geleneksel olarak fablların ders bölümü, anlatı bölümüne nazaran daha detaylı incelenmiştir. Fabl türünü ciddi bir edebi biçim olarak gören İskoç şair Robert Henryson, *Morall Fabillis* adlı eserinde, türü kendi ihtiyaçları için değiştirmekten geri durmamıştır. Dolayısıyla insanlığın günahkar durumu hakkında düşüncelerini iletmek için fabllarında Büyük Varoluş Zinciri kavramını kullanır. Böylece anlatı bölümündeki karakterler insanların dünyevi arzularına yenik düşmeleri sonucu hayvanlardan farksız olması konusunda bariz bir eleştiri haline gelir. Bu maksatla, bu makalede "The Cock and the Jasp", "The Fox and the Wolf" ve "The Sheep and the Dog" adlı seçilen üç fablın anlatı bölümünde Henryson'un fablın geleneksel hayvansı karakteriyle sınırlı kalmadığı, melez ve insansı olarak adlandırılacak fazladan iki karakter tipi daha yarattığı savunulur. Melez karakterler hayvanların insan rolünü benimseseydi nasıl karmakanşık bir dünya olurduyu göstermek için bir tür deney işlevi görür. İnsansı karakterler dünyevi arzularına yenik düşüklerinde insanların hayvanlardan nasıl farksız olurduğunu gösteren araçlar olur. Karakter tiplerinin çeşitlendirilmesi koleksiyonun maneviyat yerine dünyeviliğe bağlı olma temasının anlatı kısmına aktarılması konusunda Henryson'a yardım eder ve fabl türünün iki kısmı arasında eşitlik ve bütünlük oluşturur.

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## Introduction

Robert Henryson (c. 1430-1500) is a medieval Scottish poet whose life is shrouded in complete mystery. Almost nothing is known about him other than a certificate of acceptance of a certain *venerabilis vir Magister Robertus Henrisone* to the University of Glasgow in 1462, circumstantial evidence that associates him to Abbey of Dunfermline as a schoolmaster, and William Dunbar's poem of "Lament for the Makaris" (c. 1505-1506) in which he is mentioned as a dead poet, thereby

receiving a limit to his life (Fox, "Introduction" ix). Still, his literary legacy stands the test of time, and his main works, namely, *The Testament of Cresseid*, *Morall Fabillis*, and *Orpheus and Eurydice*<sup>1</sup> offer textual profundity that allows readers and scholars to discover a multitude of new and often interesting meanings. His works are mostly derived from Latin, French, and English sources, and are carefully appropriated to his own culture, expanded and transformed with touches of the Scottish way of life and a personally prudish sense of Christianity. Accordingly, Henryson continues the story of *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Geoffrey Chaucer has left off intentionally not to defame women and prepares a tragic ending for Cressida because of her betrayal to Troilus so that she is eventually punished by the Gods and becomes an outcast leper. Similarly, in *Orpheus and Eurydice* Henryson supplies an intricate allegorical *moralitas* at the end which is not found in other versions of the story. In the moral part, he suggests that Orpheus' search for Eurydice in the underworld represents humankind's indulgence in sin.

This is also the case with *Morall Fabillis*. The collection which is comprised of thirteen fables supplies abundant clues about the Scottish local life, addresses judicial and religious corruption of his times, depicts farm life and its juxtaposition with the town life in burgesses, and demonstrates hunting and harvest season practices through the eyes of its characters. A similar religious standpoint is also present in the fables as Henryson intends to showcase the medieval notion that when humans are indulged in worldly pleasures and sin, they are not very different from animals or animals behave in such a way that call to mind the irrational actions of humans, thereby offering a harsh criticism for humanity from both ends. Regarding the sinful condition of humankind, it is argued that Henryson employs a clever twist, and exploits the fable genre's potential to its limits by introducing hybrid and human-like characters along with the traditional animal-like characters of fables. Accordingly, hybrid characters offer a hypothetical scenario to highlight

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\* This article is a revised version of a part of the first chapter of my Master Thesis entitled "Humans as Animals or Animals as Humans: A Study of Human and Animal Relationship in Robert Henryson's *Morall Fabillis*"

<sup>1</sup> Robert Henryson's works including the *Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian* are scattered around six manuscripts that are dated decades after his supposed death. Due to partial and scattered presence of his works, these manuscripts are mentioned without folio information: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, The Bannatyne MS; Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, The Asloan MS; Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Library, The Makculloch MS; Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Library, Gray MSS; Cambridge, Pepysian Library, Magdalene College, The Maitland Folio MS; London, British Library, Harley MS 3865. All quotations from Henryson's poetry are taken from Henryson, Robert. *Robert Henryson: The Poems*. Ed. Denton Fox. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987.

how chaotic the world would be if animals assumed the roles of humans; the human-like characters display the tragic condition of humankind when they yield to their earthly desires. Therefore, in this article, fables of “The Cock and the Jasp”, “The Fox and the Wolf”, “The Sheep and the Dog” are chosen from *Morall Fabillis* to elucidate how Henryson’s respective characters are in sync with the work’s overarching theme of succumbing to carnality, and how his diversification of characters cleverly transposes this theme to the narrative part, thereby establishing unity between the two parts of the fable genre.

