

Robert Henryson The Moral Fables of Aesop – Summaries and Themes

Part of what makes Henryson’s fables different from the fables written before it, is its complex structure.

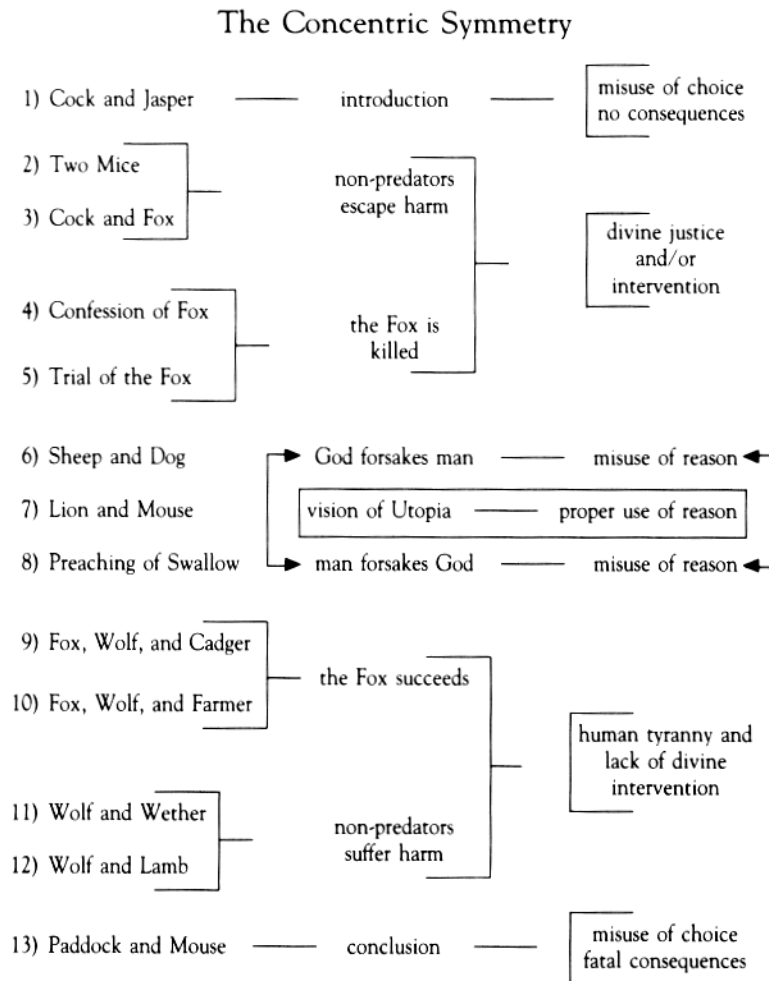


Figure 1: From The Moral Fables of Aesop. Edited and Translated by George D. Gopen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1987): 20.

The Cock and the Jasp

Aesopic

While looking for food, a cock finds a Jasper that the maids swept out with the trash. Having no need for Jasper, the cock ignores it and continues looking for food.

Themes:

Jasper = wisdom

Cock = Fool

The gem of wisdom is lost in our time. Prudence is lost on the Cock.

The Country Mouse and the City Mouse

Aesopic

The elder sister, the city mouse, visits the younger in the country and scoffs at the plain fare. The country mouse goes with the city mouse and eats well in the larder. They are interrupted first by a steward then by a cat. The country mouse returns home to plain fare and safety.

Themes:

1. The sweetest life, therefore in this land of ours is security in few possessions.
2. Be content in your station of life.

As Henryson often does, in this tale he elevates the poor. His underlying theme of being content, mirrors fifteenth century economics, when there was much mobility between the classes. Also interesting to note is that the mice are sisters, one older, one younger (in Aesop they were cousins), which could mirror inheritance laws, and that the mice are female.

Sir Chanticleere and the Fox

Reynardian

The fox (Lawrence) flatters the cock (Chanticleere) into closing his eyes while crowing. The Cock is captured then escapes when dogs come after the fox.

Themes:

Cock = Proud, foolish men

Fox = Flatterers

Fox uses double entendre when talking about the cock's father (Served father until death)

Hens, who are all women, (Sprutock, Pertock, Toppock) are fickle.

