The Destruction of the Fox Preacher:

A Reading of the Borders of the York Minster Pilgrimage Window

Aleksandra Pfau

Images of a fox preaching to a flock of birds, at least one of whom he plans later to devour, fill the margins of medieval religious manuscripts and marginal spaces in medieval churches[1]. This problematic figure appears in dress ranging from bishop's mitres to friars' robes to pilgrims' staffs. One unlucky (or perhaps unwary) member of his congregation is often shown in a following scene, flung over the fox's back as he runs off. The fox's success is seldom allowed to go unchallenged, however. Incorporated within the image or within its context is the threat of the fox's downfall and eventual death. While these images admit to the danger of false preaching even within the boundaries of religion, the impending doom for the fox serves to legitimate the religious work surrounding it. Though the fox uses the power of religious words to captivate (literally) his listeners, in the end, it is the fox who is doomed. The images may act as a warning against false preaching on the part of the clergy who view these images or against unwariness on the part of the laity, but they also act as a confirmation of the viewer's role in recognizing and chastising such preaching. This self-confirmation is evident in the border imagery in the Pilgrimage Window in the nave of the York Minster, where the fox's downfall may even be brought about by the pilgrims themselves.

The fox appears in the bestiaries, literature and art of the Middle Ages as a symbol of the sly and sophisticated devil. Classified as a beast, the fox was depicted in typical bestiaries as a devious animal that would feign death in order to lure carrion birds. In this way the fox was shown to be like the devil, of whom it was said, '*omnibus enim secundum carnem uiuetb*[*us*] *fingit se e*[*ss*]*e mortuii tenet int*[*er*] *gutt*[*us*] *sini peccatores h*[*ab*]*eat sp*[*irit*]*ualibatus & perfectis in fide uel mortuus & ad inchum*

---

[1] See K. Varty, *Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art* (New York, 1967); L.M.C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley, 1966).

reclactus est.'[2] Thus, even the natural fox had a reputation for deceit and devilry, a reputation that would have been familiar to the medieval mind. In addition, this comparison with the devil suggests that the truly spiritual man would recognize and be safe from such deceit. Judging from the literature of the time, the fox's habit of stealing chickens, however well guarded, from the peasantry and his role as an oft-hunted animal for the nobility made him an easily recognizable symbol[3]. Ideas of the fox incorporated these contradictory images of the hunter and the hunted, another way in which he was similar to the devil, at once threatening and threatened.

Under the name of Reynard the fox, the fox's roles as both hunter and hunted come to play in tales of his adventures, as he alternates between tricking his victims and running from them. Late in the twelfth century a number of the French Reynard stories were gathered together to form the *Roman de Renart*[4]. In these tales, the animal world often functions entirely separately from the human world. Reynard's crimes are brought before the lion king by the wolf (whose wife Reynard raped) and the cock with his hens (whose children Reynard ate)[5]. Reynard himself manages to avoid punishment by vowing to go on pilgrimage, a vow he immediately breaks[6]. This is only the first occasion on which the fox covers his evil deeds with a pretence of religion. Reynard can often be found dressing up as a religious

---

[2] E. G. Millar, ed., *A Thirteenth Century Bestiary in the Library of Alnwick Castle* (Oxford, 1958), p. xii (f. 10vo); Translation: 'with all those who are living according to the flesh he feigns himself to be dead until he gets them in his gullet and punishes them. But for the spiritual men of faith he is truly dead and reduced to nothing.' T.H. White, ed. and trans., *The Book of Beasts* (London, 1954), p. 54.

[3] See Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd edn (Boston, 1961), pp. 198 - 206; 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' in M. Andrew and R. Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter, 1996), pp. 269 - 270; William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. L. Schmidt (London, repr. 1987), p. 66.

[4] D.D.R. Owen, ed. and trans., *The Romance of Reynard the Fox* (Oxford, 1994), p. ix.

[5] Ibid., pp. 5 - 11.

[6] Ibid., pp. 25 - 27.

figure or pretending to be pious in order to avoid punishment or get a meal.

Chaucer's version of this traditional story does not include this religious element, but it contributes to an understanding of the Pilgrimage Window for two reasons. First, he incorporates the human world within which these animals enact their drama. The cock that the fox ensnares belongs to 'A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age.'[7] This widow, her daughters and the men of the town begin to chase the fox when he makes off with the cock at the end, and it is the fox's response to them that causes him to lose his meal. These human figures are often included in artist's renderings of the fox story. The second point that Chaucer incorporates is less to do with the tale itself than with the person telling it. Chaucer's decision to have the Nun's Priest tell the tale of the fox suggests that the fox's story might have been one of a number of fables told by priests as moral tales to gain the attention and understanding of their audiences. Indeed, the Nun's Priest addresses his fellow pilgrims at the end of the tale, saying 'But ye that holden this tale a folye,/As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,/Taken the moralite, goode men.'[8] Such use of fables by preachers was disapproved of by various church authorities, but was justified by citing Biblical precedent. As G.R. Owst puts it in his book on sermon *exempla,* 'the record of Holy Scripture is to be considered as parent authority for moralization in the shape of anecdotes, whether historical or fictitious: this, too, as set forth more particularly in the method of teaching adopted by Christ himself.'[9]

