On the fox's trail : some aspects of the English Bestiary tradition

Dora FARACI

The relationship among animal tales, *exempla* and bestiaries has been variously investigated[1], such as the influence of the Bestiary on the *Roman de Renart*[2]. In this essay I will offer my contribution to this subject by suggesting the hypothesis of the presence of the story of the fox and the cock in the English Bestiary tradition. The examination of this topic, through a detailed analysis of a passage in the *Middle English Bestiary*, will lead to the wider problem of the frequent intertwining of secular and religious works and of the important function this mutual influence has in the interpretation of medieval texts belonging to different genres.

The 13th century *Middle English Bestiary* (London, B.L., Ms Arundel 292)[3] is the only extant vernacular Bestiary in Middle English Literature, although the genre is very well represented in England. Apart from the *Old English Physiologus* and other Latin texts written during the Anglo-Saxon period[4], starting from the 12th century England assisted to a thriving production of Latin and

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1) See on the subject F.R. Whitesell, "Fables in Mediaeval Exempla", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 46 (1947), pp. 348-366, L.M.C. Randall, "Exempla as a source of Gothic Marginal Illumination", *The Art Bulletin* 39 (1957), pp. 97-107, P. Shallers, "The Nun's Priest's Tale: an Ironic Exemplum", *ELH* 42 (1975), pp. 319-37, P. Navone, "Il cane e l'ombra. Appunti sulla fortuna della favola nei bestiari mediolatini e romanzi (Phaedr., I 4)", *Atti del V Colloquio della International Beast Epic, Fable and Fabliau Society*, Torino-St. Vincent, 5-9 settembre 1983, a cura di A. Vitale-Brovarone e G. Mombello, Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso 1987, pp. 191-200.

2) Cp. R.A.Lodge, "Pierre de Saint Cloud and the Bestiaires", in *Proceedings of the University of Glasgow International Beast Epic Colloquium*, ed. K. Varty, Glasgow, 1976, pp. 37-45 and K. Varty, "Le goupil des bestiaires dans le Roman de Renart", in *A la Recherche du Roman de Renart*, ed. K. Varty, New Alyth: Lochee Publications, 1991, pp. 344-60.

3) For the edition D. Faraci, *Il Bestiario Medio Inglese*, L'Aquila-Roma: Japadre, 1990 and H. Wirtjes, *The Middle English Physiologus*, EETS O.S. 299, Oxford, 1991.

4) Cp. D. Faraci, "The Bestiary and its Sources: Some Examples", *Reinardus* 7 (1994), pp. 31-43, particularly at pp. 38 ff.

French Bestiaries – such as the Bestiaires by Philippe de Thaün[5] (12th cent.) and Guillaume le Clerc[6] (13th cent.) –, some of which beautifully illuminated. The circulation of all these texts proves the existence of an already well-established tradition at the time of composition of the *Middle English Bestiary* and also implies the influence of a varied cultural milieu on its author who shows his ability in adapting narrative motifs derived from different traditions with freedom and originality. The work is usually referred to as the English translation of the Latin *Physiologus Theobaldi*[7]. Nevertheless, if it is undeniable that the Latin *Physiologus Theobaldi* represents its main source, as the order of the chapters and the general arrangement of the matter testifies, the differences between the two works and the presence in the *Middle English Bestiary* of distinctive motifs give evidence of an original process of elaboration of pre-existing material which do not necessarily belong to the *Physiologus* tradition.

One of these departures from the main model is evident in the first lines of the chapter devoted to the fox that seem to show the presence of echoes coming from the beast tales, particularly from those belonging to the *renardienne* tradition.

In the *Physiologus* and *Bestiary* texts the fox is *figura diaboli*. It represents the devil or the traitor who entices man and brings him to perdition. The chapter usually tells of a fox which, when hungry, feigns death. The birds, thinking it is a corpse, start picking at the fox but, as soon as they are within range, it jumps up and devours them[8]. The meaning linked to this story is that the devil, like the fox, shams death until he punishes all those who are living according to the flesh. The texts I know begin the chapter by a description of the cunning behaviour of the animal in getting food when it is hungry, or by a quotation from the Bible, or

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5) E. Walburg (ed.), *Le Bestiaire de Philippe de Thaün* , Paris-Lund, 1900 and the recent edition by L. Morini, *Bestiari Medievali*, Torino: Einaudi, 1996, pp. 105-285.

6) R. Reinsch (ed.), *Le Bestiaire. Das Thierbuch des normannischen Dichters Guillaume le Clerc*, Leipzig, 1892.

7) Theobaldus, most likely, was an Italian writer of the 11th century. For the edition see P.T. Eden, *Theobaldi «Physiologus»*, Leiden und Köln: E.J.Brill, 1972.

8) This is the most frequent scene in the Bestiary illuminations. On the fortune of this representation see M. Bath, "Reynard in the Renaissance: Volpone and the bestiary", in *Atti del V Colloquio della International Beast Epic, Fable and Fabliau Society, Torino-St. Vincent, 5-9 settembre 1983*, eds. A. Vitale-Brovarone – G. Mombello, Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1987, pp.85-91.

by the Isidorian etymology of the Latin name *vulpis*[9].

Theobaldus introduces an aspect of the fox that is usually missing in the *Physiologus* tradition. Instead of starting immediately with the customary scene of the deceit of the birds, he portrays a vignette, which apparently seems to be taken from everyday experience of rural life: the fox that catches farmyard animals and the farmer's aversion for it. The inclusion of this new item does not surprise since Theobaldus's version is particularly significant within the genre just because its author was able to work out a text with elements taken from different literary traditions, thus adding a breath of fresh air to the *Physiologus* and organizing the material in a way which was intelligible and enjoyable to his audience. Let us see his fox chapter[10].

DE VULPE

Plena dolis multis vocitatur subdola vulpis;
Haut amat agricola, quod rapit altilia.
Sin habet illa famem, quia desunt, invenit artem,
Qua sibi cracantes prendere possit aves:
In terram scissam se tendit namque supinam,
Et quasi mortua sit, flamina nulla trahit.
Cornix aut ater corvus putat esse cadaver:
Insidet, ut comedat, morsibus excoriat.
Illa levis surgit subitoque volatile sumit,
Dentibus et tristem reddit edendo vicem.
Inde tenet duplam, quam prodest nosse, figuram
Nunc Zabulo similis, par aliquando viris.
Mortuus est vere, qui mortem fecit habere,
Nos et dissimulat, quod mala non faciat;
Cujus edit carnem, qui rem facit omnis inanem
(Hoc est peccatum quodlibet atque malum);
Quem quasi deglutit, cum secum ad Tartara ducit:
Demon ab insidiis vulpecule est similis.

9) See, for instance, the text of Ms Ii. 4.26 of Cambridge, University Library in T.H. White (ed), *The Book of Beasts, being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, Gloucester: Alan Sutter, 1984^2, pp. 53-4.

10) Eden, *Theobaldi «Physiologus»*, p. 44-46.

