

## REYNAERT'S JOURNEY TO COURT: REFLECTIONS ON THE TASK OF THE TRADITIONAL HERO

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"And after all those foreign books, he wrote his tale in Dutch." (A 80).<sup>1</sup> While the originality of the Dutch **Van den Vos Reynaerde** lies in its wit and literary qualities, the adventures of the fox, the hierarchical structure of the animal kingdom and the human idiosyncracies of the animals themselves are all found in other tales. This compositional duality between original and traditional elements has centered most discussions of the **Reynaert** around questions of oral versus literary tradition, of Germanic versus Latin influences, and of secular versus clerical transmission. I would like to offer some reflections on the question of traditionality versus originality by using yet another approach, employing Vladimir Propp's "morphology" to find similarities of plot in the group of animal tales centered around the fox and to compare these findings with the underlying structure of the **Reynaert**, whose author asserts its place within the tradition while at the same time allowing his hero to save his neck in an original way.<sup>2</sup>

In viewing functions as "stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled" (p. 21), Propp maintained that the characters of the Russian folk tales he studied could be defined by the roles they played in unfolding the plot, and their actions could be similarly defined by the consequences within the plot. When viewing his collection of tales in this way he found that the basic structural pattern, the "morphology," was the same for all tales in his collection.

Propp's work has not been without its critics.<sup>3</sup> In particular, his insistence that functions should always appear in the same order has met with convincing opposition. Still his morphology has been used successfully to find the underlying structure not only in collections of other Indo-European tales, but also in those poems and epics which are generally acknowledged as having some basis in the folk tale.<sup>4</sup>

It is with these limitations and possibilities in mind that I sought to establish a common morphology for the medieval tales of the fox. If such a morphology could be found, it would aid in establishing the traditionality of certain functions and plots in the tales, and hence in the **Reynaert**. Secondly, it would shed light upon the repeated occurrence of certain episodes. Such a procedure would also be preferable to others because it allows us to view the tales devoid of the individual characteristics of the animals and the particular incidents in the tales, and therefore it enables us to see the basic structure more clearly.<sup>5</sup> Most of all, in the **Reynaert**,

we can see a literary author at work, who acknowledges his source. We can therefore determine what a medieval author no longer considered useful in the tradition, what had lost its meaning for him and what he chose to adapt from his source, often in rudimentary form, sometimes in another place.

There are also several issues which this approach does not touch upon. First of all no explicit reason can be given for this underlying pattern to exist in this form, except that it appears to occur in many of the traditional Indo-European tales. This discussion will also leave to others the question of whether this tradition was oral or written, Esopetan or Northern European, because it assumes that the most important aspect is the traditionality itself. Neither does it take away any of the appreciation for the contributions made by other tellers of the "reinaerdie": Pierre, Heinrich, Paulus, Nivardus and the many *trouvères* and clerics. The fox has had the good fortune to have his tale told with verve by many authors. Their merits, however, do not lie in the fact that they told better tales but that they told their tales better.

In trying to establish a common pattern of functions for the various tales of the fox, I applied Propp's morphology to the tales found in the **Isengrimus**,<sup>6</sup> the **Reinhart Fuchs**,<sup>7</sup> to the **Ecbasis Captivi**<sup>8</sup> and to the branches of the **Roman de Renart**.<sup>9</sup> Proceeding in this way, I found the following common pattern among the tales.<sup>10</sup>

Most tales have a preparatory section which contains "an Initial Situation" in which the surroundings of the "Hero" and the motivations of the "Villain" are given. Mention is then made of an "Absence of Guard." There exists an "Interdiction": either the potential victim is not supposed to leave a certain place or lose his guard, or the "Villain" is not supposed to enter. This "Interdiction" is violated by either party. Although the cyclical nature of the animal tale breeds familiarity, still "the Hero Receives Information about the Villain." Usually this "Information is Deceitful" and the hero's reaction is "to Give in to this Deceitful Information" which causes him great "Misfortune."