Marginal imagery can be seen as similar to sermon *exempla*, in that they occasionally consist of stories with morals that draw attention to the religious context surrounding them. However, as Michael Camille points out, these marginal images could have other functions in addition to or distinct

---

[7] Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Nun's Priest's Tale,' p. 199.

[8] Ibid., p. 205.

[9] G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1961), p. 152.

from moralization[10]. In some cases, particularly with the fox-preacher, the imagery pro-actively undermines the fox. Rather than simply presenting a world turned upside down, the images of the fox include within them the re-ordering of the world encapsulated in the fox's downfall. Camille notes that the medieval cathedral was often contested ground[11]. It is possible that the fox imagery could be seen in this light, particularly in the York Minster Pilgrimage Window.

The Pilgrimage Window in the north aisle of the nave, which dates from the early fourteenth century,[12] includes scenes containing the fox in the bottom border. This location at the base of the window places it within easy sight from the ground and the images would have been decipherable to viewers, of which there were likely to be many due to its position in the nave. Indeed, the bottom border of the Pilgrimage Window is actually larger than that of the other windows in the nave, suggesting a heightened importance for those images within it. The three scenes depicted are also guaranteed significance because of the medium of stained glass. While marginalia in manuscripts could have been unplanned, in order to include such images in stained glass they must have been planned simultaneously with the rest of the window. In fact, it is this similarity to manuscript illumination that makes the Pilgrimage Window so distinctive. The manuscript element seems to encourage a more personal reading of the window.

Although the three borders can be read separately, I would like to postulate a reading that incorporates all three lights, and also connects these scenes to the rest of the window. Since the window as a whole seems to read from the left and the right into the centre (with the two pilgrims flanking St. Peter in the lower row and the Virgin Mary and St. John flanking the crucifixion in the upper row), I

---

[10] M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992), p. 28.

[11] Ibid., p. 77.

[12] D. E. O'Connor and J. Haselock, 'The Stained and Painted Glass' in G. E. Aylmer and R. Cant, ed. *A History of York Minster* (Oxford, 1977), p. 357; J. Toy, *A Guide and Index to the Windows of York Minster* (York, 1985), p. 17.

would like to argue that the left- and right-hand marginal images are converging towards the centre image.

In the border of the left-hand light (Figure 1) a fox at a lectern preaches to a cock. Unfortunately some of the glass has been lost, so it is impossible to say whether or not he was wearing religious regalia, but he is certainly a religious figure. Behind him, apes mimic a human funeral. The scene's iconography suggests that it is the funeral of the Blessed Virgin Mary. According to Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, the Virgin Mary died in the presence of all the apostles. After her death, the apostles carried her bier, with John walking in front with a palm. As they walked, the chief priest attempted to overturn the bier and his hands withered and became stuck to it. Thus, in the Pilgrimage Window, there is a figure hanging from the bier. Again, much of the glass is missing, but the toothy smile that this figure is sporting suggests that he is another ape, although he could arguably be a fox. The crowd of Jews around the Virgin's bier was struck blind. In desperation, the chief priest converted to Christianity and his hands were healed. Afterwards the chief priest cured the believers in the crowd of their blindness with the palm John was carrying[13]. This cure for blindness could be the source for the final scene in this light, where a physician uselessly stands staring into a urinal while another ape heals the third with something held in his hand. The physician ape is continued as a theme up the left- and right-hand borders of the left- and right-hand lights. It is possible that this physician ape refers to a failed physical cure for an illness (perhaps blindness?) that the two pilgrims cured or hoped to cure through pilgrimage to a shrine. It is significantly absent from the borders of the centre light. Interestingly, the other ape figure in the side borders of the left- and right-hand lights is holding an owl, a symbol for blindness[14].

Like the fox, the ape is also compared to the devil in medieval bestiaries. As such, their

---

[13] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend,* ed. and trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York, 1969), pp. 451 - 454.

