

Understanding The Representation Of Foxes And Fox Characteristics In The Language Of The 15th Century Fables Of Robert Henryson And Ben Jonson.

Course: B.A. English Studies



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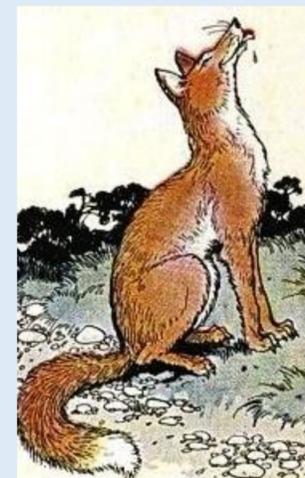
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Abstract

The choice of animal species is an intrinsic aspect in the construction of a fable. Each animal denotes a particular collection of characteristics and attributes, and in creating a role around an individual animal, the author is equally imparting these recognisable traits onto their character. This discussion will focus on the animal depictions chosen in both Robert Henryson's *The Fox and the Wolf*, and Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. This essay will assess the reasons why animal breeds are chosen, highlighting the characteristics which these choices denote, focusing on their personality signifiers, as well as their physical aspects. In particular, this essay will discuss the religious undertones associated with particular animals, as well as the biblical connections their presence connotes.

In discussing Jonson and Henryson, there is one animal species which intersects both of these authors' literary works; the fox. In *Volpone*, it is the fox that ultimately becomes the central character in the play, as it is, crucially, the eponymous species. Through *Volpone*, we see the depiction of the mental faculties of the cunning fox character, rather than the more physical attributes which it possesses. In *Volpone*, we are exposed to wit, to deceit, and to trickery. In the Henryson Fables, there is a similar preoccupation with foxes, as well as with more sinister apex predators, such as wolves and lions.

My conclusions followed academic discourse. The attributes of the fox impact both the characters in the fable, as well as their perception by the audience. The cunning and disregard for religious morals were clearly elements of the fox's nature which were used to add a sense of depth and inevitably to the fables, and an understanding of these characteristics is crucial to a fully rounded interpretation of these 15th century works.



Volpone: The Fox

Volpone is a Jacobean era comedy written by Ben Jonson, the English Playwright. It was first produced in 1605, and it draws upon the concept of the beast fable. It remains Jonson's most-performed play.

Who is Volpone?

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In *Volpone*, we are exposed to wit, to deceit, and to trickery of the fox character. *Volpone*, being the Italian translation of the word fox, and more literally being the Italian for 'big fox', is a master of disguise, and is effortlessly able to manipulate and trick the wealthy and educated members of society in his presence. Jonson uses the Italian names of birds to describe *Volpone*'s three key advisors, naming them as the Crow, the Vulture and the Raven. *Volpone* goes on to terrorise these 'birds', playing with the concept of the fox as a hunter of birds. This is a common theme in medieval fables, such as Chaucer's "Chanticleer", and Henryson's "The Cock and the Fox".

Defining the Fox

In the traditional medieval fable representation of the fox, there is a convention of observing the fox as being a sly creature, who has a comprehension of the perspective of those around him, often manipulating this to his advantage. In French and British and even Chinese fables, such as *Le Corbeau et le Renard*, we see that the fox uses his ability to deceive to his advantage. The fox often uses flattery, or trickery, to achieve his aim, often mimicking a corpse to lull those around him into a false sense of security, allowing for the optimal window in which to attack his prey. *Volpone* lives up to this representation, by faking his own death to enact his evil plan on his advisors.

Other Animal Characters- Birds

Birds of Prey- In Jonson, the carrion birds, the Vulture, the Crow, and the Raven, are all metaphorical representations of greed and of destruction. In Jonson's fable, these birds pick apart their victim for his wealth, and it is the concept of inheritance that drives their motives, reinforcing the concept of picking at a carcass for nourishment.