In the following main portion of the tale, "a Call for Action" is made, followed by the "Dispatch of the Hero," which might involve the "Transference of the Hero to a Designated Place" if the hero is the one already in trouble. The "Contest" which follows is either a battle of wits or a battle with humans. "Victory" might mean nothing more than escape. During or right after the contest, the "Hero" is either "Branded" or "Given Something." If the fox-

hero is allowed to pick his presents, it will usually hurt the giver. "The Pursuit of the Hero" and his "Rescue in flight" are sometimes implied, at other times they are alluded to in a later tale. They are essential, however, since the cyclical nature of the tales requires that the hero escapes and thinks of new tricks elsewhere. Expressed in Propp's designations, the tales discussed here follow the pattern:

· $\alpha, \beta, \delta, \xi, \eta, \theta, \lambda = A, B, C, \uparrow = G, H, I, Pr, Rs$  ·

Comparing this pattern of functions with that of Propp's folk tales shows that with minor variations both patterns are identical. The smaller deviations that occur are caused by the relative shortness of the individual tales, the cyclical nature of the collection, and the fact that the "Heroes" show the same character flaws as the "Villains," making it hard to distinguish who wears the white hat.

In concentrating on the cast of characters we see that, as in Propp's folk tales, the functions of the hero are carried out by many different animals. It is essential that these animals have human characteristics, since functions like "Deceitful Persuasion" can only be carried out by anthropomorphic characters.<sup>11</sup> In some instances the same basic tale recurs<sup>12</sup> with a different protagonist. In the *Aegrum fama fuit* fragment, the bear maligns the fox before the king and loses his fur in the end. In the *Ecbasis* it is the wolf.

Unlike the Russian tales, the cyclical nature of the fox tales allows for an occasional change of hero in the middle of the tale. This also becomes necessary because our heroes are often scoundrels, and the fox is the most cunning of them all. He initiates the action by carrying out all of the functions of the villain in the preparatory section, but when his actions get him into a predicament, the tale allows him to free himself in a hero's way.<sup>13</sup> For instance in Branch 3 of the *Roman de Renart*, the fox deceives the fishermen into allowing him into their cart by playing dead, but after eating their eel, he manages to escape this captivity by a battle of wits.

The cast of characters surrounding the fox, the wolf and the bear is smaller, as are the tales that tell their adventures. The cyclical nature furthermore allows each animal his "day in court," his own tale to tell. These animal tales therefore have a protagonist (the "Hero") and an anti-protagonist (the "Villain"), and the two animals are pitted against each other. All functions relating to "Donors" and "Helpers" (Propp's designations D and E) are absent, as are the functions relating to the false hero (L through U). The occasional occurrence of humans is more an extension of the hero's or the villain's actions.<sup>14</sup>

When viewing the system of functions, we notice that some functions are combined, again due to the relative shortness of the tales. "Preliminary Misfortune (Propp's  $\lambda$ )" and "Villainy" (Propp's A) are identical, as are "Dispatch" and "the Hero is led to a designated place." The cyclical nature also breeds familiarity. In some tales the preparatory section is alluded to and the fox is hunted, summoned, or beleaguered because of past actions. This same cyclical nature lends itself well to "Rahmenerzaehlungen." The outer framework of functions is a vehicle to tell a series of shorter tales. The earliest example is the *Ecbasis Captivi*. The *li-plaid* branch of the *Roman de Renart* and the *Reynaert* are further examples. In all these instances, the functions of the outer framework as well as the shorter tales follow the above established pattern. The confessions in the *li-plaid* branch and the *Reynaert* are another opportunity for a series of tales, all following the pattern of functions established for the preparatory section, usually occurring in flashback.

Within the tale there is also the opportunity for the repetition of functions.<sup>15</sup> It is in these repetitions that the traditional morphology shows itself as most powerful. The cat has to undergo the same fate as the not-so-clever Brun in spite of the fact that he is a wise animal and has successfully withstood the fox's temptations elsewhere (branch 2 of the *Roman de Renart*.) This same power of morphology allows the rooster, pompous and not very intelligent, to save himself by cunning like a hero, after first having succumbed to the temptations of the villainous fox (branch 2 of the *Roman de Renart*.)