Stories of animals interacting with each other exist virtually in every culture and region around the world. In the Western tradition, these stories of anthropomorphic characters pointing out a particular lesson at the end are known as fables. The etymology of the word is derived from the Latin term *fabula* which means speaking, feigned story, narrative, or fiction (Mitchell 252). Ascription of such an inclusive epithet to the genre indicates its archaic origins, yet for the same reason, the name does not offer distinct contours for the genre. A retrospective look at the genre reveals that the fable must be constitutive of two parts: the narrative part and a related moral section. Besides, it is generally characterised as a “*brief and simple fictitious story with a constant structure, generally with animal protagonists (but also humans, gods, and inanimate objects e.g. trees), which gives an exemplary and popular message on practical ethics*” (Zafiropoulos 1). Within this framework, these stories are known as Aesopic fables although no extant fable can be traced to Aesop, the mythical progenitor of the genre. However, the stories that bear these characteristics can be found as far back as Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (c. 700 B.C.) (Holzberg 12). Still, it was only in the first century A. D. that a Roman poet, Phaedrus, wrote probably the first verse collection of Aesopic fables entitled *Liber primus fabularum Aesopiarum*. His complex verse led the original copy to be superseded by various re-castings known as *Romulus* texts. The *Romulus* versions circulated throughout Europe in the Middle Ages as popular school texts. As indicated earlier, Henryson had probably a connection with Glasgow University and the school of the Dunfermline Abbey since in the witnesses he was frequently referred to as “*scolmaister of Dunfermling*” (Fox, “Introduction” ix). For this reason, it is only natural that Henryson’s major source in *Morall Fabillis* is Gualterus Anglicus’ version of the elegiac *Romulus* (Mann, “Introduction” 4-12). The choice of Aesopic fables as a form of expression to comment upon the plight of the human condition has probably three distinct reasons for Henryson: familiarity of the genre

to all walks of life as a school text, its adaptability to the notion of the Great Chain of Being, and its suitability to the medieval literary theory.

The fable genre in the Middle Ages appealed both to the nobility and the commoners at the same time since their “*unadorned brevity and wit make them approachable by the simplest minds; their neatness and inevitability give a profounder pleasure to the more sophisticated*” (Hobbs 12). Throughout its journey from ancient Greece to Henryson’s time in Europe, the role of the Aesopic fable as a school text was not subject to many changes. In Aristophanes’ play, *Birds*, the chorus leader is scolded with the words: “*Because you’ve a blind uninquisitive mind, unaccustomed on Aesop to pore*” (178). The case was similar in the Roman Empire since one of the distinguished Roman rhetoricians “*Quintilian recommended Aesopic fables (‘Aesopi fabellas’) as subject-matter for school-exercises in which they were to be paraphrased, abbreviated, or more fully elaborated, without losing the poet’s meaning*” (Mann, “Introduction” 6). The tradition of paraphrasing Aesopic fables continued in the grammar schools of the Middle Ages so that the students even took for granted that these fables “*existed only to be rewritten*” (Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop...* 71). Such a tendency also resulted in an attitude which “*encouraged everyone who received an education to view fable as common property*” (Ziolkowski 22). As an educated man and a possible schoolmaster, Henryson’s rather free usage of these fables reflects such an attitude. Accordingly, he stretches his fables sometimes to 350 lines as in the case of “The Trial of the Fox”. Its fictitious quality is blurred by the obvious references of contemporary social, religious, and economic events and institutions, the protagonists seem like animals, however, the degree of animality is disrupted by the additional human qualities that he gives to his characters, and finally, its message on practical ethics is replaced by Christian morality and good conduct.

In terms of moral instruction, certainly, Henryson was not the first to recognise the genre’s potential. Preachers had also realised the genre’s suitability to be included as *exemplum*, which is a form of “*moralized anecdote, whether historically true or fictitious, drawn from sources both ancient and contemporary, secular as well as religious*” (Owst 149). One of the earliest Christian thinkers who recognised the propriety of the fable genre for moral instruction was St. Augustine. In *To Consentius: against lying*, he states that in this “*sort of fiction [in which] men have put even human deeds or words to irrational animals ... [that is,] by this sort of feigned narrations but true significations, they might [be] in a more winning manner*”

(Augustine XXVIII.6). Following the steps of Augustine, especially after the twelfth century, with the newly rising Franciscan and Dominican orders Aesopic fables were exposed to large populations because these travelling preachers, “*to interest and amuse the common people, ... had to have at their command repositories of stories*” including fables (Crane 327). As a reflection of this tradition, at the end of *Morall Fabillis*, Henryson discloses his intention to leave the rest “*vnto the freiris, / To mak a sample or similitude*” (2971-2).

Henryson’s bestowal of the work to friars indicates his perception of the collection as a Christian-oriented moral work. Within the Christian cosmology, unlike the animals that are subject to their instincts, “*humans possess the free will to resist instigation toward sin*” (Sobol 120). Conversely, however, as Henryson also suggests, humans’ “*Saull with sensualitie / So fetterit is in presoun corporall*” (1629-30). Therefore, humankind’s liability to fall as a result of various vices opens up the possibility of reinterpreting the traditional animal characters of the Aesopic fable tradition. For Henryson, humans too can be represented in the narrative part of the fables as he points out that “*mony men in operatioun / Ar like to beistis in conditioun*” (48-49). This idea is derived from the medieval notion of the Great Chain of Being which is a gradational and hierarchical vision of perceiving all forms of beings. The origins of the idea can be traced back to Plato’s principle of “*plenitude*” and Aristotle’s principles of “*continuity*” and of “*gradation*” (O’Meara 17). Yet, it finds its full-blown expression in the writings of the Neo-platonists such as Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Augustine. Accordingly, Augustine famously writes that “*if all things were equal, all things would not be; for the multiplicity of kinds of things of which the universe is constituted – first and second and so on, down to the creatures of the lowest grades would not exist*” (qtd. in Lovejoy 67). Humans occupy the central place in this scale since humans are perceived to be “*composite being[s], partly akin to the angels who are rational ... and partly akin to the beasts which are animal but not rational*” (Lewis 153). As intermediary beings, humans are granted the potential to rise above or below their status through their actions. This view finds the clearest expression in the Prologue of *Morall Fabillis*:

Bot takis all the lust and appetyte,  
 Quhilk throw custum and the daylie ryte  
 Syne in the mynd sa fast is radicate  
 That he in brutal beist is transformate. (53-56).