Et cum fraude viri sunt vulpis nomine digni,
Quales hoc omnes tempore sunt homines;
Herodesque fuit, qui Christum querere jussit,
Credere se simulans, perdere dissimulans.

Theobaldus devotes a single verse to the predatory nature of the fox, probably with the intention of presenting the negative qualities of the beast from the very beginning and of preparing his readers' mind for a negative inclination toward the animal he is going to deal with from a typological perspective.

Our vernacular author adds more details to the scene concisely hinted at by Theobaldus. And by doing so I think he refers directly to the beast tales, which must have circulated in England at that time. The following is the first part of the Middle English fox chapter.

NATURA WULPIS
A wilde der is ðat is ful of fele wiles
fox is hire to name. For hire qweðdsipe
husebondes hire haten, for hire harm dedes.
Ðe coc 7 te capun
ge feccheð ofte in ðe tun,
7 te gandre 7 te gos,
bi ðe necke 7 bi ðe nos,
haleð is to hire hole. Forði man hire hatieð
hatien 7 hulen, boðe men 7 fules.
Listneð nu a wunder ðat tis der doð for hunger.
Goð o felde to a furg 7 falleð ðar inne,
in eried lond er in erðchine forto bilirten fugeles.
Ne stereð ge nogt of ðe stede a god stund deies
oc dareð so ge ded were, ne drageð ge non onde.
Ðe rauen is swiðe redi, weneð ðat ge rotieð,
7 oðre fules hire fallen bi for to winnen fode,
derflike, wiðuten dred: he wenen ðat ge ded beð.
He billen on ðis foxes fel 7 ge it wel feleð.

Ligtlike ge lepeð up 7 letteð hem sone.
Gelt hem here billing
raðe wið illing, 300
tetoggeð 7 tetireð hem mid hire teð sarpe.
Fret hire fille
7 goð ðan ðer ge wille[11].

We cannot rule out the possibility that the author of the *Middle English Bestiary*, like Theobaldus, might have derived the fox's habit of preying on fowls from the observation of an event frequent in the country, since in the Middle Ages the fox was a common pest. Nevertheless, I feel to agree with those who maintain that a medieval author directed his eyes to encyclopaedia more often than he directed them out of the window, i.e. he drew on the literary tradition rather than on reality[12]. Nor can we exclude an influence derived from exegetic or religious texts, where the predacious nature of the fox is often mentioned in relation to the devil, the heretics or the persecutors. The following passages show how the description of the fox's practice of stealing fowls does not exclusively belong to the heritage of beast epic.

Pascasius Radbertus (9th cent.): *Quam bene haeretici vulpibus comparantur: fallax enim animal satis, et semper insidiis intentum, fraudis rapinam passim excercens, nunc extra, nunc infra, nunc circa domos inter ipsa hospitia hominum fraudem requirens, jugiter foveas parat in quibus semper aut latere aut refugere captat. Denique insidiatrix domesticarum avium, pullos gallinarum, indefessa rapere curat...*[13]

Petrus Capuanus (12th/13th cent.): *Vulpes violentae, scilicet principes mundani et persequutores, ad modum vulpium, rapiunt pullos gallinae, scilicet Ecclesiae*

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[11] Faraci, *Il Bestiario*, p.64.

[12] Cp. H. Reinitzer, "Vom Vogel Phoenix. Über Naturbetrachtung und Naturdeutung", in *Natura loquax, Naturkunde und allegorische Naturdeutung vom Mittelalter bis zur frühen Neuzeit*, eds. W. Harms-H. Reinitzer, Frankfurt a. M., Bern, Cirencester: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1981 (Mikrokosmos, Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft und Bedeutungsforschung Bd. 7), pp. 17-72, at p. 28.

[13] *Exp. in Matt.*, *PL* CXX, col. 357.

filios, ad praedandum eos et ritrahendum a fide[14].

Vincent de Beauvais (13th cent.): *Vulpes est animal dolosum, aues etiam domesticas, ut gallinas insidiose rapit et deuorat*[15].

A story of a fox sneaking into a farmyard and stealing domestic fowls can be read in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, in the book dealing with Bonifacius[16]:

Haec itaque in hospitii sui uestibulo gallinas nutrire consueuerat, sed eas ex uicinitate uulpes ueniens auferebat. Quadam uero die, dum in eodem uestibulo puer Bonifatius staret, uulpes ex more uenit et gallinam abstulit. Ipse autem concitus ecclesiam intauit, et se in orationem prosternens, apertis uocibus dixit: « Placet tibi, Domine, ut de nutrimento matris meae manducare non possim? Ecce enim gallinas, quas nutrit, uulpes comedit ». Qui ab oratione surgens, ecclesiam egressus est. Mox autem uulpes rediit, gallinam quam ore tenebat dimisit, atque ipsa moriens ante eius oculos in terram cecidit.

The practice of adding passages taken from Patristic texts belongs to the Bestiary tradition and quite early excerpts from the Church Fathers were added to the original Greek or Latin *Physiologus*. But while in the examples just quoted the allusion was simply to the fox and the fowls, the narrative plot condensed in the initial lines of the fox chapter in the *Middle English Bestiary* seems to describe a more articulate scene.

Not only does the text narrate a theft, but it also tells of a chase, with the participation of both men and animals, and of a flight to a den. A comparison with

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[14] Cp. J.B. Pitra, ed., *Spicilegium Solesmense* , Paris, 1885, tomo III, pp. 64-5.

[15] Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum maius*, 4 vols., Douai: B. Belleri, 1624, *Speculum Naturale*, vol. I, Lib. XIX, coll. 1448-49.

[16] *Grégoire le Grand, DIALOGUES*, Tome II, eds. A. de Vogüé - P. Antin, Sources Chrétienne 260, Paris: Les éditions du Cerf 1979, I, 18, pp. 90-92. For the Old English translation of the passage cp. H. Hecht, *Bishop Wærferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen*, Leipzig, 1900-07 (repr. Darmstadt, 1965) pp. 69-70. On this episode see P. Boglioni, "Il Santo e gli animali nell'alto medioevo", in *L'uomo di fronte al mondo animale nell'alto medioevo* (Settimane di studio del centro italiano di studio sull'alto medioevo, XXXI, 7-13 aprile 1983), 2 vols., Spoleto 1985.

some passages from the texts of the beast tale tradition may display how much our text owes to everyday life experience and how much to an established literary tradition. The texts I have considered are: *branche* II of the French *Roman de Renart*[17] (end 12th cent.), the Middle German *Reinhart Fuchs* by Heinrich der Glichezaere[18] (12th cent.), the tale *Del goupil e del coc* written by Marie de France[19] (12th cent.) – the poetess attached to Henry II's court who claims to have translated from an English tale collection written by King Alfred –, the English beast tale *The fox and the wolf* (13th cent.)[20], Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*[21], the two narrative songs, belonging to the 15th century[22] *The Fox and the Goose* and *The False Fox*, and other Latin tales and *exempla* dealing with the fox and the cock[23], some of which written by English authors, such as Odo of Cheriton (1180-1246).