Henryson's Fox Fables

Henryson too emphasizes the trickery and the deceit which is internalized within the concept of the fox. A medieval bestiary describes the trickery employed by foxes:

"When he is hungry and nothing turns up for him to devour, he rolls himself in red mud so that he looks as if he were stained with blood. Then he throws himself on the ground and holds his breath, so that he positively does not seem to breathe. The birds, seeing that he is not breathing, and that he looks as if he were covered with blood with his tongue banging out, think that he is dead and come down to sit on him. Well, thus he grabs them and gobbles them up."

The choice of focus on the fox animal species is equally viewable as being a direct reference to the Catholic religion. The fox has a notable red pelt, which is important, as it mirrors the red breast of the common robin, which was said to be red due to the blood of Christ upon the cross as he was being crucified. This red pelt, thus, can be interpreted as the fox being drenched in the blood of Jesus Christ, making it essentially a Judas character.



Other Animal Characters – The Wolf

The Wolf- For Henryson, the wolf is oftentimes associated with the clergy and with the church. Henryson uses physical attributes as well as emotional states to create this comparison. He connects their grey coats to the style of habits worn by monks, and he also draws parallels between their fur and the tonsure hairstyles used by monks. Using a wolf, or any predatory animal, as a symbol for church authority has roots in medieval fables, as Refael Vivante explains, "The lion and the fox are common characters in literary works that contain social criticism of leaders, rulers and authority figures".

Fox as the Anti-Christ Character

In both Henryson and Jonson's fables, there are clear attempts to portray the fox character as an alternative or opposite figure to that of the Christ figure. The fox in these fables is often seen bastardising traditional acts and miracles of the Christ figure. The Christian God is often depicted as being the shepherd to this flock of lambs, and thus, choosing the fox species becomes a clear and intentional depiction of a sinister character, a polar opposite to the Christ or God character, a manifestation of evil, or more precisely, of the betrayer. As Mark Loveridge explains, "The devil in this case assumes his traditional animal form, the fox".

Fox vs Lamb

One clear affiliation between the fox animal and the Christ figure is the concept of the 'Lamb of God'. Christ represents a lamb to be slaughtered for the sins of mankind, while the fox character sacrifices lambs for its own survival. In Henryson, we see the fox intentionally manipulating this concept of lamb purity to its own benefit. He performs an act of baptism, washing a lamb in the river and anointing it as a 'salmon' so that it can be consumed with no repercussions. As such, this molestation of the rite of baptism is used to intentionally highlight the depravity of the fox character, and equally widens the gap of the immoral fox, from the moral Christian lamb.

"Every action in Volpone is starkly silhouetted against a backdrop of Christian ethics".

Inverting Miracles

The Lamb of God selflessly travels the countryside, healing lepers who come across him, wanting nothing in return but their thanks. While the fox, *Volpone*, travels Italy in disguise, selling an artificial potion which will cure none of the ailments that he claims. He also has a following of 3 'wise men' who open the play by bringing him gifts, he spreads rumours to allege that a woman has been unfaithful, mirroring Christ's protection of the alleged prostitute Mary Magdalene, and his final bastardisation is his falsified resurrection.

In his final deceit, *Volpone* chooses to fake his own death in an attempt to condemn those around him, encouraging them to commit sins and greed. In feigning his own death, and eventually having to rectify this trickery, *Volpone* can be seen as having come back from the dead, as having risen. It is this moment that truly cements the anti-Christ interpretation of *Volpone*'s fox character.

Conclusion

To conclude, the figure of the fable beast must be considered in light of its wider settings. The power of the literature around medieval fables is drawn from the universal recognition of the traits and attributes of certain animals. In these early times, the widespread understanding of how an animal was going to be perceived by a large audience was an important factor to be contemplated by authors. Academic discourse supports the conclusion that the choice of the fox character, as well as the surrounding animal species, was a deliberate and premeditated one. The attributes of the fox impact both the characters in the fable, as well as their perception by the audience.

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