

Mary Rowlands

THE FABLES OF ROBERT HENRYSON

MASTER ROBERT HENRYSON BEGAN MAKING pointed comments in verse on Scottish society during the latter part of the reign of James III, and continued to do so through the early part of the reign of James IV — from about 1450 to 1500.

Henryson is perhaps best remembered as the author of that charming pastoral, *Robene and Makyne*, and of *The Testament of Cresseid*, a continuation of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, but the most interesting portion of his writings is a collection of medieval beast fables called *The Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian*. The poet claimed this to be a translation from Latin of Aesop's fables, but it is really a generous drawing from the mass of popular medieval literature. It is invaluable to the historian in that it is a commentary on Scottish life and affairs by an observant and fair-minded contemporary.

Although the tales themselves are not Henryson's invention, his skilful pen has given life to the familiar beasts of medieval fable. Vividly clear, they are drawn with sympathy and understanding, revealing in the poet a shrewd knowledge of human nature and a keen sense of humour. Among them we find beasts such as that unprincipled rogue, the wolf, clothed upon occasion in the habit of a friar with "pail pietious face"; and his hungry partner in crime, Lawrence the Fox, leering at Chanteclair as he declares with fervent admiration,

'Quhen I behald your ffedderis ffair and gent,
Your beik, your breist, your hekill, and your kame,
Schir, be my Saull, and the blissit Sacrament,
My hart is warme.'¹

The period during which the fables were written was an exciting one in Scottish history, for although it stands in the Middle Ages, it saw the early stirrings of those great upheavals, the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. Changes had already begun to make themselves felt in the social, religious, and economic life of the nation, closely bound with which was the development of the middle class.

This was the class in contact with foreign countries and new ideas, the class that fostered the growth of a money economy that struck at the roots of the feudal system, especially land-owning as a means of wealth.²

Over and again, Henryson expressed in the fables what he considered to be the great weakness of the age arising from these changes, and that was the displacement of medieval values by rank materialism. He saw society in the person of the cock who found the jewel of knowledge on a dunghill, and, being foolish, left it there in favour of something to fill his stomach. He felt some small curiosity about the jewel, and he was prepared to admit that kings and other persons in authority might require its wisdom for governing, but as for himself, he was not interested because the jewel would "nouthar extoll nor magnify" him. He went his way, remarking scornfully,

'I had lever ga scrapit heir with my naillis,
Amangis this mow, and luke my lifys fude,
As draf, or corne, small wormis, or snaillis,
Or ony meit wald do my stomok gude,
Than of Jaspis, ane mekill multitude.'³

It was, naturally enough, in the middle class, the class most directly concerned with making money, that Henryson saw the strongest expression of materialism. At least some of his life was spent in Dunfermline on the east coast of Scotland, formerly a busy trading centre, and he was consequently in a position to know the middle-class character and way of life, and to observe the impact that commercialism was making upon them. This is apparent in the familiar old tale of the town mouse and the country mouse, called by him "The Taill of the Uponlandis Mous, and the Burges Mous", in which he contrasts the countryman, content with enough, and that pushing new member of society, the merchant.

The country mouse is portrayed as a poor tenant, having lands "nane in propertie", and the little house into which he led the visiting burges mouse "without fyre or candill birnand bricht",

ane sober wane,
Off fog & farne ffull febilie wes maid.
(ll. 226-228)

Nevertheless, with hospitality as sincere as it was generous, he laid all that he had at the command of the visitor:

'Sic thing as ye se heir,
Baith meit and dreink, harberie and hous,

Salbe your awin, will ye remane al yeir.'
(ll. 226-228)

He was full of rural wisdom, assailing his relative with agreeable platitudes such as,

'Quhat plesure is in ffeistis delicate,
The quhilkis ar gevin with ane glowmand brow?'
(ll. 232-233)

and,

'Ane modicum is mair ffor till allow,
Swa that gude will be kerver at the dais,
Than thrawin vult and mony spycit mais.'
(ll. 236-238)

The burgess mouse, on the other hand, was a citizen of property and influence who lived in a "worthie wane" in the town. What was more important, he was a member of the Gild Merchant, with the right to trade abroad and in the burgh free of taxation. As Henryson put it, he