The narrative structure of the introductory section of the fox chapter in the *Middle English Bestiary* is articulated in the following five sequences:

[17] I quote from the edition by E. Martin, *Le Roman de Renart*, 2 vols., Strasbourg-Paris 1882-85, vol. I, which generally follows ms. A (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fr. 20043) but considers also other manuscripts; ll. 1-131 of Branch II, where some of the details I am concerned with appear, are published, for instance, according to ms. D (Oxford, Douce 360). The edition by M. Roques, *Le Roman de Renart. Branches II-VI*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1951, based upon ms B (ms. de Cangé, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fr. 371) also includes the motifs I deem relevant for the present discussion, while some of them are missing in the text most recently edited by N. Fukuloto, N. Harano, S. Suzuki, *Le Roman de Renart, édité d'après les manuscrits C et M*, Tokyo: France-Tosho, 1983.

[18] K. Düwel (ed.), *Der Reinhart Fuchs des Elsässer Heinrich*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984. See also U. Schwab, *Zur Datierung und Interpretation des Reinhart Fuchs*, Napoli: Cymba, 1967 and id., *Das Tier in der Dichtung*, Heidelberg : Carl Winter, 1970.

[19] C. Brucker (ed.), *Marie de France. Les Fables*, Louvain: Peeters, 1991, pp. 240-42.

[20] For the edition cp. J.W.A. Bennett - G.V. Smithers, *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, Oxford, 1974², pp. 297-99. On the subject see T. Paroli, "*Of the vox of the wolf* "La volpe e il lupo": funzionalità strutturale e intento umoristico in un apologo medio-inglese", in *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Aurelio Roncaglia*, Modena: Mucchi Editore, 1989, III, pp. 965-83.

[21] F.N. Robinson (ed.), *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985². Regarding the source of this tale, see among the others, R. A. Pratt, "Three Old French Sources of the Nonnes Preestes Tale", *Speculum* 47 (1972), pp. 422-44 and 646-68.

[22] For the edition see R. H. Robbins (ed.), *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, Oxford 1955², pp. 43ff.

[23] For the diffusion of this tale cp. G. Dicke – K. Grubmüller, *Die Fabeln des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, München: W.Fink Verlag, 1987, pp. 215-18. See also E.P. Dargan, "Cock and Fox. A Critical Study of the History and Sources of the Medieval Fable", *Modern Philology* 4 (1906-7), pp. 38-65.

1) The fox gets into a farm.
2) It takes cocks, capons, ducks and geese.
3) It takes them by the neck and the beak.
4) It goes away with them toward its lair.
5) Peasants and animals run after it howling and crying.

Similar details are to be found in Literature and Art, as Kenneth Varty has shown in his interesting and fundamental works on the pursuit of Reynard in Medieval England[24].

Let us consider these narrative segments individually, by testing them against the most representative works telling of the fox's deeds.

1) Setting. The fox is said to penetrate into a private property; the Middle English word *tun* gives the idea of a fenced place. In the literary texts under consideration, fowls are suitably kept in an enclosure to avoid the attacks of the fox. The presence of walls or other defence underlines the canny intrusion of the beast. The Latin tales usually speak about a *gallinarium*, as in the stories by Odo of Cheriton and John of Sheppey[25].

ROMAN DE RENART, Branche II, ll. 23ff:
Il avint chose que Renars,
Qui tant par fu de males ars
Et qui tant sot toz jors de guile,
S'en vint traiant a une vile.
La vile seoit en un bos.
ll. 45 ff:
Li courtilz estoit bien enclos.
De piex de chesne agus et gros.
Hourdés estoit d'aubes espines.
Laiens avoit mis ses gelines

[24] K. Varty, *Reynard the Fox. A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art*, Leicester, 1967. See also D. Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 62-71.

[25] Cp. L. Hervieux (ed.), *Les Fabulistes Latins*, Paris, 1893-99 (repr. 1970), 5 vols, vol. IV.

Dant Constant pour la forteresce.

REINART FUCHS, ll. 21 ff:
Er hatte eine groze klage,
er mvste hveten alle tage
Siner hvner von Reinharte.
sin hove vnd sin garte
was niht bezevnet ze frvmen.
ll. 37 ff:
Einen tzvn macht er vil gvt,
dar inne want er han behvt
Scanteklern vnd sin wip,
den het Reinhart an den lip.
Eines tages, do die svnne vf gie,
Reinhart do niht enlie
Ern gienge ze hove mit sinnen.

THE FOX AND THE WOLF, ll. 9 ff.:
He strok swithe overal
So that he ofsei ane wal.
Withinne the walle wes an hous:
The wox wes thider swithe wous,
For he thohute his hounger aquenche,
Other mid mete other mid drunche.

NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE, ll. 2847 ff:
A yeerd she hadde, enclosed al aboute
With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute,
In which she hadde a cok, hight Chauntecleer.

THE FOX AND THE GOOSE, ll. 7 ff:
Whan he cam all in the yarde,
Soore the geys wer ill a-ferde...

THE FALSE FOX, ll. 7 ff:
The fals fox cam into our yerde,
And ther he made the gese aferde.
The fals fox came unto our gate,
And toke our gese ther wher they sate.

2) Typology of the animals. The kind of farmyard animals mentioned also plays a meaningful role because of the lexical similarities our text shows with other beast tales. In the passages of the patristic or religious tradition we have seen, the only animals to be seized by the fox are hens or cockerels (*pullos gallinarum*, *pullos gallinae*, *gallinae*). Theobaldus, by using the word *altilia*, does not specify the kind of fowls. The Middle English author is more precise: he lists four different kinds of domestic animals, *coc, capun, gandre and gos*[26] which can be also found in other texts such as the

ROMAN DE RENART, Branche II, ll. 28-29:
Molt i ot gelines et cos,
Anes et malarz, jars et oes.
ll. 34-35
De gelines et de chapons
Bien avoit garni son hostel.

Guillaume le Clerc, BESTIAIRE, ll.1307 ff. :
Assez avez oï fabler,
Coment Renart soleit embler
Des gelines Costeins de Noës.
Volenters fist trosser ses joës
Li gopiz en totes saisons

[26] For a story concerning fox, cock and capon, see the tale De gallo et capone, in the *Dialogus Creaturarum*, in J.G.Th. Grässe (ed.), *Die beiden ältesten lateinischen Fabelbücher des Mittelalters des Bischofs Cyrillus Speculum Sapientiae und des Nicolaus Pergamenus Dialogus Creaturarum*, Tübingen, 1880 (Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins, vol. 148), pp. 204-05.

De gelines e de chapons[27].

NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE, l. 2849:
... a cok high Chauntecleer.
l. 2866
Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce.
ll. 3390-91
The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle;
The gees for feere flowen over the trees.

THE FOX AND THE WOLF, ll. 28-30:
Hennen weren ðerinnen icrope
Fiue (ðat makeð anne flok),
And mið hem sat on kok.