We now turn to the *li-plaid* branch of the *Roman de Renart*, the probable source of the *Reynaert*, for an illustration of the features established above. Here the animals' demand for a summons of Renart provides the framework for a number of tales, some of which occur in other branches and other collections, all showing the fox as the "Villain" engaged in the same deceitful actions as were outlined in our discussion of the preparatory section, through which he caused the necessary "Misfortune" which now demands his appearance. Both the tales within the tale and the story of the fox's impending trial follow the same structural pattern. The unfortunate fate of the substitute heroes, the first two messengers, requires that a third messenger be sent, but the structural pattern does not recognize the badger as a protagonist and his summons is nothing but a call for action. A change of hero has taken place. Renart assumes this role in his own tale. He travels (is led) to a designated place and then is transported to the gallows. Arriving there he should now engage in a battle, presumably a battle of wits. He certainly does

so in the **Ecbasis**. It is therefore important that it is the fox who brings up the suggestion that he might go on a pilgrimage. The king, however, refuses to be fooled. The literary author cannot allow his royal character to be taken in by a proposed pilgrimage: "Qui bon i vont, mal en revenement" (line 1408), but has to permit him to react favorably to the ruse in order to produce the next function: "Victory of the Hero" in this battle of wits and the escape of the fox from the court. Renart also receives something, a ring from the queen. Since Renart left the court with the untraditional royal permission, the story of Coart and Renart's speech are now necessary to motivate the "Pursuit of the Hero," and "the Rescue of the Hero in Flight." During the speech, Coart escapes, but although there is surface similarity with the rooster story, the morphological pattern is uncommonly untraditional. Again I think this is the direct invention of the author of the **li-plaid** branch, who needed this addition at this stage of the tale to allow the morphology to run its course.<sup>16</sup>

Based on the structural pattern established for the other fox tales, it is therefore my suggestion that the Coart story could have been among the existing fox tales. Its adaptation here in the **li-plaid** branch, made necessary by the uncommon scepticism of a traditionally gullible king, was the invention of the author of the **li-plaid** branch, who took what he needed to bring his story to the desired end. His version now becomes the source of the Dutch "reinaerdie."

In his adaptation of the **li-plaid** branch,<sup>17</sup> the Dutch author adds two tales to the initial section, the story of Cortoys and his stolen sausage and that of the beaver. Morphologically the first half of the **Reynaert** adheres closely to its French source, although the Dutch author adds some interesting touches, especially in the adventures of Bruun. Like a Beowulf, a honey eater, Bruun travels through the water and is at first unrecognized upon his arrival at court: "And all the noblemen wondered what came rolling toward them" (A 980-1.) The author is imitating another tradition here, although these touches do not alter the basic underlying structure.<sup>18</sup>

Whereas the **li-plaid** branch author kept to the traditional morphology and made the fox propose a pilgrimage even if he could no longer allow his king to believe in it, the Dutch author does away with what can no longer be a deceptive ruse and invents a new battle of wits, the story of the Ermenric treasure, in the traditional place in the tale. The pilgrimage is still necessary, however, to put some distance between the fox and the court and allow a possible "Pursuit of the Hero" and "Rescue of the Hero in Flight."

Again it is the Cuaert story which is most puzzling

in the **Reynaert**. Necessary in the **li-plaid** branch to make the persecutors ride out, the Dutch author adopts it where he finds it and adds some interesting touches of his own, all in character but all deviating from the basic morphology established for the fox tale tradition. If the cowardly Cuaert is really as important as a succession of Dutch scholars have claimed, his killing could be the extension of the fox's triumph over the villain.<sup>19</sup> The killing itself, however, is untraditional. The cyclical nature of the tales forbids any of the recurring heroes to be "bumped off." A succession of beleaguered heroes are allowed to escape either by physical superiority or by their wits, even the dumb rooster. There are a few precedents, however, not counting the killing of the wolf in the **Ecbasis** because his children and grandchildren continue to make the neighborhood unsafe in the same manner as their skinned forefather had. There appears to be a certain finality in these killings. In **Reinhart Fuchs** the lion is poisoned by the fox. The wolf perishes tragically in the **Isengrimus**.

The function of the gift giving has been maintained in its traditional place but the Dutch author is far unkind to the adversaries of the fox than his French source had been. In the **Ecbasis** at least, the wolf skin is used (supposedly) for healing. Here the potential usefulness of hide and claws is questionable.