[14] Varty, *Reynard the Fox,* p. 48.

depiction as the apostles in what appears to be the funeral of the virgin seems problematic. The bestiary points out that '*Symia caudam no*[*n*] *h*[*abe*]*t cuius figuram diabolus hab: qui caput h*[*abe*]*t cauda*[*m*] *uero no*[*n*] *h*[*abe*]*t.*'[15] Thus, should these tail-less, scripture-less animals be included in a representation of the Virgin's funeral? Alternatively, this scene could be read as a depiction of the text that the fox is preaching to the cock. Like the Nun's Priest, the fox could be using a well known story in his preaching to hold the interest of the cock. The *Golden Legend* acknowledges that the story of the Virgin's funeral is apocryphal,[16] which suggests that it, like the story of the fox, may be considered almost anecdotal. In this way, the left-hand light's bottom border could be seen as self-referent. It is a depiction of a moral story in which one of the story's characters tells another moral story. When read in this way, the apes become less problematic. Apes are often pictured as the fox's accomplice, and sometimes as a close relative[17]. If the fox is using the story of the funeral of the Virgin in order to lull the cock into a false sense of security, then it would make sense to represent this story with his devilish cousins.

This funeral scene is also intriguingly similar to a manuscript illumination of the funeral of the fox himself, which may provide another self-referring moment[18]. The story of the fox's funeral is part of the *Roman de Renart* and tells of Reynard's near death and his revival just before being placed in his grave. Reynard opens his eyes as his bier is being carried towards his grave, at which point he leaps

---

[15] *A Thirteenth Century Bestiary*, p. xx (f. 15vo); Translation: 'A monkey has no tail (*cauda*). The Devil resembles these beasts; for he has a head, but no scripture (*caudex*).' White, *Book of Beasts*, p. 34.

[16] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, p. 454.

[17] Varty, *Reynard the Fox*, pp. 60 - 67.

[18] Randall, *Images in the Margins,* plate 599.

out of his bier and grabs Chantecler the cock, who is carrying the thurible[19]. In the *Romance of Alexander*, illuminated by Jehan de Grise in Bruges in the mid-fourteenth century, the marginal image of the fox's funeral (figure 4) is nearly identical to the funeral depicted in the Pilgrimage Window. Instead of a monkey hanging from the funeral bier because of his presumptuous attempt to push it over, it is Reynard the fox who is leaping from the funeral bier. He already has a cock clutched firmly in his mouth as he falls. It is difficult to say how widespread that particular rendering of the fox's funeral was, but there is a possibility that the funeral in the margins of the Pilgrimage Window could have been read as a foreshadowing of the fox's death. This double meaning can also be seen in the preaching fox from the late fifteenth-century misericords in Ripon Cathedral (figure 5)[20]. This depiction seems to refer to the fox's trial, as the oversized duck and cock close in on the fox who appears to be stuck in his pulpit.

The right-hand light of the Pilgrimage Window (figure 3) contains a hunting scene that is arguably unconnected to the tale of the fox. However, it could be seen in the context of the fox's downfall. On the far right an archer aims at a deer which is also being attacked by a grey hound. The other figures in the scene are not, as might be expected, also converging on the deer, but rather seem to be moving out of the right-hand light and into the centre. Immediately to the left of the small grey hound, a hunter carrying a spear faces away from the deer. Next to him, another grey hound runs eagerly towards the centre light. Though D. E. O'Connor and J. Haselock argue that the animals have been moved from their original order, their argument is based on a comparison with a similar hunting scene in the early fourteenth century manuscript, the Peterborough Psalter (figure 6)[21]. While the order in the window does seem unusual, one of the dogs is facing in the wrong direction to fit into the order set out by the Peterborough Psalter. It is thus arguable that the hunter and the other hound could be

---

[19] E. Martin, ed., *Le Roman de Renart* (Berlin, 1973), II: 226 - 227; Owen, *The Romance of Reynard*, p. xix.

[20] C. Grossinger, *The World Upside-Down: English Misericords* (London, 1997), p. 24.

[21] D. E. O'Connor and J. Haselock, 'The Stained and Painted Glass,' p. 357.

moving into the centre light. Regardless of the actual order that the Pilgrimage Window's hunt was in originally, the Peterborough Psalter provides an interesting parallel relating the hunt to the fox (figure 6). While the bottom of the page consists of a hunting scene similar to that in the right-hand light of the Pilgrimage Window, the top of the page includes a fox running away with a cock. Behind him, an archer, who seems to have slipped up the side of the page from the hunt at the bottom, aims an arrow at his head. Thus, the possibility that the animals involved in the hunt have been replaced in the wrong order does not negate the connection proposed between the hunt scene and the downfall of the fox.

Between the hound and the centre light, admittedly, is a rampant lion. However, this is almost certainly a later restoration to the glass. In fact, it may even have come from an adjacent window[22]. It seems out of place not only in the scene, since its size and position are inconsistent with the hunt scene, but also in the window in general. Although there are other lions in the glass, they are lions couchant, not lions rampant. While it would be helpful to know what image should have been in the scene, it is impossible to do more than speculate. It seems likely, judging from the glass on the right hand side of the same scene, that the image there was simply more of the oak tree that at the moment frames the lion, however, it is impossible to be certain. The oak tree does continue in the far right corner of the centre light, which seems to support the connection between the two borders.