Was Gild brother and made ane fre Burges;
Toll fre als, but custom mair or les.
(ll. 172-173)

Like many a *nouveau riche*, the burgess was rather over-impressed with himself, and when he took it into his head to visit his brother in the country, where he himself was born, he was aghast to find how small everything was, how primitive and poor. He was not at all appreciative of what his generous, welcoming brother was carrying forth from the pantry — he wanted a civilised meal:

'My fair sister' (quod scho), 'have me excusit.
This rude dyat and I can not accord.
To tender meit my stomok is ay usit,
For quhyllis I fair alsweill as ony Lord.
Thir wydderit peis, and nuttis, or thay be bord,
Wil brek my teith, and mak my wame fful sklender,
Quhilk wes before usit to meitis tender.'
(ll. 218-224)

Drawing his brows down sourly, he advised the country mouse to "lat be this hole" and accompany him to the city, where

'My gude friday is better nor your pace;
My dische likingis is worth your haill expence.'
(ll. 248-249)

Though the burgh mouse was rather deficient in the quality of graciousness, he made good his boast. His poor relation, used to weighing and pondering before spending money, was extremely suspicious of city folk who waste their substance in riotous living. Confronting the groaning table by which the city mouse proved that he really did fare "alsweill as ony Lord", he pretended to be impressed not in the least, bestowing on the feast only the gloomy comment, "Ye, dame, how lang will this lest?" Despite his misgivings, however, he was soon prevailed upon to set to work:

Withoutin grace thay wesche and went to meit,
 With all coursis that Cukis culd devyne,
 Muttoun and beif, strikin in tailyeis greit.
 Ane Lordis fair thus couth thay counterfeit,
 Except ane thing, thay drank the watter cleir
 In steid off wyne, bot yit thay maid gude cheir.

(ll. 268-273)

Once he had started, the banquet was so much to the liking of the country mouse that he went so far as to join the burgh in a merry chorus of "Hail yule, hail!" until the arrival of a steward and a cat cut short the merriment.

This misfortune shows us yet another aspect of the difference between city and country dweller. Snobbish the burgh may have been; nevertheless, in his world of small ships, pirates, and uncertain markets, he had become accustomed to danger and to quick, decisive action in the face of it.⁴ He simply streaked to the safety of a nearby hole, while the country mouse fainted on the spot. After the departure of the steward, the "bald burgh" was unable to understand why the country mouse was too shaken to resume the feast at once, for in his philosophy of life, everything returned to normal as soon as the peril was "overpast".

As the country mouse crept thankfully back into his own little house, "als warme as woll," Henryson concluded that his was the better life, for although he had little, he enjoyed what he had in peace. For the burgh, the poet's medieval mind could see only misfortune. He had left his appointed place in society among the common folk to clamber up beside the lords, and all for material gain. "O wanton man!" he warns,

that usis for to feid
 Thy wambe, and makis it a God to be,
 Lieke to thy self; I warne the weill but dreid,
 The Cat cummis, and to the Mous hes Ee. ⁵

Indirectly, the activity of the merchant class was helping to make the lives of

the common folk "half ane Purgatorie". In return for Scotland's wool, hides, meat, and fish, the merchants were importing cargoes designed to excite the interest of the nobles, such as rich materials for clothing, spices and wine, and articles of European furniture.⁶ However, since the wealth of the nobles lay principally in land, they had to convert their land or its produce into money before they could acquire from the merchants the luxuries they coveted. Later, this frequently led to "feuing", a practice that threatened the very existence of the feudal system, giving the tenant as it did virtual ownership of the land,⁷ but in Henryson's day, landowners seem to have been content to get money from their tenants in ways rather simpler if less lawful.