THE FOX AND THE GOOSE
He hente a goose all be the heye,
Faste the goos began to creye!

THE FALSE FOX
The fals fox cam unto our croft,
And so our gese ful fast he sought.

It seems important to underline that the Middle English text mentions the cock in the first place, although its presence in the farmyard was not very frequent[28]. The priority given to it among the other fowls suggests that the author meant to bring the story of the fox and the cock back to his audience's mind from the very beginning. More direct is the allusion to the *renardienne* tradition in Guillaume le Clerc, who mentions the names of the characters of the *Roman de Renart.*

3) Way of seizing the fowls. The *Middle English Bestiary* specifies the part

[27] R. Reinsch, ed., *Le Bestiaire. Das Thierbuch des normannischen Dichters Guillaume le Clerc*, Leipzig, 1892.

[28] See the observations by K. Varty, "The Pursuit of Reynard in Medieval English Literature and Art", *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, 8 (1964), pp. 62-81, at. p. 70.

of the body by which the prey is taken[29]. Apart from the passage from Gregory's *Dialogues*[30], where the fox lets drop the hen from its mouth, none of the religious texts examined describes exactly the way fowls are carried away from the yard. In the following passages we shall see how often in animal literature it is clearly stated that the fox grabs his prey by the neck. Of the beak, mentioned in our text, I have found no parallel[31]. The presence of this detail in the *Middle English Bestiary* could be ascribed to rhyme and alliteration reasons (*gos/nos/necke*).

ROMAN DE RENART, ll. 241-42:
C'est li gorpils qui vos prendra
Parmi le col, quant il vendra.
ll. 349 ff:
Par de desoz un roge chol
Le prent Renars parmi le col,
Fuiant s'ent va et fait grant joie
De ce qu'il a encontre proie.

REINHART FUCHS, ll. 133-4:
Blinzende er singende wart,
Bi dem hovbt nam in Reinhart.
ll. 147 ff:
Schantekler was vngerne do.
als er im entweich, do want er sam vro
Den hals vz Reinhartes mvnde.

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[29] There are many examples, taken from the illustrations, which show a fox running away with a goose between its jaws. In some Bestiary texts this motif appears in the chapters devoted to the goose (Latin *anser*). London, B.L., ms Harley 4751, f. 54r shows three geese and some goslings in a medallion and, in the right margin of the page, a fox with a goose in his mouth. A similar image can be found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms Bodley 764, f. 83v. K. Varty, *Reynard the fox*, has traced this motif in many drawings and sculptures. For the preference the artists give to the goose see Varty, *ibid.* p. 37.

[30] See above and note n. 16.

[31] Philippe de Thaün in his *Bestiaire* (cp. Morini, *Bestiari Medievali* , p. 204) mentions both head and beak, but the context is different from the one we are dealing with here; ll. 1785ff: *Li oisel ki la veit / quide que mort seit, / al gupl vent volant / la u fait mort semblant; / lores li volt manger / si la prent a bechieer, / en la buche li met / sun chef e sun bech: / li gupilz eneslure / li oisel prent e devure.*

John of Sheppey, VULPES ET GALLUS:
...Videns enim vulpes sibi competere tempus et locum, gallum sumens per collum, strangulavit eum et asportauit ad siluam[32].

NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE, ll. 3334-35:
And daun Russell the fox stirte up atones,
And by the gargat hente Chauntecleer...

THE FALSE FOX:
He toke a gose fast by the nek
And the goose thoo began to quek.

Concerning this point and in the light of the continuous development and amplification of the *Physiologus* texts, it is interesting to notice that while Theobaldus does not specify either the kind of animals the fox likes to take away or the way of stealing them, in one of the late annotated *Physiologus* Theobaldi texts, specifically the one kept at the University Library of Basel and printed in 1501, there is a clear reference to both the features just mentioned and also to the leading motif of the stories centred on the fox and the cock, that is the singing of the fowls:

Nota que adhuc sunt alie nature vulpis. Prima est quod vulpes gallis et gallinis est maxime inimica. Solet enim quando adest eis videns eos cantantes rapere per collum.

Although much later than the text we are considering here, the example just quoted proves that the practice of fitting into *Physiologus* texts excerpts from animal stories into *Physiologus* texts was not unusual, as we have seen in the lines of the *Bestiaire* by Guillaume le Clerc.

4) Shelter. The detail concerning the place where the fox makes for after the taking is significant. In the majority of secular texts I have analysed a wood

[32] See Hervieux, *Les fabulistes latins*, vol. IV, pp. 446-47.

or a forest is usually mentioned. Mt. 8,20 speaks of fox's holes: "Vulpes foveas habent, et volucres coeli nidos". This quotation, which first appears in the Greek *Physiologus*, can be found in many Bestiary texts[33] where it gives the cue for underlining the deceitful nature of the animal. Although we cannot except that our text derives from the Gospel, as the similarity between *hol* and *fovea* suggests, we think that the idea our passage conveys is that of a flight to the forest and then to the fox's shelter. A comparison to the beast tales seems therefore more fitting.

REINHART FUCHS, ll. 136 ff.:
Reinhart tet niht danne draben
Vnd hvp sich wundern balde
recht hin gegen dem walde.

Romulus Anglicus, DE GALLO ET VULPE:
Vulpes, in eum irruens, cantum in tristiciam vertit, raptumque cantorem ad nemus deferens properavit[34].

Marie de France, DEL GUPIL ET DEL COC, ll. 14-15:
Li gupil saut e si l[e] prent;
vers la forest od lui s'en va.

John of Sheppey, VULPES ET GALLUS:
...gallum sumens per collum, strangulavit eum et asportauit ad siluam.

NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE, ll. 3336-37:
And on his bak toward the wode hym beer,
For yet ne was ther no man that hym served.

THE FOX AND THE GOOSE, l. 20:
Sche shall goo unto the wode with me;

---

[33] Cp. Faraci, *Il Bestiario medio inglese*, pp. 137-8.

[34] Hervieux, *Les fabulistes latins*, II, pp. 598-99.

THE FALSE FOX, ll. 27-28:
The false fox went into his denne,
And ther he was full mery thenne.

The passage closest to our text is the one from the late *False Fox*, which mentions *den*, to be equated to the *hol* of our Bestiary. But the specification seems of no relevance: the structure of the story does not change at all if instead of a wood we find a den or a hole. What means is not the exact indication of the place, rather the idea conveyed, that is the fox's flight with its prey to a safe shelter[35].

5) Pursuit. In the *Middle English Bestiary* men and animals hunt the fox[36]. The chase is accompanied with cries and howls as in many literary texts.

ROMAN DE RENART, ll. 369ff:
La bone feme del mainil
A overt l'uis de son cortil
...
Quant voit que prendre nel porra,
Porpense soi qu'el criera.
"Harou!" escrie a pleine gole.
Li vilein qui sont a la coule,
Quant il oent que cele bret,
Trestuit se sont cele part tret
...
Li vilein corent a esploit.
Tuit s'escrient "Or ça, or ça!"
...
Tuit s'escrient:"Or ça, or ci!"