The Fox's Confession to Friar Wolf-who-lies-in-wait

Reynardian

Fox confesses sins to the wolf and his penance is to eat no meat until Easter. The fox immediately finds a kid and dunks in water to "turn it into" a salmon. The goat herder kills the fox with an arrow through the belly.

Themes:

Warning to people to truly repent when going to confession because death comes suddenly.

The Trial of the Fox

Reynardian

Lion calls a parliament but the mare does not come. The fox (Lawrence again) and the wolf are sent to call the mare. As the wolf goes to look at the excuse on the hoof of the mare, she kicks him. Saying that he'll get the wolf some water, the fox leaves, kills a lamb (breaking the rule of parliament), and then eventually takes the wolf back. The fox's crime is discovered and he is hanged.

Themes:

Lion = worldly things that make people bow down before the powerful to gain wealth

Mare = men of contemplation who praise god through every action and thought

Wolf = sensuality

Fox = temptations

Sheep and the Dog

Aesopic

Dog falsely calls sheep to court over a loaf of bread. Court is presided over by enemies of the sheep, including the wolf and the kite. Sheep found to blame.

Themes:

Sheep = commoners

Wolf = sheriff

Dog = person who takes advantage of commoners.

No justice in our world. Sheep cries out: “Lord, God, why do you sleep so long?”

Lion and the Mouse

Aesopic

Mice frolic on sleeping lion and one is caught. The lion grants mercy. Later when the lion is caught in a net, the mice all come and chew him free.

Themes:

Utopian Dream vision. It is noteworthy that Aesop says that it is pointless to tell fiction to teach when people don't listen to the preachers.

Preaching of the Swallow

Aesopic

As a fowler plants seeds, a swallow warns the other birds to destroy the crop. They do not heed. That winter the fowler spreads his nets and covers them with chaff. When the birds come they are gruesomely killed.

Themes:

It is important that Henryson parallels this tale with the Lion and the Mouse. Here is society as it is. People don't listen to wisdom. Utopia and justice are only a dream.

Fox, Wolf, and the Cadger

Reynardian

Fox tricks Cadger into thinking that he's dead. While he's being carried off, he steals herrings and throws them back to the wolf. When the fox returns, he tells the wolf about nekhering (sp). The wolf pretends to be dead too, then, to get all the fish. Not willing to be tricked again, the Cadger this time beats the animal before wanting to carry it off. The wolf barely escapes with his life.

Themes:

Men are never content with what they have.

Fox, Wolf, and Farmer

Reynardian

As farmer is plowing, he threatens the oxen that he will give them to the wolf. Overhearing this, the wolf comes to claim the oxen. The fox acts as arbitrator, and the farmer bribes him with hens. The fox tricks the wolf into thinking that the moon at the bottom of a well is cheese to be used as payment. The wolf gets caught in the well.

Themes:

Wolf = wicked man who oppresses poor

Fox = devil

Farmer = godly man

Cheese = covetice

Wolf and the Wether

Reynardian

A sheepherder's best dog dies and he fears that the predators will now take advantage. A wether volunteers to wear the dog's hide and for a while protects the sheep. Eventually a wolf takes a lamb and the wether gives chase. Even though the wolf drops the lamb the wether still follows. Branches tear away the hide and the wolf sees the sheep. The sheep is killed.

Themes:

Fine clothing makes men presumptuous

Know your place in society

Wolf and the Lamb

Aesopic

A lamb is drinking downstream from a wolf. The wolf becomes angry. Although the lamb makes all the right legal arguments, the wolf kills it.

Themes:

Lack of justice in the world.

Lamb = poor

Wolf = oppressors (three kinds: pervert laws, have plenty, man of inheritance who kicks people off land)

Paddock and Mouse

Aesopic

Mouse wishes to cross a river. Paddock volunteers to teach mouse to swim. Against its better judgment the mouse ties himself to the paddock. As the paddock tries to drown the mouse, the mouse tries to reach the surface. Seeing the struggle a kite comes and kills them both.

Themes:

Paddock = body

Mouse = soul

Kite = death

River = Life

1. A fair tongue and wicked mind are worse than any pestilence. Don't believe them.
2. Keep good company
3. Cherish freedom even in poverty more than wealth in slavery
4. Nothing in this life is secure
5. Death comes quickly, be wise.