Among those whom the landlords persecuted for money, Henryson included all of the common folk—"maill men, Merchandis, and all lauboureris"—but he had rather more to say about the "maill men", or tenants. A poor tenant like the country mouse had nothing "bot croip and caff upon ane clout of land", and after labouring all day "with faynt and hungrie wame", he returned to his family at evening to find very little food to eat. This was caused in part by the harshness of the landlords in exacting ordinary feudal services, which forced the tenant to neglect his own land to work for the lord without recompense:

His Hors, his Meir, he man len to the Laird,
 To drug and draw in Court or in Cariage;
 His servand or his self may not be spaird
 To swing and sweit, withoutin Meit or wage.
 Thus how he standis in labour and bondage,
 That scantlie may be purches by his maill,
 To leve upon dry breid and watter caill. ⁸

Besides these agreed payments and services, the landlord seems to have devised additional means of oppressing his tenants. For example, the custom of paying "grassum", the sum of money required of the tenant on the assumption of a new lease, gave the landlord great scope. As Henryson tells us, as soon as he had collected the "grassum", he began scheming to force a second payment, either by intimidating the holder of the lease, or by forcing him out altogether so that the landlord could collect from someone else. He

settis to the Mailleris ane Village,
 And for ane tyme Gressome payit and tane;
 Syne vexis him, or half his terme be gane,
 With pykit querrellis for to mak him fane
 To flit, or pay his Gressome new agane. ⁹

If the husbandman were unable to satisfy the demands of the landlord, then "over his heid his mailling will thay tak", an eventuality that left him with no alternative but to beg. Addressing himself to the lord with some indignation on this score, the poet says,

O man! but mercie, quhat is in thy thocht,
 War than ane Wolf, and thow culd understand?
 Thow hes aneuch; the pure husband richt nocht
 Bot croip and caff upon ane clout of land.
 For Goddis aw, how durst thow tak on hand,
 And thow in Barn and Byre sa bene, and big,
 To put him fra his tak and gar him thig?¹⁰

When misfortune came upon the poor man, as it did all too frequently, he had nowhere to turn in the hope of obtaining justice. When he spoke of oppression by the landlords, Henryson made the pious prayer that God

Mot saif our King, and gif him hart and hand
 All sic Wolfis to banes out of the land,¹¹

but unless he wrote these lines after the death of James III, he must have had little hope of his prayer being answered. A notoriously inept ruler, James III seems to have been uninterested in his kingdom, a weakness particularly serious during a period when the nobles had grown both powerful and disloyal. Occupied with the improvement of his castle at Stirling, with music and with alchemy, surrounded by a group of low-born favourites whose presence infuriated the nobles, James took

na labour
 To reule and steir the land, and Justice keip,
 Bot lysis still in lustis, sleuth, and sleip.¹²

The poet imagined him as the lion who slept on the forest floor until he was awakened by a troupe of little mice playing over his face. "Be my sawll," the leader of the mice declared in apology, "we weind ye had bene deid,/Elles wald we not have dancit ouer your heid."¹³

This lack of leadership, besides permitting the nobles to persecute the poor commons, in 1482 threatened to destroy James's power altogether in a serious rebellion. The nobles came upon the king at Lauder as he was making his way south to repulse an English invasion. They hanged some of his favourites over Lauder Bridge, and allowed the English army, under the command of James's brother the Duke of Albany, to take possession of Edinburgh and imprison the king in Edinburgh Castle.

It is interesting to note that although the common folk who tilled the land were helpless against the nobles, the merchant class was beginning to make its presence felt in political affairs. In the fable, the slothful lion was captured in a net set by the country folk whose livestock he had been hunting. He was released by the little mice to whom he had previously shown mercy. That Henryson intended the fable to call to mind an actual event seems to be borne out by an allusion he made in regard to the taking of the lion:

Mair till expound as now I lett allane,
 Bot King and Lord may weill wit quhat I mene:
 Figure heirof oftymis hes bene sene.¹⁴

The mice who chewed through the ropes that bound the lion Henryson called the "commountie", the community or the townspeople.¹⁵ There appears to be but one occasion forming a parallel to the fable, and that took place soon after Lauder Bridge. The king had been imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle by the Duke of Albany, but for reasons best known to himself, Albany decided to release him. To this end, he enlisted the aid of the burgesses of Edinburgh under the leadership of the provost. The success of the rescue is duly attested to by Edinburgh's Golden Charter, in which the king bestowed generous privileges on the burgh for its action in his behalf.¹⁶

No less than the rest of society, the fifteenth-century church showed evidence of the beginning of a great change in character. Already the church had grown rich enough to attract the attention of nobles more interested in lining their pockets through the advancement of their clerical relatives than in the furthering of religion, with the result that moral and spiritual values were rapidly declining.¹⁷ This may be seen in the fable called "The Taill how this foirsaid Tod maid his Confessioun to Freir Wolf Waitskaith", in which a defective confession appears to be acceptable to the church.