This centre light (figure 2), towards which both the right- and left-hand lights appear to converge, contains an even more certain doom for the fox. Although at first glance the fox in this window appears to have succeeded in his aims (he has a goose firmly held in his mouth), he is statically positioned between a woman who aims a distaff at him and a man with a horse. Varty comments on the unusual presence of the man and the horse in this version of the scene and postulates that it refers to 'a lost literary variant.'[23] Rather than join Varty's search for a literary corollary, I would suggest that

---

[22] Ibid.

[23] Varty, *Reynard the Fox*, p. 38.

this version of the scene of the fox's downfall connects the marginal imagery in the centre light both with the marginal imagery in the left and right and with the lower row of the window. The fox's preaching having succeeded, he stands in the centre of the centre light's bottom border with a goose in his mouth, connecting this centre light to the left-hand light, where the fox is preaching to another bird. The literary source for the man with his horse can be found in the men who typically join in the chase once the woman with her distaff begins to shout for help. However, as Varty confirms, usually those who chase the fox are the common people who have been in the fields and are wielding agricultural implements or have been playing games. Judging by their clothing and the elaborate buildings out of which they are coming, neither the woman nor the man in this version is a peasant. In fact, their clothing is similar in colour to the clothing worn by the woman and the man in the lower row of the window. It could be postulated, then, that this centre border is showing the people pictured in the main window as they conquer a false preacher. It is in this moment, as the pious laity are seen overcoming and defeating religious pretence, that the Pilgrimage Window could be engaging with the cathedral as contested ground. It might be seen as legitimizing or even authorizing the power of the laity to recognize and chastize impious religious officials.

On the right of the centre border, an ape sits, holding an owl on his arm. The same bird can also be seen sitting in front of the fox in the Peterborough Psalter (figure 6). The ape and the owl are commonly pictured together, and in fact are mentioned in tandem in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale during a discussion of dreams. 'Men dreme alday of owles and of apes,' the cock in the tale says[24]. The owl can be a symbol for death as well as blindness,[25] perhaps, in the window, alluding to the hound and hunter who are about to enter the scene from the right-hand light. Unlike the usual band of peasants, a hunt is certain to kill the fox. Alternatively, the ape and owl could again be referring to the blindness

---

[24] Chaucer, 'The Nun's Priest's Tale,' p. 202.

[25] Varty, *Reynard the Fox*, p. 49.

(physical or even spiritual) that the two pilgrims might be seeking to cure. The connection to the right-hand light does not depend on this symbolic reference, however. The man and his horse could be seen as members of the hunt. In any case, this centre light refers to the other borders and the main window in its defeat of the fox, the false preacher.

Images of fox preachers prominently placed in religious contexts are not as problematic as they at first appear. Though they could be seen as a negative commentary on the religious actions carried out around them, they nearly always end with a chastisement of the fox and his deceit. This chastisement is often placed in the fox imagery itself or in the context it surrounds, thereby legitimizing that context. In the Pilgrimage Window in the York Minster, the fox imagery could be seen as helping to legitimize the pilgrims' roles as pious laity and, specifically, as pilgrims. The window's marginal imagery was intentionally incorporated into the window as a whole. The choice of the preaching fox iconography serves to enhance the viewer's understanding of some of the possible meanings in the window.

Bibliography

Published Primary Sources

Andrew, M. and Waldron, R., eds. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript.* Exeter, 1996.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer.* Ed. F.N. Robinson. 2nd edn. Boston, 1961.

Langland, William. *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. Ed. A. V. L. Schmidt. London, repr. 1987.

Martin, E., ed. *Le Roman de Renart.* Berlin, 1973.

Millar, E. G., ed. *A Thirteenth Century Bestiary in the Library of Alnwick Castle.* Oxford, 1958.

Secondary Sources

Camille, M. *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art.* London, 1992.

de Voragine, Jacobus. *The Golden Legend.* Ed. and trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger. New York, 1969.

Grossinger, C. *The World Upside-Down: English Misericords.* London, 1997.

O'Connor, D. E. and Haselock, J. A. 'The Stained and Painted Glass.' *A History of York Minster.* Ed. G. E. Aylmer and R. Cant. Oxford, 1977.

Owen, D.D.R., ed. and trans. *The Romance of Reynard the Fox*. Oxford, 1994.

Owst, G.R. *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England.* Oxford, 1961.

Randall, L.M.C. *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts.* Berkeley, 1966.

Toy, J. *A Guide and Index to the Windows of York Minster.* York, 1985.

Varty, K. *Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art.* New York, 1967.

White, T.H., ed. and trans., *The Book of Beasts*. London, 1954.