[35] An interesting figurative example of this motif has been traced by Kenneth Varty in the *Smithfield Decretals*, a text preserved in B.L., Royal Ms 10.E.IV, written in Italy and illuminated in England in the fourteenth century ("Reynard the fox and the Smithfield Decretals", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 26 (1963), pp.347-54). On f. 49v, in the lower margin one can see a fox that runs off to his hole with a goose held in its mouth by the neck and a woman who pursues the fox with her distaff.

[36] For the meaning of the verb *hulen* cp. Faraci, *Il Bestiario medio inglese*, p. 139.

Costans lor dist:"ot tost aprés!"

...

Costans apele son mastin,
Que tuit apelent Mauvoisin...
Tuit s'escrient, "vez le gorpil!"

REINHART FUCHS, l. 135:
Pinte schrei vnd begonde sich missehaben.
ll. 139-40:
Den schal vernam meister Lantzelin.
er sprach:"Owe der hvner min".

GALLUS ET VULPES (11th. cent.):
Clamore complent nubila:
"Gallum tollit vulpecula!
Succurrite quantocius,
Ales perit egregius!"[37]

Romulus Anglicus, DE GALLO ET VULPE:
Aderant forte pastores in campo, qui vulpem profugam canibus et clamoribus insequebantur.

Marie de France, DEL GUPIL ET DEL COC, ll. 16-20:
Par mi un champ, u il passa,
curent aprés tut li pastur,
li chiens le hüent tut en tur.
Veit le gupil, ki le cok tient;
mar le guaina si par eus vient!

NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE, ll. 3355 ff.:
Certes, swich cry ne lamentacioun
Was nevere of ladyes maad whan Ylioun

...

[37] L. Herrman, *Scriptorium* 1 (1946-7), pp. 260-6 and J. Grimm-A. Schmeller (eds.), *Lateinische Gedichte des X. und XI. Jh.*, Göttingen, 1838 (repr. Amsterdam, 1967), pp. 345-54.

As maden alle the hennes in the clos,
Whan they had seyn of Chauntecleer the sighte.
But sovereynly dame Pertelote shrighte
Ful louder than dide Hasdrubales wyf
...
O woful hennes, right so criden ye
As whan that Nero brende the citee
Of Rome cryden senatoures wyves...
ll. 3375 ff.:
This sely wydwe and eek hir doghtres two
Herden thise hennes crie and maken wo,
And out at dores stirten they anon
And syen the fox toward the grove gon,
And bar upon his bak the cok away,
And cryden, "out, harrow, and weylaway!
Haha, the fox!" and after hym they ran,
And eek with staves many another man.
ll.3390-91:
The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle;
The gees for feere flowen over the trees;

THE FOX AND THE GOOSE, ll. 15ff:
He hente a goose all be the heye,
Faste the goos began to creye!
Oowte yede men as they myght heye,
And seyde, "fals fox, ley it doowne!".

THE FALSE FOX, ll. 3-5:
With how fox, how; with hey fox, hey!
Come no more unto our howse to bere our gese aweye!
ll. 35-36:
He toke a goose fast by the nek,
And made her to sey "wheccumquek".

Although in the *Middle English Bestiary* there is no precise reference to the singing, such as to other meaningful details of the story of the fox and the cock, this survey has shown that the few lines examined might be added to the evidence of the diffusion of beast epic and beast tales in Medieval England. The impression we get when we read the initial lines of the fox chapter is that the English author, relying on his public's knowledge of the story, needed only to hint briefly at it, as if his intention were to start a process of association and come back, immediately after, to the expositive structure typical of the Bestiary genre. Guillaume le Clerc, for instance, does not mention the cock, although he undoubtedly alludes to the *Roman de Renart*. And we wonder whether by referring to the fox tales the author of the *Middle English Bestiary* simply meant to embellish his text or rather to put emphasis on the moral lesson he drew from the behaviour of the animal.

As a matter of fact, another distinguishing aspect of the *Middle English Bestiary* is the tone of the moralization of the fox chapter which is different from Theobaldus's and the majority of texts belonging to the genre, as we can see from the following lines, where intemperance and idle talk are strongly underlined:

Twifold forbisne in ðis der
to frame we mugen finden her: 305
warsipe 7 wisedom
wið deuel 7 wið iuel man.
Ðe deuel dereð dernelike.
He lat he ne wile us nogt biswike,
he lat he ne wile us ðon non loð 310
7 bringeð us in a sinne 7 ter he us sloð.
He bit us don ure bukes wille,
eten 7 drinken wið unskil
7 in ure skemting
he doð raðe a foxing. 315
He billeð one ðe foxes fel f.7v
wo so telleð idel spel
7 he tireð on his ket
wo so him wið sinne fet.
And deuel geld swilk billing 320

wið same 7 wið sending
7 for his sinfule werk
ledeð man to helle merk.

Significacio
Ðe deuel is tus ðe <fox> ilik
mið iuele breides 7 wið swik,
7 man also ðe foxes name
arn wurði to hauen same,
for wo so seieð oðer god
7 ðenkeð iuel on his mod
fox he is 7 fend iwis.
Ðe boc ne legeð nogt of ðis.
So was herodes fox 7 flerd.
Ðo crist kam in to ðis middelerd:
he seide he wulde him leuen on
7 ðogte he wulde him fordon.

The moral lesson is centred on the damage that derives from behaving badly and a special stress is given to eating and drinking immoderately, both considered as the origin of the other sins. In the fox chapter, the majority of bestiary texts refers mainly to those who live according to the flesh (*carnalities veer*) and adds a long list of sins, such as: *adulteries, fornications, idolatries, beneficial, homicidal, forte, false testimonial etc.*, with no specific mention of eating and drinking. Significantly, the consequence of eating and drinking to excess is emphasised in the *Bestiaire* by Guillaume le Clerc [who], as we have already noticed, had in mind the *Roman de Renart*:

ll. 1369ff.
Li sages, qui ben aparceit
Le larron, qui les fols deceit,
Se tret ensus des leccheries,
Des ivresces, des beveries,
Dont les granz ordures norrissent,

Que le cors e l'alme i perissent[38]

and in Gervaise, ll. 669-75:

Ensi pren des oiseaux vanjance;
et li deables seins dotance
el puis d'anfer nos enprisone
per les charz qu'il nos abandone.
Sa charz est ivrece et luxure,
orguel, fierté et desmisure,
et sourcuidance et glotonie...[39]

Also the moral tale by Odo of Cheriton, *De vulpe*, which bears some similarities to our text, ends with a warning against intemperance:

Sic diabolus fingit se mortuum, quod nec auditur nec uidetur, et eicit linguam suam, hoc est omne illicitum delectabile et concupiscibile, scilicet pulchra mulier, cibus delicatus, uinum sapidum et huiusmodi; que cum illicite capit homo, capitur a Diabolo[40].