As suggested in the extract, the fable characters with animal dispositions present an opportunity for Henryson to display human characters succumbing to their appetites and sin, and therefore they transform into beasts.

Henryson benefits loosely from the idea of physiognomy to associate malformed outer disposition with a tendency towards sin. Physiognomy in the Middle Ages relates to “*the doctrine of the right construction of the body, which will be later known ... as the theory of the proportion or symmetry, of the human body*” (Stimilli 21). It was simply believed that “*the physical features of a person’s face and body indicated character instincts and behaviour, and all these were expressive of the soul*” (Hartley 16). Thus, human-like characters’ animal appearance in the fables is an implied judgement on their indulgence in their carnal appetites. Regarding the creation of human-like characters, Henryson’s inspiration from this idea is clear in *Morall Fabillis* as the Mouse in one of the fables of the collection entitled “The Paddock and the Mouse” underlines the basic premise of physiognomy:

For clerkis sayis the inclinatioun  
Off mannis thoct proceidis commounly  
Efter the corporall complexioun  
To gude or euill, as nature will apply:  
Ane thrawart will, ane thrawin phisnomy. (2826-2830).

Hence, physical deformity, or as in this case, the human-like characters’ animal appearance is an indication of their sinful nature. Henryson uses this to illustrate how the world is now full of sinful individuals who are not indistinguishable from animals.

As for the hybrid characters of the collection, they constitute the gradational middle between humans and animals. Especially after the thirteenth century, there was a rise in the popularity of *Physiologus* and its follow-up, bestiary tradition. These encyclopaedias of beasts contained imaginary and real animals, the actions and dispositions of which were moralised according to Christian context. Along with their popularity, there occurred a change in the perception of animals as medieval scholars began to comment on the proximity between humans and animals in terms of the possession of mutual traits (Salisbury 104). In this regard, in the fourteenth century, medieval scholars would even state that people began to observe “*animals exhibiting human traits, as having conscious motives or even moral standards*” (qtd. in Salisbury 104). Repercussions of this idea are reflected at the

beginning of “The Cock and the Fox” as Henryson illustrates, animals possess their distinct personality through their “*diuers inclinatioun*” (400) as a result of which “*The bair busteous, the volff, the wylde lyoun, / The fox fenzeit, craftie and cawtelows, .../ Sa different thay ar in properties*” (401-402, 404). Instead of the traditional anthropomorphisim of speech and personification, Henryson attributes specific human characteristics such as craftiness, anger, or trickery to particular animals to underline their depth as characters and blur the boundary between humans and animals.

It is not a coincidence that Henryson stresses the similarity between humans and animals in the first of the three fables that are united, and have the same source, that is, the French *Roman de Renart*. These Reynardian tales belong to a distinct continental tradition that recounts the adventures of a trickster figure thinly veiled as a fox. The world of Reynard is a refracted mirror image of the social, political, religious, and cultural facets of the medieval world. The characters have their own names such as Reynard, Wolf Isegrim who is the archenemy of Reynard, or Noble who is the ruler lion. Often, these characters are related to particular medieval occupations. For example, Isegrim is commonly associated with monks. According to Blake, the defining aspect of this tradition is that these characters “*do not become wholly human or wholly animal, and the charm of the Reynard stories consists to a large part in this blend of the human with the animal*” (“Introduction” xi). Henryson largely benefits from this aspect in his fables because the characters from the Reynardian tradition supply him the gradational middle between the animal-like and human-like characters. These hybrid characters underline the comical incongruity between the characters’ animal instincts and human responsibilities which ultimately clashes with each other and results in often a chaotic outcome produced by the polar opposites in their characterisation. Besides, these characters display the bitter satire of the human beings’ animal side. By presenting an imaginary situation of animals assuming the roles of humans, Henryson demonstrates an alternative world governed by whim and instinct. As a result of shunning rationality and law, cruelty and violence flourish and triumph in these tales. Thereby, this fictitious world becomes a grim example to illustrate that if humans indulge in their carnal desires and sins, the world will be as chaotic and distorted as the world of hybrid characters.

Henryson's employment of hybrid and human-like characters in the narrative part of the fables endorses the interdependence of the narrative part and the moral part. In a conventional Aesopic fable, the actions of the animals in the narrative part are only relevant in terms of providing guidelines to humans on what not to do. However, relocating hybrid and human-like characters to the narrative part enables the narrative to be as important as the moral part since the actions of human-like figures become an immediate source for *moralitas*. This aspect is underlined by Henryson in the Prologue where he benefits from the image of the ploughing earth "with grit diligence" (9) to make "the flouris and the corne" (10) spring so that it is used "[t]o gude purpois, quha culd it weill apply" (14). In this extract, Henryson stresses the interdependence of each part of the fable as entities holding equal value. The earth without having the necessary seed, which is the narrative part, cannot produce a flower, which is the moral part, similarly, a flower cannot spring out of anything. Hence, the entity of the earth, that is, the narrative part and the characters in it becomes as important as the flower, that is, the moral part.