The friar in the tale, Freir Wolf Waitskaith, bore all the outward signs of piety. He was "ane worthie Doctour in Divinite . . . in science wonder sle", who had just left his cloister with the intention of preaching and praying. When a penitent Lowrence the Fox met him on the road, he was telling his beads, apparently with Christian fervour. As Lowrence said, kneeling reverently in the road before him,

'Ye ar Mirroure, Lanterne, and sicker way,
 Suld gyde sic sempill folk as me to grace.
 Your bair feit, and your Russet Coull off gray,

Your lene cheik, your pail pietious face,
Schawis to me your perfit halines.'

(ll. 679-681)

However pious he may have seemed, under his cowl the friar was still a wolf by nature. The confession he allowed Lowrence to make, like himself, preserved the correct outward form, but inwardly meant nothing. First he asked Lowrence if he repented of his sins:

'Art thow contrite and sorie in thy Spreit
For thy trespas?

(ll. 698-699)

Lowrence answered with engaging frankness that he was not at all sorry, except that he had not had the opportunity of doing further wickedness:

'Na, Schir, I can not duid:
Me think that hennis ar sa honie sweit,
And Lambes flesche that new ar lettin bluid;
For to repent my mynd can not conclud,
Bot off this thing, that I haif slane sa few.'

(ll. 699-703)

This admission annoyed the friar. "In faith, thow art ane schrew," he complained. He went on, however, to ask Lowrence if he would turn from his sins, but again the fox made excuses for himself:

'Sen thow can not forthink thy wickitnes,
Will thow forbeir in tyme to cum and mend?'
'And I forbeir, how sall I leif, allace,
Haifand nane uther craft me to defend?
Neid causis me to steill quhair evir I wend.
I eschame to thig, I can not wirk, ye wait,
Yit wald I fain pretend to gentill stait.'

(ll. 705-711)

Long before this point was reached, the friar, no matter how dull he was, must have realised that Lowrence's conscience was not pricking him just "sa sair" as it might. He carried on, however, without comment, as if this were normal behaviour in a penitent, as perhaps it was:

'Weill' (quod the Wolff) 'thow wantis pointis twa,
Belangand to perfyte Confessioun.
To the thrid part off penitence let us ga:
Will thow tak pane for thy transgressioun?'

(ll. 712-715)

At first the fox refused on the grounds that he was not very strong, but on second thought he condescended to do penance providing it were "licht, schort, and not grevand to my tendernes", so that he might set his innocent soul in the path of grace.

Having at last found one point upon which the fox was not entirely at odds with him, the friar speedily terminated the interview, forbidding Lowrence to eat meat until Easter. On the strength of this penance alone, he granted him full remission for his crimes of "reif and stouth" (robbery and plunder). Lowrence, however, was not yet finished. He announced that he would not do the penance unless he were given permission,

'To eit puddingis, or laip ane lytill blude,
Or heid, or feit, or paynches let me preif,
In cace I fall no flesche unto my fude.'
(ll. 727-729)

Without hesitation, the friar replied that this would be permissible twice in the week, because "neid may haif na Law". Thus, of course, he put his seal of approval on the very crimes for which Lowrence was to do penance, for it is difficult to see how the fox could obtain these parts of animals upon which he was to lunch unless he first despatched their owners.

Though not much of an aid to grace, the fox's manner of doing the penance was quite logical in the light of this regard of confession as a sort of hocus-pocus that required no real penitence. Casting about on the sea-side in a half-hearted way for something to eat, he spied a flock of goats nearby. Mindful of his promise to eat fish only, the ingenious rascal drowned a little kid, reciting solemnly as he ducked it under the waves, "Ga doun, Schir Kid, cum up, Schir Salmond agane!"

Besides hypocrisy in the church, a further manifestation of the undermining of society was corruption in the courts. There were two legal systems rather than one, the civil and the ecclesiastical, and according to the poet, one was as bad as the other.