In the beast tales centred on the fox, hunger is usually the catalyst of the action. In

[38] In the *Bestiaire* of Guillaume le Clerc kept in Paris, B.N., ms fr. 14969, f. 25, two illuminations accompany this passage. The one in the upper part of the folio shows some men drinking and playing who represent those who spend their life in worldly pleasures, while the one in the lower margin shows the usual bestiary image of the fox feigning death and then running away with a chicken in his mouth. See D. Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, p. 63 and fig. 62. The representation of the revellers leads us to the passage Pierus Damianus devoted to the fox in his *De bono religiosi status*, *PL* 145, col. 771: "Manifesta sunt opera carnis, quae sunt ... fornicatio, immunditia ... ebrietates, comessationes", from *Gal* 5, 19-21.

[39] The text (13th cent.) was first edited by P. Meyer, "Le Bestiaire de Gervaise" *Romania* I (1872), pp. 420-43. We quote from the recent edition by L. Morini, *Bestiari Medievali*, pp. 289-361.

[40] Cp. Hervieux, *Les Fabulistes Latins*, vol. IV, p. 220.

The Fox and the Wolf[41], for instance, the narrative originates from the fulfilment of a desire which will motivate all the actions in the poem: fox and wolf are both eager to satisfy their hunger and thirst. Consequently, we might argue that this reference to animal stories in the *Middle English Bestiary* is functional to the lesson the author wishes to impart. The stress given to eating and drinking in the morality parallels, in a way, the double reference to the fox's habit of getting food we read in the opening lines of the chapter, where the *Physiologus* tradition, with its description of the fox's sham death, merges with that of the fox stories represented by the stealing of yard fowls. By blending the learned religious and didactic *Physiologus* tradition and the secular one[42], the English author strengthens the allegorical meaning and makes the understanding of the moral message easier to grasp.

There is another aspect of our *Bestiary* that deserves to be taken into account. It is the reference to idle speeches, a detail which, missing in other texts belonging to the Bestiary tradition, is expressed in the following lines:

He billeð one ðe foxes fel
wo so telleð idel spel

that find a parallel both in *Mt* 12, 36, «*Dico autem vobis quoniam omne verbum otiosum, quod locuti fuerint homines, reddent rationem de eo in die iudicii*» and in *Prov* 13,3 «*Qui custodit os suum custodit animam suam; qui autem inconsideratus est ad loquendum, sentiet mala*». [Cf. also *Iac* 3, 1-12]. A warning against idle speech, significantly considered as a consequence of excessive drinking and

[41] On the subject see H. Bergner, "The Fox and the Wolf und die Gattung der Tierepos in der Mittelenglischen Literatur", *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 23 (1973), pp. 268-85, Paroli "*Of the vox of the wolf*", 1989, p.982, F. Le Saux, "Of Desire and Transgression: the Middle English *Vox & Wolf*", *Reinardus* 3 (1990), pp. 69-79). Bergner (p. 270) has listed all the words that in *The fox and the wolf* belong to the semantic field of drinking and eating; they amount to thirty. None of the other semantic fields in the text is so well represented.

[42] The inclusion of motifs deriving from secular works is also to be found elsewhere in the *Middle English Bestiary*. In the chapter on the whale, for instance, I have spotted a detail which I have never come across in texts belonging to the genre but which appears in the *True Story* by Lucian and in a Latin collection of Medieval stories; cp. Faraci, *Il Bestiario Medio Inglese*, p. 155.

eating, can be also found in some homiletic texts[43]. If we consider the prevailing character of the Middle English text, which verges on a sermonizing tone, the passage quoted might be added to the examples suitable for proving the influence of the preaching tradition on the *Physiologus* one. However, without belittling the importance of homiletics, but rather in order to underline how blurred the borders of literary genres are in the Middle Ages, we should consider that talking too much was one of the reasons why in the fox tales the canny animal is deceived by the cock, as we read in the following passages:

ROMAN DE RENART, ll.446-48:
'La boce', fait il 'soit honie
Qui s'entremet de noise fere
A l'ore qu'ele se doit tere'.

REINHART FUCHS, ll. 162 ff:
er sprach:"er ist tvmb, sam mir got,
Der mir schaden richet,
daz man im gesprichet,
Oder swer danne ist klaffens vol,
so er von rechte swigen sol".

GALLUS ET VULPES:
"Incurrat lingua pustulas,
Quam possidet loquacitas,
Cum est dampnosum proloqui
Neque sic valet comprimi".

Marie de France, DEL GUPIL E DEL COC, ll. 29-31:
...
de maltalent e de dreit'ire
la buche cumence a maudire,
ke parole quant devereit taire.

[43] Cp. Alcuin: «De qua gula nascitur inepta laetitia, scurrilitas, levitas, vaniloquium, immunditia corporis, instabilitas mentis, ebrietas, libido» (*PL* 101, col. 633). For further examples cp. Faraci, *Il Bestiario medio inglese*, pp. 142-43.

ll. 36-38:
Ceo funt li fol: tut li plusur
parolent quant deivent taiser,
teisent quant il deivent parler.

Romulus Anglicus, DE GALLO ET VULPE:
Tunc vulpes ait: Ve sibi qui loquitur, cum melius deberet tacere! Cui Gallus de sublimi respondit: Ve sibi qui claudit oculos, cum pocius eos deberet aperire!
Moralitas: Non est exigua res suo tempore loqui, et suo tempore reticere; mors enim et vita in manibus lingue sunt.

THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE, ll. 3433-3435:
"Nay", quod the fox, "but God yeve hym meschaunce,
That is so undiscreet of governaunce
That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees".

Although not much considered by the critics, this fragment of beast story in the *Middle English Bestiary* is quite meaningful since on one hand it stands as a proof of the freedom of the vernacular poet in adapting his Latin model to the taste of his audience; on the other because it shows a story whose structure, rather than referring to the actual observation of a rural scene, seems to re-echo other stories on beasts of which very few exemplars are left in England. As a matter of fact, apart from the works previously quoted, the other references called to testify the presence in England of the story of the fox, according to the tradition, belong to iconography. Moreover, since the majority of the figurative examples dates from the 15th century, their diffusion has been ascribed to the popularity of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*[44].

However, it is possible to trace in England other evidence for the popularity of *Renard* or generally for other stories having the fox as central character.

Among the written evidence one cannot avoid mentioning the *Bestiaire* by Guillaume le Clerc, a text that in some of its chapters bears a similarity to the

[44] Beside K. Varty's works, on the subject see N.F. Blake, "Reynard the Fox in Eng-land", *Aspects of the Medieval Animal Epic* ed. by E. Rombauts - A. Welkenhuysen, Leuven-The Hague, 1975, pp. 53-65.

Middle English Bestiary. Right in the opening verses of the chapter related to the fox, the poet, who wrote his work in England and addressed it to an Anglo-Norman audience, refers distinctly to the *Roman de Renart*, as we have already seen in the examples quoted above (ll. 1307ff).