Henryson's emphasis on the equal value of the narrative and moral part is in line with the perception of literature as a popular means of entertainment and instruction in the Middle Ages. It is an idea derived mainly from Horace's famous statement in the *Ars poetica*, "[p]oets aim either to benefit, or to amuse, or to utter words at once both pleasing and helpful to life" (479). According to Glending Olson, these words become "the most familiar literary dictum in the Middle Ages" (292). Henryson stresses the importance of this notion by stating that "clerkis sayis, it is richt profitabill / Amangis ernist to ming ane merie sport, / To blyth the spreit and gar the tyme be schort" (19-21). The fable genre, in this regard, offers the perfect solution for him since he does not want to vex his audience "[w]ith sad materis" (26) all the time. In a literary mode whose moral quality holds the key element of importance, Henryson enlivens the narrative part with diverse characters, thus gives equal imminence to the narrative part in terms of narrative creativity. In this endeavour, he diversifies the traditional animal characters of the fable genre by adding hybrid and human-like characters. In the next section, character types of animal-like, hybrid, and human-like are analysed in the respective fables, namely, "The Cock and the Jasp", "The Fox and the Wolf", "The Sheep and the Dog".

### **Animality of Animals in “The Cock and the Jasp”**

The animal characters in Henryson’s fable collection keep their bestiality in size and shape except for the speech quality bestowed upon them by the genre itself. In their respective fables, their manners and reactions are similar to those of a real-life animal. Hence, even if they can speak, they do not interact with human beings in the fables, but strictly keep their conversational ability to their own kind. If there is an occasion when humans are present, they immediately return to their bestiality. The foregrounding quality of animals in the fables is their lack of reason. Therefore, they do not learn from their mistakes and make the same mistakes over and over again. Through these characters, Henryson suggests that, unlike animals, humans can learn from their mistakes with their mental faculties. Besides, these characters, whose animal features are vividly described, their animal natures truly exposed and their animal rationale subtly mocked, are utilised so as to show the reader that humans have the capability of not succumbing to carnal desires. For this reason, the fables that contain animal-like characters usually deal with such characters’ unrestrained appetite and tendency to yield to their carnal urges which further emphasise their animality.

The animal-like characters appear in “The Cock and the Jasp” which is the first fable in the collection. This fable is traditionally marked first in the Aesopic collections (Gopen 14). Therefore, Henryson makes a traditional start with the classic animal characters. The fable tells the story of a barnyard cock who finds a precious gem while searching for his meal. Upon finding the gem, he declares that it has no value for him and continues to look for grain. Despite the overt animality of the main character, the Cock’s elaborate argument for leaving the gem misleads critics into believing that the Cock actually has a deep insight into human culture. Therefore, the subsequent association of him as a fool in the moral part puzzles critics such as Kurt Wittig who regards the *moralitas* “as a surprise,” (40). However, Henryson regards the Cock as a fool because of its essential animality and his consequential lack of rationality.

For the modern readers, Henryson indeed seems to disguise the true nature of the Cock by constructing a façade to this apparently hungry cock which puzzles the reader by making them believe that he is actually very wise. However, for Henryson, the case of an animal deliberating on whether to keep the valuable stone or not forms the comic effect of the fable since such an act contradicts the Cock’s animal nature and the medieval understanding of animals in general. In fact, he prepares

the reader for the Cock's animality by referencing the habit of seeking his food from the very beginning: "And to begin, first of ane cok he [Aesop] wrate, / Seikand his meit, quhilk fand ane iolie stone, / Of quhome the fabill 3esall heir anone," (61-63). According to Denton Fox, the medieval reader can easily detect the Cock's overt animality as they "would have been warned by his exaltation of food, and would have thought that his desire for 'small wormis, or snaillis' was repulsive" (Fox, "Henryson's Fables" 345). Besides, Henryson provides descriptions of the Cock's physical features such as "*feddrum fresch*" (64) and recounts his daily routine of flying about the barn and scraping for food around (66-68). One of these days, he comes across the gem which is cast out of the house during house-cleaning.

The culprits of the act are damsels who do not pay any attention to housework: "*To swooping of the hous thay tak na tent*" (73). Instead, they are more interested in showing themselves off in the streets as they "*play and on the streit be sene,*" (72). This aspect indicates the vanity in the damsels who are entirely preoccupied with their sexuality and do not pay attention to anything else. For this reason, Henryson actually does not elevate the Cock to the level of humans but downgrades the damsels to the level of animals with regards to their subjection to their bestial urges. What puzzles the readers and the critics alike is the fact that the Cock seems to understand the real value of the precious stone:

It is pietie I suld the find, for quhy  
 Thy grit vertew, nor 3it thy cullour cleir,  
 I may nouthur extoll nor magnify,  
 And thow to me may mak bot lyttill cheir;  
 To grit lordis thocht thow be leif and deir,  
 I lufe fer better thing of les auaill,  
 As draf or corne to fill my tume intrail. (85-91).

After an elaborate pondering that takes up the next thirty lines, the Cock finally concludes that it is best to desert this "*gentill Iasp*" (110). In this regard, Douglas Gray purports that Henryson's placement of the Cock's speech just after the Damsels' careless swooping of the gem seems to construct an analogy with "*the wanton damsels ... which we read as implying that the Cock has a higher estimation of the jewel than they*" (Gray 123). Yet, what Henryson tries to point out in the moral part by associating the Cock to that of a fool is that he is indeed an animal caring only for his appetite, and does not require an object that will not satisfy his immediate needs. At first glance, it seems that the Cock understands the value of the stone and is saddened by the thought of its new residence since its real place is

among the lords and kings according to him. However, just after these lines, the Cock states that he “*lufe fer better thing of les auail, / As draf or corne to fill [his] tume intrail*” (90-1) or “*small wormis, or snaillis,*” (94). Henryson’s insistence on demonstrating the details of the Cock’s overt bestiality, at this point, coincides with the Cock’s justification of leaving the gem: “*Thow hes na corne, and thairof I had neid; / Thy cullour dois bot confort to the sicht, / And that is not aneuch my wame to feid,*” (99-101). It is visible from the Cock’s words in these lines that he is solely attracted to the colour of the gem, a physical feature that implies the Cock’s misunderstanding of the real meaning of the gem. His only care is seeking food throughout the fable so that he looks at the gem only from the perspective of whether it can ease his appetite or not, and he concludes that it does not. Therefore, by deserting the jewel, the Cock, as Marshall Stearns observes, “*remain[s] true to the logic of his station in life, which the poet probably considered fitting and proper*” (108).