The fact that Cuaert and Belin accompany the fox on his intended pilgrimage is reminiscent of the **pèlerinage** branch (1b). Morphologically this could have been the beginning of the new tale: "Initial Deceit of the Villain" followed by "Misfortune." Since Cuaert is killed, Belin would have been the hero of the story, although his actions are hardly heroic. But the author does not even make the animals ride out in pursuit and Reynaert has no intention of fleeing beyond Malpertuus. The scribe of the B-manuscript feels it necessary at this point to give an extended account of the vixen's objections to any flight so the function is there, although subdued. The author has his animals make "peace of all things"—a very untraditional ending. The king tells the bear and the wolf that they can pursue the fox, but the author does not stick around to tell the tale.

These are some of the observations which the application of Propp's morphological system allows us to make regarding the traditional pattern of the fox cycle and the adaptations of an individual author. The fact that the deviations observed in the **Reynaert** do not occur with such frequency in the other tales leads one to assume that the authors kept more to their source material at least as far as the functions were concerned. But even in spite of the literary liberties which the Dutch author(s) took, the **Reynaert**—relying on its source—does not stray far from the

traditional morphological pattern. And when, guided by the same French source, he does spin a different yarn, the outcome still is surprisingly within the tradition: the treasure of Ermenric belongs with the "Battle of Wits," the maiming of Bruun and Isengrijn with "The Hero is given something." Those instances in which the author deviates do not so much violate the morphological pattern as they disrupt the cyclical nature of the tale. The **Reynaert** no longer belongs to a cycle. As both the beginning and the end of the **Reynaert** indicate, when the animals "make peace of all things," the author has indeed finished his tale. Throughout Northern Europe, the **Reynaert** did not become one of many tales, but became the tale to be written and rewritten.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Van den Vos **Reynaerde I**, Teksten, diplomatisch uitgegeven naar de bronnen voor het jaar 1500, ed. W. Gs Hellinga (Zwolle, 1952). All quotations are taken from the manuscript called **A** by Hellinga, also known as the Comburg Manuscript. Names are also spelled as they occur in this manuscript. **Van den Vos Reynaerde** will hereafter be referred to as the **Reynaert**.

<sup>2</sup>Valdimir Propp, **Morphology of the Folktale**, rev. ed., Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore and Linguistics, Publication 10 (1968).

<sup>3</sup>Criticism has ranged from those who sought improvement in Propp's method, e.g. Claude Bremond, "Die Erzählung," **Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik**, III (1973) 177-217, to those who rejected it entirely, e.g. Bertel Natorst, **Formal or Structural Studies of Traditional Tales** (Stockholm, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>Daniel R. Barnes, who himself applies Propp's morphology to the *Beowulf*, gives an extensive bibliography of the applications of Propp's method to various groups of folktales and other genres in "Folktale Morphology and Structure of *Beowulf*," **Speculum**, 45 (1970), 418. See also: Paul Gottschalk, "Strukturelle Studien zum Ortnit und den Mittelhochdeutschen Spielmannsepen," Diss. Colorado, 1970, and Ruth Hartzell Firestone: "Elements of Traditional Structure in the Couplet Epics of the Late Middle High German Dietrich Cycle," Diss. Colorado, 1972.

<sup>5</sup>A clear example of such research is the study of Adolf Graf, **Die Grundlagen des Reineke Fuchs**, **FF Communications** 38 (1920). The number of similarities of function and the number of examples he cites could have been increased beyond the most blatant ones with a methodical instrument of investigation which Propp's morphology provides. My discussion does not center on the recurrence of certain animals like the rooster or the wolf;—Graf himself points out that their roles are often interchangeable—but on the role which animals and incidents play in the unfolding of the basic plot. Some of the similarities are undoubtedly caused by newer tales imitating older ones. The consistent similarity, however, appears to point at a tradition rather than a one-to-one imitation or adaptation.

<sup>6</sup>Ernst Voigt, **Ysengrimus** (Halle a.S., 1884). Albert Schönfelder, **Isengrimus...**(Münster, 1955).

<sup>7</sup>Georg Baesecke (ed.), **Das mittelhochdeutsche Gedicht vom Fuchs Reinhart...**(Halle a.S., 1952). Hermann Büttner, **Studien zu dem Roman de Renart und dem Reinhart Fuchs**, (Strasbourg, 1891).