Like our author, Guillaume introduces the chapter on the fox by referring to an episode that was certainly known to his public, as if to prepare his audience for the list of negative qualities he was about to tell. Surely, the *Roman de Renart* was known and circulated in the French-speaking milieu.

Echoes of the *Roman de Renart* can be also found in some moral tales written in England. I refer here to the stories by Odo of Cheriton, mainly to the one *Contra gulosos* that we read in the collection by Hervieux[45]. Here the story of the fox that confesses its sins to the cock, the chaplain of the beasts, and then seizes and devours it, is told. The names are those of the characters of the *Roman de Renart*: the cock's name is Chantecler, the fox's Reinardus.

The *Bestiary* illuminations offer also interesting examples. What we usually read about the iconographic representation of the *Bestiary* fox is that the beast lies on a field with some birds pecking on it. If it is true that this is the most portrayed episode, other examples referring to scenes that are not to be found in the written *Physiologus* and *Bestiary* tradition are to be considered as well. I refer here to the beautiful illumination of Ms Bodley 764, Oxford Bodleian Library, where the picture, beside the scene of the fox feigning death, represents also the fox going away with a bird in its mouth. But there is another example which is more significant and which is to be held as a sort of integration of the written text. I refer to the illustration we can see in Ms Harley 3244 of the British Library (13th cent.) where a peasant, with a club, chases a fox with a fowl in its mouth (f. 43v). The text does not mention at all this episode that seems to hint at the renardienne cycle. The presence of this picture in a Latin Bestiary, whose text does not mention at all the corresponding episode which seems to hint at the renardienne cycle, is particularly meaningful, because it shows how these works were conservative as far as the written text was concerned, innovative and open

[45] Cp. Hervieux, *Les Fabulistes Latins*, vol. IV, p. 198.

to receive influences from other literary traditions in their illuminations[46].

The evidence just rehearsed brings us back to the debated question of the relationship between the *Roman de Renart* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. We have no written text to base an indisputable theory on. We may only put together the surviving examples and make some conjectures from them. The *Roman de Renart* must have circulated in England, where it was probably very popular in the French version. It is hardly possible, if one considers the strong links between France and England, to think that a text so popular in the Continent enjoyed no favour in Britain. We cannot be sure that it was translated into English in its entirety. It could have been propagated simply orally and only fragmentarily: whenever poets, preachers, story tellers needed it, they used it, picking up the passages they considered best suited to convey their messages. It is from one of these versions that Chaucer drew the matter of his tale. And rather weak appears the position of those who argue that Chaucer did not have the *Roman de Renart* as a model for his *Nun's Priest's Tale* on the basis of minor details, such as the different names of the characters of his tale. He was not a translator but an author who meant to create a new work based on a well-known plot. Moreover, the scholars who support the theory that the French epos was unknown in England have advanced, as one of the proofs, the fact that the surviving iconographic examples representing the hunting of the fox do not show a man, as in the *Roman de Renart*, but a woman, as in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. This supposition contrasts with the above quoted Bestiary illumination of Ms Harley 3244 that portrays a man in the act of chasing a fox. Moreover, although in the *Roman de Renart* the actual pursuit is performed by the peasants, it is the farmer's wife who first notices that Chantecleer was stolen and it is she who starts crying and shouting. A motionless reaction of the woman is hardly conceivable, while it is feasible to imagine a first and instinctive attempt to rush after the fox with the threat of a distaff or a club or whatever object within reach. In fact, this lively scene appears in some illuminations of the *Roman de Renart* where a woman is depicted

[46] This illumination gives us the opportunity to hint at another problem connected to the bestiary manuscripts, that is the relation between text and image. I've recently discussed on this topic, reaching the conclusion that written text and illumination form a whole unit in the bestiary tradition. The problem has to be faced considering the different role images played in the middle ages, where their function was not only that of embellishing but also of instructing. See D. Faraci, "Considerazioni su parola e immagine nella tradizione dei bestiari medievali", in D. Faraci (ed.), *Simbolismo animale e letteratura*, Manziana (Roma): Vecchiarelli, 2003, pp. 9-36.

running after a fox with a distaff (cf. Oxford, Bodleian Library Ms Douce 360, f. 21v). It seems that artists did not care about the pursuers: it is the fox that holds the scene and it is the chase that needs to be stressed; no matter if the performers are men or women.

This use of beast epic fragments lets us think of the effort bestiary writers, as well as preachers, had to make in order to provide moral instruction in a way that could be remembered by their public. Obviously, the work was simplified in the case of illuminated Bestiaries, as Willene Clark[47] and most recently, Beryl Rowland[48] have stated. But what, then, when no picture was available and when the meaning of the work had to be understood only through the ear with no involvement of the eye? With no appealing to visual images, the task was harder. In this case the skill of the writer rested entirely on his evocative power, on his ability to refer to a set of familiar images apt either to be fixed in the mind of the audience, or to put in motion their imagination. By using this technique, moral and ethical lessons were easily conveyed. And, as regard to this last point, I would like to quote Caesarius of Heisterbach who narrates that once an abbot awakened his somnolent monks during a sermon by exclaiming: "*Audite fratres audite rem nobis novam et magnam proponam. Rex quidam fuit, qui Artus vocabatur*", whereupon he lectured them: "*Videte, fratres, miseriam magnam. Quando locutus sum de Deo, dormitastis; mox, ut verba levitatis inserui, evigilantes erectis auribus omnes auscultare coepistis*"[49]. Therefore, presenting one of the most familiar aspects of the fox, i.e. its wiliness in stealing fowls, easily seen in everyday country life and also strengthened by the literary lore, appears as a cunning device adopted by Bestiary authors in order to draw their public's attention and to engender the due aversion for the fox, that is for the

[47] W. B. Clark, "The illustrated Medieval Aviary and the Lay-Brotherhood", *Gesta* 21 (1982), pp. 63-74. On the *Aviarium* see W. B. Clark, *The Medieval Book of Birds. Hugues of Fouilloy's Aviarium.* Edition, translation and commentary, Binghamton & New York: MRTS, 1992 (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 80).

[48] B. Rowland, "The Art of Memory and the Bestiary", in *Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages. The Bestiary and its Legacy*, eds. W.B. Clark and M.T. McMunn, Philadelphia: UPP, 1989, pp. 12-25: "Clark has suggested that both illustrated Aviary and Bestiary may have been used to instruct illiterate lay brothers whose attention might be held by the pictures, while their teachers translated and explained, in whatever the local dialect, the simplified lesson contained in the text" (p. 18).

[49] The passage is quoted from F.H. Bäuml, "Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy", *Speculum* 55 (1980), pp. 237-65.

devil, to an audience who for being not much accustomed to dogmas and abstract concepts, needed to be addressed straightforwardly. The use of this expositive technique[50] and the richness of moral suggestions give the impression that the *Middle English Bestiary* was meant to be used as a sort of preaching aid.