This signals the Cock’s habit of taking things at face value and causing him to overlook the true meaning of the gem which is expounded in the *Moralitas* as having the properties of making “*man stark and victorious; / Preseruis als fra cacis perrillous*” and bringing “*gude hap*” (123-125). Henryson is aware of the function of the gem and its place in the lapidaries so that he enumerates the properties of the gem that the Cock ignores. He stresses the gem’s quality of “*perfite prudence and cunning,*” (128) that makes men victorious against spiritual enemies. In addition to that, he particularly underlines the gem’s property of “*eternall meit*” to “*mannis saull*” (140). The moral part’s emphasis on knowledge as man’s ideal food points out humans as the targeted audience and exempts the Cock because he is destined to ignore the gem and follow his appetite. The Cock’s unchanging station in life as an irrational animal directs him to behave as he does in the fable. Therefore, the real criticism is directed not to the Cock but to the damsels that carelessly throw the gem away and whose concerns are only to be seen and desired by others. For this reason, Henryson no longer focuses on the Cock that leaves the story and the gem to “*seik his meit*” (114). He moves away from the Cock without making him hear the *moralitas* as he does not believe that the Cock can learn anything, instead, he directly addresses the audience: “*Ga seik the iasp, quha will, for thair it lay*” (161). In this way, Henryson’s address provides a kind of encouragement for the reader to find the true wisdom both in this fable and the real-life by continually seeking knowledge and wisdom.

**Animality of Humans or Humanity of Animals in “The Fox and the Wolf”**

Hybrid characters comprise the second category of characters. These characters have qualities pertaining both to humans and animals in their composition. They are witty and actually more intelligent than the ones in the previous category, but they still have animal carnality that tempts them to fall because of their appetites. Mockingly, they imitate human beings with their gestures, dresses, and manners, but it is obvious that these actions do not fit them. One way or the other they fail to resist their bestial urges that lead them to contrive foul play and prepare for their eventual downfall. In the fables, they may interact with human beings and when they do, they immediately assume the role of ordinary animals. As is intimated earlier, these characters appear in fables that are generally derived from the Reynardian tradition. These fables are generally satiric in tone coated over light-hearted and absurd material as if to display such a mixture’s comical yet tragic overtones. These characters function as a kind of experiment for Henryson to present how chaotic the world would be if animals assumed the roles of humans and tried to govern the man-made institutions. It also becomes a criticism towards humans for creating a world of sin, chaos, and corruption because of their indulgence in animalistic urges. Similar to the previous group, in these fables, Henryson addresses the issue of unrestrained appetite and the consequential moral blindness that cloud the characters’ judgement.

The fox Lowrence in “The Fox and the Wolf” is an example of such a hybrid character. This fable is the intermediary one between “The Cock and the Fox” and “The Trial of the Fox”. They comprise a sequence of three unified fables that recount the adventures of Lowrence and his son. Accordingly, the fable starts from where the former one has left off. Lowrence fails to catch the cock Chanteclair of the previous fable and is now very hungry. He waits for the night to study the stars where he foresees that unless he repents his ways, death will be imminent for him and his line. He chances upon Friar Wolf Waitskaith and confesses his sins half-heartedly. For penance, the Friar orders him to fast until Easter, forbidding eating meat except for fish. Lowrence, however, is quick to give up his resolve when he sees a lamb. He contrives to baptise the lamb as a fish in the sea and devours the animal without thinking twice. During his rest afterwards, the owner of the lamb kills Lowrence with his bow.

The fable begins with the traditional binaries of light and dark, carnality, and spirituality in order to hint at Lowrence's association with the negative side. From the very beginning, Lowrence is scared to go out "[a]ls long as leme or licht wes off the day / Bot bydand nicht full styll lurkand he lay" (619-20). Light has traditionally been associated with goodness whereas dark has been associated with carnality and evil. This tradition comes from the Genesis in which the "newly created world is described as formless, empty and covered in darkness. To this God gave light and separated night from day ... it was light that was good" while the dark was considered bad (Youngs and Harris 136). Therefore, Lowrence's habit of shunning daylight is a clear indication of his evil character.

As is the case with the Reynardian tradition, Lowrence's characterisation is heavily interpolated with human characteristics and culture. He is described as knowing astrology. He studies the stars and their course to determine his fate. He reads his destiny and discovers that unless he mends his ways "[d]eid is reward off sin and schamefull end" (653). This prospect prompts him to "seik sum confessour / And schryiff (absolve) [him] clene off all sinnis to this hour" (654-55). The depiction of a fox knowing the position of planets, deducing his fate, and seeking penance to counteract the predicament of his death is employed by Henryson to illustrate these characters' misconception of these cultural and religious practices. Accordingly, as R. J. Lyall demonstrates, Lowrence clearly "misunderstands the purpose of penance, which is to put the soul in a better state of preparedness for death rather than to delay the moment of death's occurrence" (90). Subversion of the cultural practices and concepts is underlined further by Lowrence's defence of thieves: "In dread and schame our dayis we indure, / Syne 'Widdineck' and 'Crakraip' callit als, / And till our hyre ar hangit be the hals" (660-2). Thus, Lowrence's distorted perception leads him to regard theft as "an ordinary honest trade pursued under conditions of unusual difficulty" (MacQueen, *Robert Henryson...* 147).