For the convenient administration of civil justice, Scotland had been divided into sheriffdoms; these in turn were subdivided into bailiaries or constabularies. Twice a year the King's Justiciar, sometimes accompanied by the king himself, was supposed to make a circuit of the country, holding court in the chief burgh of each shire to check on the sheriffs and hear any cases they wished to bring before him. In actual fact, however, as long as the country was torn by war and rebellion, as it was through much of the reign of James III, it was difficult or impossible to make the circuit, which left the sheriffs to do as they pleased.

The greater number of actions were brought before the consistory rather than

the sheriff court, for the church claimed a very wide jurisdiction. In addition to this, the consistory was better organised than the civil court, and its officers better trained in the law, which encouraged laymen to seek the ecclesiastical court in the hope of getting justice.¹⁸ Nevertheless, evil had crept in there as surely as it had into the civil court.

The tale that deals with this subject, "The Taill of the Scheip and the Doig," probably the best known of Henryson's fables, has given us the judicial process of the consistory in great detail. It concerns a sheep called before a "Cursit Consistorie" by a dog who wished to recover from him, fraudulently, it seems, a piece of bread.

As soon as the sheep appeared in answer to a summons, it was apparent that he stood no chance of getting a fair hearing. All the officers of the court were his mortal enemies. The presiding judge was "ane fraudful Wolff"; the apparitour, who was the beadle or crier of the court, was Schir Corbie Ravin, "quha pykit had ffull mony Scheipis Ee"; the notary was a fox; and the dog's advocates were the kite and the vulture, who were conspiring dishonestly to procure sentence against the sheep—"thocht it wes fals, thay had na conscience". Furthermore, the judge proposed holding the trial at sundown, a strictly illegal practice.

Despite the sheep's attempt to have the judge disqualified as suspect, which he was quite within his rights to do, the court, "corruptit all ffor meid, aganis gude faith, Law, and eik conscience," lost no time in pronouncing sentence in favour of the dog.

After telling the tale in terms of the consistory, Henryson applied the moral to the sheriff court, thereby involving both in his accusation. The consistory judge, he said, was like a stout sheriff who gathered about him "ane cursit Assyis", the assise being the jury that gave judgment in the sheriff court. From the moment of his arrest, declared the poet, the defendant faced ruin "thocht he wer true as ever wes sanct Johne" unless he were in a position to indulge in bribery.

The raven, the apparitour of the consistory, he likened to the Crownar, who went before the Justice Ayre arresting anyone whose name appeared on his list of persons to be indicted. He was a "fals Crownar" who hesitated not to change the names on his roll for the purpose of collecting bribes:

Bot luke, gif he wes of ane trew Intent,
To scaip out Johne, and wryte in Will, or Wat,
And tak ane bud at both the parteis tat.¹⁹

We have noted, then, that the stirrings of commercialism in Scotland were not without their dark side, in that all classes in society (with the exception of the com-

mon folk, who were not given much opportunity of displaying their strength or weakness of character) showed themselves to be rather more interested in gold than in the milk of human kindness or the gathering of knowledge. It is ironical that it was from the class which best exemplified the materialism Henryson deplored, and which was largely responsible for the shifting of spiritual and economic standards, that the desired return to enduring values came.

As trade grew to greater proportions, and the merchants found that they had more money to spend and the leisure time to enjoy it, they began to develop their intellectual interests, becoming, for example, art patrons²⁰ and importers of books.²¹ What was more significant, they gradually extended an influence over the burgh schools where their children were taught, in some burghs gaining complete control over the school and appointing their own master.²²

Along with their cargoes, they took home from Europe the ideas with which they came in contact. Thus the new learning of the Renaissance made its way into their burgh schools while the church-controlled universities were yet stubbornly medieval.²³ Further, as practical businessmen, they were more impressed by the doctrine of the Reformers when it swept through Europe than they were by the inefficient, hypocritical medieval church. Their ports became hot-beds of heresy, as their energies were thrown into the difficult undertaking of securing for Protestantism a foothold in Scotland.²⁴

The middle class had found the jasp on the dunghill and raised it to its former position of honour. They were the leavening agent that gave to Scottish thought a new impetus, a stronger, more vigorous life. The effect of this, particularly in the overthrowing of the old church, was doubtless not at all what Henryson's medieval mind visualised when he wrote the fables, but he would surely not have disapproved entirely of the direction taken by events.