If I have tried to show the pervasiveness of beast epic in the bestiary tradition, now I would like to reverse the problem in order to see if it is possible to trace echoes from the *Physiologus* in the beast tales.

And at this regard Chaucer gives us a good example. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* he mentions the *Physiologus* (l. 3271) in the passage where he compares Chauntecleer's singing skill with the mermaids' beautiful voice: *For Phisiologus seith sikerly / How that they syngen wel and myrily.* One can argue that the mention of *Physiologus* in describing a characteristic of the mermaid we find in Homer and in many other authors is the consequence of the popularity of the work: Chaucer was sure that his public knew the *Physiologus* and could better understand the sweetness of the cock's voice through a comparison to the mermaids' melodious song[51]. Though, it is conceivable to see in this allusion the result of a sort of harmonization of allegories joining together the fox, the cock and the mermaid. By referring to the fabulous sea creatures, Chaucer might have meant to allude, in addition to the beauty of their song, to their deceitful nature and, consequently, to establish a link not only between cock and mermaid, but also between mermaid and fox, creating a sort of chain of symbolical meanings. As a matter of fact, in some branches of the *Bestiary* tradition[52], as well as in other texts[53], mermaids are not only symbols of the devil or of lasciviousness but also of the deceiver, the hypocrite, the treacherous. The same can be said about foxes that beside wiliness symbolise flattery. An explicit link between fox and flattery, appears in a branch of the Anglo-Latin family of bestiaries where the

[50] Cp. Faraci, *Il Bestiario Medio Inglese*, pp. 26-31.

[51] For the mermaid as symbol of concupiscence in Chaucer see B. Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World*, Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971, p. 44.

[52] Cp. Faraci, *Il Bestiario medio inglese*, pp. 160-61.

[53] See J.M. Steadman, "Flattery and the Moralitas of the Nonne Prestes Tale", *Medium Ævum* 28 (1959), pp. 172.79, K.P. Wentersdorf, "Symbol and Meaning in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale", *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* 26 (1982), pp. 29-46 and L.A.J.R. Houwen, "Flattery and the Mermaid in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale", in L.A.J.R. Houwen (ed.), *Animals and the Symbolic in Mediaeval Art and Literature*, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997, pp. 77-92.

habit the fox has when it wants to escape from the attack of the dogs is related by means of a variety of expressions belonging to the semantic field of deception:

Uulpis si ei canes insequentes acriter institerint mox se pedibus eorum prouoluens more canum adulantium eis alludere incipit. Cuius blandiciis deliniti canes impetum reuocant et blandienti sibi alludunt. Sic uersipellis quisque cum a quo uis superiore uicia sua feriri et reprehendi pertimescit obsequia et uerba adulatoria quandoque et munera pretendit que omnia eos excecant qui querunt que sua sunt non que Ihesus Christi[54].

Other details of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* can be singled out in the *Bestiary* tradition. When Chauntecleer tells Pertelote about his dream, he describes the beast that troubled his sleep as a being with *glowynge eyen tweye* (l. 2905). This devilish peculiarity of the fox can be found in Peter of Cornwall's *Pantheologus* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms Lincoln College 83, f. 57r-v), and in the bestiaries influenced by it, such as the text preserved in London, British Library, ms Royal 12 F XIII, ff. 25r-v, which includes the brightness of the fox's eyes among the animal's ruses to steal fowls:

Aues de nocte ac gallinas super arbores sedentes ad scintillam oculorum suorum quasi ad lumen ignis allicit ut descendant. Infatuantur enim scintillantibus luminibus vel quia lumen in tenebris aues petunt ad illud descendunt.

Being the *Physiologus* a moral work, Chaucer might have mentioned it in his tale in order to drop a hint to its deep moral meaning, as the conclusive sentence "taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" implies. This cross-reference which links mermaids and foxes[55] gives the impression to be a device apt to drive the

[54] This passage is included, with some variations, in the following manuscripts: Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 254, f. 22v (1220-1230); Oxford, Bodleian Library, e Musaeo 136, ff.23r-v (XIII cent.); Westminster Abbey 22, f. 24v (XIII cent.); Cambridge, University Library Kk. 4.25, f. 71v (1230 ca); Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce 88 E, ff. 91v-92r (1300); for the characteristics of the manuscripts cp. F. Mc Culloch, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Chapel Hill, 1962², (University of North Carolina Studies in Romance Language 33), p. 39.

[55] The practice of associating beasts whose allegories are very similar or of setting them side by side was not unusual. In *Les Contes Moralisés* by Nicole Bozon (eds. L. Toulmin Smith-P. Meyer, Paris 1889, pp. 47-8) the chapters on the mermaid, symbol of the flatterers, and on the fox are contiguous.

audience within the borders of a definite moral framework and, coming back to our initial topic, seems to play the same role as the mention of the story of the fox and the cock in the *Middle English Bestiary*.

This minor example of the *Middle English Bestiary* has made evident how vague the boundaries among animal tales, epic, *exempla* and bestiaries are, although the general tone is obviously differently balanced, since, for example, in the religious works the moral outweighs the entertainment.

The similarity among these texts is, moreover, underlined by the way they have been grouped together and handed down to us. In the absence of precise chronological or authorial points of reference, the content of individual manuscript represents a cornerstone for the deep understanding of a work and for its reception. It is interesting to notice, just to quote some examples, that ms Arundel 292, the same of the *Middle English Bestiary*, includes some tales by Odo of Cheriton and that Ms Harley 3244, together with a bestiary and other texts, contains a collection of exempla, among which the fable of the fox shamming death[56]. Moreover, if one considers that both bestiaries and beast tales were used as school texts[57], the fluidity between the two genres and the recurring merging of motifs appears less unusual.

The continuous intertwining in the Middle Ages between religious and secular, instruction and entertainment, symbol and reality can find an explanation in the following consideration of Guiette, with which I would like to conclude: "Je veux y voir le sogne d'une conception du monde qui prétend ne pas isoler absolument le grave et en quelque sorte le divin. On tient à ne pas oublier la réalité d'un moment burlesque, d'un moment dérisoire de la vie éphémère: sans

[56] See J.A. Herbert, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, London, 1910, vol. III, p. 461. See also Codex Vindobonensis 303 (France, 13th-14th cent.) that contains a conspicuous collection of fables and a *Physiologus Theobaldi* with a marginal comment from the *Dicta Chrisostomi*. Cp. N. Henkel, *Studien zum Physiologus im Mittelalter*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1976, p. 87.

[57] For the inclusion of *Physiologus* in the school curricula see Faraci, *Il Bestiario*, pp. 26-7; for the fables see K. Grubmüller, *Meister Esopus. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Funktion der Fabel im Mittelalter*, Zürich- Munich, 1977, pp. 67-97.

se moment le monde serait moins vivable"[58].

[58] R. Guiette, *Forme et senefiance. Etudes médiévales recueillies par J. Dufournet, M. De Grève, H. Braet*, Genève: Droz, 1978, pp.53-56 at p. 54.