These deluded perceptions and misunderstandings of the actual purpose of religious penance and theft come from his innate animality and can be excused, yet comedy arising from this discrepancy becomes gravely tragic for humans who behave like Lowrence in real life. This double-sidedness in the narrative part of the fable is achieved by Henryson intentionally so that the reader can simultaneously experience the comic adventures that befall the characters and deliberate on the tragic condition of humankind when subjected to earthly desires. The introduction of the wolf as having the complex mixture of human and animal within himself as

“Freir Volff Waitskaith” enhances this tragicomic situation. The mixture of human-animal qualities is visibly manifested in the depiction of the wolf donning the attire of a friar and having “*bair feit*” (679), “*lene cheik*” and “*paill and pietious face*” (680). Henryson craftily blurs the boundary between a vicious animal and a pale churchman which becomes a striking criticism on corrupt churchmen. The Friar’s corruption is further underlined when he asks Lowrence if he is “*contrite*” (698) about his previous sins, Lowrence denies quite plainly: “*‘Na, schir, I can not duid / Me think that hennis ar sa honie sweit, / And lambes flesche that new ar letting bluid*” (699-701). Despite Lowrence’s insistence that he is neither sorry nor contrite about his previous deeds, the Friar overlooks these answers and urges Lowrence to refrain from eating until Easter to receive his penance. He even grants Lowrence permission to eat “*heid, or feit, or panchis (paunch)*” (728) in case of extreme need since he knows quite well from his own experience that “*neid may haif na law*” (731).

Additionally, similar to Lowrence, Friar Wolf is a figure of satire and corruption. His implied sinfulness in terms of quickly granting remission to Lowrence and having a compassionate approach to Lowrence’s desires of eating meat underline his venality. However, unlike the critics such as Rosemary Greentree who argues that these characters “*represent hypocrites of the laity and clergy,*” (40), it is wrong to consider these characters as direct representatives of the medieval people, rather these characters are perceived as bi-directional entities conceived by Henryson. They are simultaneously animal and human. They have a degree of rationality that is higher than the animals in the first two fables, but still, they yield to their animal appetites as illustrated by the Friar’s speech of “*neid may haif na law*” (731). They have the manners, beliefs, and attires of humans, but they are naturally, instinctively, and descriptively animals. It is this mixture that leads to the mock confession scene because the fox’s need for survival as an animal is the very thing he is supposed to shun from in the human sphere. Therefore, they are seen as characters whose animal natures impel them to do what they do in the story, but also their actions under the guise of a churchman or layman strike the reader as a kind of warning to men who behave like these characters in the real world. Thus, the fantastic natures of these characters function as a demonstration of how the world would be if it was governed with animal appetites, and a warning to humans for not giving precedence to carnal needs over spiritual ones.

The mock confession scene is followed by a mock baptism in the fable. Lowrence goes to the seaside to catch some fish but realises that it is very difficult for him. He notices a flock of goats and steals a little lamb from the herd and dips the little lamb into water saying “*Ga doun, schir Kid, cum vp, schir Salmond, agane*” (751). Hence, the same manner of an offence resulting from the misunderstanding of religion is repeated. Just like Lowrence’s belief that “*it is the form of [the] confession which is effective, and not the spiritual quality of the confessional process,*” (Lyll 91) the baptism for Lowrence is valid enough verbally. The final subversion of the sacrament is the one that triggers Lowrence’s end. While he is stroking his belly under a bush, quite satisfied with what he has devoured he states, “*[v]pon this wame (belly) set wer ane bolt (target) full meit*” (760). This time verbal performance works against Lowrence’s favour. His belly becomes literally the target of an arrow shot by the owner of the kid. The owner pins Lowrence down and skins him clean.

Although it is foreshadowed at the beginning of the fable, the reader who is familiar with the Reynardian tradition does not expect the wily fox to die. The reason for Henryson to include such an ending to his fable is to show that divine justice is upon those who are “*[v]incust with carnal sensualitie*” (783). In fact, Henryson reveals his intention at the beginning of the *moralitas* by urging “*folk to mend / For dreid of sic ane lyke conclusioun*” (777-8). Thus, it actually becomes more of an obligation for Henryson to kill this hybrid character to teach the reader to be aware of “*this suddane schoit (arrowshot)*” (789) and to exhort the “*folk to mend their sinful ways and not make false confessions*” (McKenna 494). As a result, he urges human beings to “*[c]eis of ... sin; remord ... conscience; / Do wilfull pennance here; and [humans] sall wend (go), / Efter ... deith, to blis withouttin end*” (793-795).

### **Humans as Animals in “The Sheep and the Dog”**

After three-unit fables of the Reynardian origin, Henryson turns to the Aesopic tradition for his human-like characters. Except for their overtly bestial physiognomy, these characters are completely human. They act and behave in the way human beings normally act. They interact with humans on equal terms in the fables; visibly human characters do not find these characters’ animal dispositions surprising as if their appearances are only symbolic manifestations of their dominant characteristics. Accordingly, if a person is meek and innocent in the fable, his personality is reciprocated with a sheep whereas if a person is wile and

gluttonous, he is represented as a wolf. Henryson uses this type to portray humans steeped in vices. Thereby, they become tools to display how people are indistinguishable from animals when they yield to their earthly desires. The fables that contain these characters, as a result, are darker in tone than the previous fables. This dichotomy is established purposefully to imply that in a world that is governed with carnal desires, injustice reigns and cruelty dominates. Hence, in these fables, instead of the general theme of succumbing to carnality, human notions of injustice and cruelty are the locus of criticism.