NOTES

1. "The Taill of Schir Chantecler and the Foxe," ll. 453-456. All quotations from the fables are taken from *The Poems and Fables of Robert Henryson*, ed. H. Harvey Wood (Edinburgh, 1933).
2. W. S. Reid, "The Middle Class Factor in the Scottish Reformation," *Church History*, XVI (1947), 138ff.
3. "The Taill of the Cok and the Jasp," ll. 92-95.
4. W. S. Reid, "The Middle Class Factor in the Scottish Reformation," *op. cit.*, pp. 138-142.
5. "The Taill of the Uponlandis Mous, and the Burges Mous," ll. 381-384.
6. John Warrack, *Domestic Life in Scotland, 1488-1688* (London, 1920), pp. 8-9.
7. Reid, *Economic History of Great Britain* (New York, 1954), pp. 134-136; I. F. Grant,

- The Social and Economic Development of Scotland before 1603* (Edinburgh, 1930), p. 268.
8. "The Taill of the Wolf and the Lamb," ll 2749-2755.
 9. *Ibid.*, ll. 2744-2748.
 10. *Ibid.*, ll. 2735-2741. That Henryson was not exaggerating the problem of eviction may be seen by comparing his description with an Act of Parliament passed in 1469, which complained that the disturbance caused by "punding of malis and annualis incasting and owt casting of tennandis" greatly marred the peace of holy days. See *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland*, II, 95.
 11. "The Taill of the Wolf and the Lamb," ll. 2775-2776.
 12. "The Taill of the Lyon & the Mous," ll. 1577-1579.
 13. *Ibid.*, ll. 1445-1446.
 14. *Ibid.*, ll. 1612-1614.
 15. *Ibid.*, l. 1587. See *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed James A. Murray (Oxford, 1893), II, under "commonty".
 16. ". . . regiam personam de carceribus, ex castro de Edinburgh liberando, in quo contra voluntatis sue libitum fuit detentus, et eorum personas vite exponendo periculis dictum castrum cum dicto duce obsidendo, ex quo insultu jam persona regia libertate gaudebat . . ." See *The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland*, ed. James Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1882), II, 1525. See also Oliphant Smeaton, *The Story of Edinburgh* (London, 1905), p. 46.
 17. D. Hay Fleming, *The Reformation in Scotland* (London, 1910), pp. 67, 69, *et passim*; John Herkless and Robert Kerr Hannay, *The Archbishops of St. Andrews* (Edinburgh, 1907), pp. 72, 73.
 18. Cosmo Innes, *Lectures on Scotch Legal Antiquities* (Edinburgh, 1872), pp. 238-239. See also George Chalmers, *Caledonia* (London, 1807), IV, 136, 580.
 19. "The Taill of the Scheip and the Doig," ll. 1276-1278. An Act of Parliament passed in 1449 forbade this very practice, saying, "It is ordanit that Justice Clerks reveil nocht to na persone his accion or translait ony accion uthir wais than it wes gevyn hym bot for the better to the King or change names ane for ane uthir . . ." See *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland*, II, 1449, 15.
 20. Warrack, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-72, 122-123.
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122
 22. By the end of the fifteenth century, the town councils of Aberdeen, Peebles, Edinburgh, and probably Dunfermline all supported burgh schools. See W. J. Gibson, *Education in Scotland* (London, 1924), pp. 37-40; Innes, *Scotland in the Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1860), pp. 255-256; John Edgar, *History of early Scottish Education* (Edinburgh, 1893), pp. 114-115.
 23. Greek was probably first taught in Scotland in the grammar school at Montrose, founded by John Erskine of Dun, one of the principal Reformers. The grammar schools of Aberdeen and Perth very early showed the influence of the humanists. See John Strong, *A History of Secondary Education in Scotland* (Oxford, 1909), p. 7; Edgar, *op. cit.*, pp. 123, 302.
 24. Reid "The Middle Class Factor in the Scottish Reformation," pp. 143-146.