<sup>8</sup>Edwin H. Zeydel (ed.) **Ecbasis Cuiusdam Captivi per Tropologiam**, (Chapel Hill, n.d.) This edition includes the **Aegrum fama fuit** fragment.

<sup>9</sup>I maintained the generally used numbering system established by Martin and the chronology as outlined by Foulet. Branches dated

after the appearance of the **Reynaert** were not taken into account and more weight was given to the earlier than to the later branches. See **Le Roman de Renart** ed. Ernest Martin (Strasbourg, 1882-1887) and Lucien Foulet, **Le Roman de Renart** (Paris, 1914).

See also: John Flinn, **Le Roman de Renart dans la littérature française et dans les littératures étrangères au Moyen Age** (University of Toronto Press, 1963).

<sup>10</sup>The phrases in quotation marks are Propp's terminology. To facilitate reading I have, with a few exceptions, refrained from using Propp's symbols. I have retained Propp's designation of "Hero" and "Villain" and will modify and clarify these terms below.

<sup>11</sup>While it is essential that these animals have human characteristics, it is not essential for these functions that they are noblemen. Much has been written about adaptations from contemporary epics by the authors of the tales. That the tales in the cycle lend themselves so well to such adaptations makes one wonder about the affinity of the medieval epic to the basic morphology of the tale, not only in surface features but also in matters of basic plot.

<sup>12</sup>Ulrich Leo, "Die erste Branche des Roman de Renart nach Stil, Aufbau und Einfluss," Diss. Göttingen, 1917.

<sup>13</sup>In the German medieval narrative, the villain also assumes a large role. But as Firestone points out, his role in the narrative remains that of an opponent of the hero, even if his actions resemble those of the hero to a large extent (Firestone *op. cit.*, pp. 118-120). However, in the tales referred to here, the deceiving animal becomes the hero. The villainous nature of the fox, if not his bag of tricks, varies in the different versions of his tale. See Donald B. Sands, "The Flemish Reynaert: Epic and Non-Epic Affiliations," **The Epic in Medieval Society, Aesthetic and Moral Values**, ed. Harold Scholler (Tübingen, 1977), pp. 86-99.

<sup>14</sup>Propp's tales were chosen for their common magical element and magic was a part of the donor's function. The animal tales discussed here do not have "Donors" and magic and the supernatural are, for the most part, not only absent from the tales of the fox, but also carefully explained away. The authors make no attempt to strain the audience's credulity beyond a belief in an animal kingdom and social hierarchy.

<sup>15</sup>Firestone found that in the **Dietrichepen**, the same functions, or series of functions (called "moves" by Propp), were repeated with different characters or different objects involved, thus making for a longer narrative with the same basic pattern. See Axel Olrik's law of twins in "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative," **The Study of Folklore**, ed. Alan Dundes, pp. 129-41.

<sup>16</sup>We could reconstruct the original story: the hare is hiding in the bushes, the fox discovers him there, asks him to go and get food, hurts him, carries him off, but the hare escapes while the fox is talking.

<sup>17</sup>The **F**. manuscript seems to suggest that the author of the tale regretted the fact that one adventure of **Reynaert** had remained unrecorded in **Diets**, hereby suggesting that other tales existed in **Diets**. The scribe of the **A** manuscript, however, records "Dat die avonture in dietsche onghemaket bleuen," hereby suggesting that he knows of no adventures of **Reynaert** in **Diets** outside of those appearing in the **Reynaert**. None of the versions specifically excludes the existence of unwritten tales, only written ones ("vollscreven"). See also the detailed discussion by Ernst Martin, **Reinaert, Willems Gedicht Van den Vos Reynaerde**. (Paderborn, 1874.)

<sup>18</sup>Although unrecognized arrival is a feature in Propp's morphology, it is connected with the functions regarding the unmaking of the false hero, a character not occurring in the cycle of fox tales, in which most animals know each other well. The only tale which features anything like it is in branch 1b of the **Roman de Renart** (verse 209f) and it occurs there at the beginning of the plot as part of the initial deceit by the villain (here the fox.)

<sup>19</sup>J. Bosch, **Reinaert-Perspectief**, (Kampen, 1972.)