“The Sheep and the Dog”, in this respect, is an example of the final phase of this slow and smooth transformation of characters from animal-like to human-like. Departure from the comic, but essentially tragic adventures of Reynard to the Latin fable collection as a source material helps Henryson establish a grimmer tone in the collection. According to McDiarmid, this grim tone is carried out by the “*factualness and bareness of statement that intensifies feeling*” (74). Compactness and immediacy in the Aesopic fable tradition offer a chance of minimalism in terms of the characters’ outlook. In this way, the lack of descriptions of the characters conveniently blurs their animality so that the characters pose as more human than ever. The subject matter is also chosen deliberately as it is dealt with in a manner that is reminiscent of a well-known judicial case. Accordingly, in the fable, the Dog accuses the Sheep of borrowing a loaf of bread and not returning it. The Sheep is summoned to a hearing. He denies such allegations, but unfortunately, the outcome of the case has already been decided since the judge is the Wolf and the notary is the Fox. In the end, restitution of the loaf of bread is ruled, and the Sheep is shorn off his wool to pay for the required amount. Edward Wheatley propounds that this particular fable is not “*general enough for all times and places: these are medieval characters in a contemporary situation*” (“Scholastic Commentary...” 83-84).

The sense of contemporariness is achieved through the excessive use of law terminology and the real-life simulation of a court scene and the character’s social life. Accordingly, characters are personified to a degree that is not present in the previous fables. Similar to previous Reynardian tradition, characters address each other as “*maister Volff*” (1155) or “*Schir Scheip*” (1158); they have names such as “*Schir Corbie Rauin (Raven)*” (1160) or “*Perrie Doig (Dog)*” (1166). They have occupations; the Fox is holding the position of a “*clerk and noter in the cause*” (1174), the kite works as an advocate (1175). However, unlike the previous

examples, these characters have a deep understanding of their particular occupations. They exploit their positions not because of the clash between their animal instincts and human responsibilities but because of material gain. In this regard, Henryson's choice of "*breid, worth fyue schilling*" (1183) as the main catalyst to trigger the events that follow distinguishes "The Sheep and the Dog". The characters in this fable dispute over food that ultimately belongs to the people's diet. Neither the Dog nor the Sheep has diets containing such nourishment. As a result, unlike the previous fables in which morals relate to and are derived from animals and human carnality, this fable's main concern is the oppression of the weak by the corrupt institutions controlled by the wicked. This shift in the subject matter situates the characters to become almost humanised creatures in the fable. The characters' names such as the Dog or the Sheep only represent the power relationship between them to suggest how the world of men is similar to the natural world in which only the powerful are right. In addition to that, Henryson's choice of the loaf of bread as the main issue of the dispute signals the actual triviality of the debt of the Sheep to the Dog, yet at the hands of the powerful, even such a small sum can be exploited to harm the innocent.

The Sheep perceives the evil intention and declines the accusations based on valid reasons: "*Heir I decline the iuge, the tyme, the place*" (1187). The aspect of Sheep's rational answers is another factor that leads the reader to be more and more emotionally attached to the character. Unlike the caricature-like characters of the previous fables who are constantly yielding to their carnal appetites, the condition of the Sheep is more relatable to humans in terms of the subject matter as people often find themselves unlawfully accused and apprehended unjustly in different stages of their lives. The Sheep's objection is no doubt rejected by the Bear and the Badger who pretend to dispute with one another and search for similar cases in the past. At last, they conclude that "*[t]he scheip suld pas befor the volff agane, / And end his play*" (1226-1227). The Sheep appears before Judge Wolf, then the Dog demands his bread or the equivalent of it as money. Afterward, the Fox hurries the case to its end, and the Wolf decrees that the Sheep must pay the sum which results in the Sheep's decision to sell his wool to a merchant and pay the Dog. In all this process, the Sheep's "*lack of an advocate ... symbolises his helplessness*" against the powerful which heightens the tragedy even more dramatically (MacQueen, *Complete and Full with Numbers* 119).

Henryson's indication that he is dealing with human characters thinly disguised as animals is also manifest in the *moralitas* since it "differs from all others in continuing the tale it expounds, by including the speech of the shorn sheep" (Greentree 43). In "The Cock and the Jasp" the Cock is left off by Henryson to impart the moral to the readers alone. In this fable, however, he transposes the Sheep from the narrative part to the moral part to express his plea. Such an act strengthens the individuality and humanity of the character. In this way, his identity transcends through the narrative part's fabulous construction to the moral part's human sphere. However, the grim tone in the narrative part is also reflected in the *moralitas*. The Sheep now shivers from cold and in a similar manner to Christ on the cross, "[k]est vp his ee vnto the heuinnis hicht, / And said, 'O lord, quhy sleipis thou sa lang'" (1294-5). His complaint about the corruption, neglect of "lufe, lawtie, and law" (1301), and indulgence in prejudice, bribery, cruelty strikes a bitter cord in the reader's heart. Besides, Edward Wheatley's comment on the *moralitas* is also important as he claims that "Henryson rejects the spiritual allegory available to him in scholastic commentaries, where the trial is allegorically recast as a divine judgment of a human soul" ("Scholastic Commentary..." 83). Considering the overarching theme of carnality and spirituality, Wheatley's suggestion is convenient for Henryson, but as he chooses his main character as a humanised entity, he prefers social commentary so that the Sheep becomes "pure commounis," (1259) that is crushed by the Wolf who is the "schiref stout," (1265).

### Conclusion

Robert Henryson's *Morall Fabillis* presents a valuable insight into the medieval understanding of the world. His works are moulded by concepts and notions that flourished during the Middle Ages. At first glance, his fable collection may seem traditional; however, his expansion of these Aesopic fables by adding local colour, humour, and wit quickly attracts the readers' attention and prompts the reader into suspecting that there is more than meets the eye. Indeed, besides the traditional animal characters, this article argues that Henryson creates two additional character types in the fable genre, which can be called hybrid and human-like characters, to emphasise his notions about the transitory condition of human beings in a convenient and unique way that is not undertaken by his contemporaries or predecessors. He makes use of the idea of the Great Chain of Being and employs this to the popular and familiar fable tradition so that when

Christian virtues are neglected and human rationality is forsaken, humans downgrade themselves to the level of animals.

This view is reflected in the formation of human-like characters that are veiled under the thin guise of animal appearance whose outer appearance implies their sinful nature and indulgence in carnal pleasures. Along with the human-like and the animal-like characters, Henryson creates hybrid characters that have qualities pertaining both to the animal and the human. This type has a bilateral purpose for the reader. Firstly, through them, Henryson displays a fantasy world similar to the humans' which is reigned by chaos, corruption, and sin so that the religious and social institutions derail from their original purpose of maintaining order. This implies that when irrational animals assume the role of humans, only chaos ensues. Secondly, such a representation works as criticism towards humans since the similarity of the conditions in these fables to the real world is an indication that the contemporary world is full of corrupt and sinful people giving priority to their carnal appetites, thereby making the world an abominable place.

Henryson's new characters create a new way of emphasis on the presentation of how carnality makes humans bestial. In the traditional fables, animal characters and their actions in the narrative part function only as a tool for a human-centred moral to be pointed out. However, in Henryson's fables, the main theme of carnality ties the fables' narrative parts and their respective characters to their morals since the particular character type ascribed to each fable is indispensable for the moral analysis Henryson offers in these fables. His fresh approach to the Aesopic fable genre may indicate that Henryson treats fable as a serious form of expression, and he utilises, makes additions, and appropriates it to convey his thoughts about the general human condition in the period he lives in.

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### **Summary**

The purpose of this article has been to analyse Robert Henryson's creation of three distinct character types, namely, the animal-like, hybrid, and human-like in *Morall Fabillis* in the light of the main theme of carnality against spirituality. Normally, in the fables, the anthropomorphised characters in the narrative part are ignored as they only serve to point out a relevant truth in the moral part. However, Henryson's transposition of humans and hybrids to the narrative part works as an efficient way to endorse his view that when humans yield to their carnal desires they are not very different from animals. In this way, the narrative part becomes as important as the moral part.

Henryson's emphasis on the equal value of the narrative and moral part points out to perception of literature as a popular means of entertainment and instruction in the Middle Ages. It is an idea derived mainly from Horace and becomes very popular in the Middle Ages. The fable genre, in this regard, provides an efficient way for Henryson who does not want to vex his audience all the time but offers delightful stories as well. Besides, the popularity of the fable genre is mentioned to give a contextual reason why Henryson prefers this form to comment on humanity's condition. After the twelfth century, the genre attracts the attention of a growing number of authors outside of its general use as a school text in the Middle Ages. Especially the newly arising Franciscan and Dominican orders help fable reach larger populations. The change in the preaching tradition popularises the use of the genre in the churches throughout Europe and after the twelfth and thirteenth century, authors begin to take these classical fables and appropriate their story and moral parts to the period they live in. This opens new possibilities for the fable genre to comment on the social and religious malpractices in the late Middle Ages.

In this regard, the Great Chain of Being is regarded as the primary concept that inspires Henryson to implement these two new characters. By making use of this idea, Henryson intends to show that when Christian virtues are neglected, and human rationality is forsaken, humans downgrade themselves to the level of animals. They neglect their angelic attributes and indulge in carnal appetites so

that they become indistinguishable from animals. This view is reflected in the formation of human-like characters that are veiled under the thin guise of animal appearance whose outer appearance implies their sinful nature and indulgence in carnal pleasures. Along with human-like characters and the animal-like characters, Henryson creates another type of character which includes qualities pertaining to both the animal and the human side as a result of which they are called hybrids. Formation of such a character type provides a double-sided perspective for the reader. First of all, through them, Henryson displays a fantasy world similar to the real world, yet in this world, chaos, corruption, and sin reign over society, and the religious and social institution are disarrayed. This implies that when irrational animals assume the role of humans, only chaos ensues. Secondly, such a representation is a criticism of humans since the similarity of the conditions in these fables to the real world is an indication that the contemporary world is full of corrupt and sinful people giving priority to their carnal appetites, thereby making the world an abominable place. Accordingly, the character types of animal-like, hybrid, and human-like are analysed in the respective fables chosen from the collection, namely, “The Cock and the Jasp”, “The Fox and the Wolf”, “The Sheep and the Dog”.

In this first fable, despite the Cock’s seeming wisdom in the narrative part, the Cock is referred to as a fool in the moral part which puzzles the critics. It is argued; however, that the Cock is indeed a fool, an irrational animal, and the main criticism is directed towards the damsels that seek only their carnal appetites. In the second fable, the characters mainly clash between their animal instincts and human responsibilities as monks or religious people. Their misperceptions concerning religion and penance come from their innate animality and can be excused, yet comedy arising from this discrepancy becomes gravely tragic for humans who behave like Lawrence or Friar Wolf Waithskait in real life. This double-sidedness in the narrative part is achieved through the hybrid characters so that the reader can simultaneously experience the comic adventures that befall the characters and deliberate on the tragic condition of humankind. The last fable contains human-like characters and presents a darker tone than the previous fables. Besides, in this fable, instead of the clash between animal instincts and human responsibilities, human notions of injustice and cruelty are in the foreground.