

## An Illiterate Fox

### A remarkable scene from *Reynaerts historie*

Paul WACKERS

In the European animal epic the fox is almost always the intellectual superior character and very often his ruses or his disguises are based on education. He shows, for instance, another animal (most often a bird) a 'document' and explains its content, he presents himself as a physician, a hermit, or a confessor. And in visual art his dominant role is that of a preacher. All these roles presuppose the ability to read. It is very rare for the fox to present himself as uneducated. And, as least to my knowledge, there is only one scene in the European animal epic in which the fox presents himself as illiterate. This scene can be found in *Reynaerts historie*<sup>1)</sup> and it will be the subject of this article.

*Reynaerts historie* is a bipartite story. Reynaert comes twice to court, and both times he makes a 'confession' to his nephew, Grimbeert the badger, who is accompanying him during their voyage from Malpertuus to Nobel's court. In his second confession Reynaert retells a 'service' (*hoesheit*, v. 3994) he did to Ysegrim the wolf (vv. 3996-4108). The story he tells is based on the wellknown fable about the lion and the horse.<sup>2)</sup> Reynaert tells that the wolf and he were travelling together when they saw a mare with her foal. Ysegrim was very hungry and sent Reynaert to the mare to ask her whether her foal was for sale.

<sup>1)</sup> *Reynaerts historie* is the second Middle Dutch Reynaert story and the dominant story in the post-medieval European Renart/Reynaert/Reynard/Reynke tradition. For a summary of this story and a sketch of its place in the European tradition, see the lemma 'Reynard the Fox' in: *Dictionary of Medieval Heroes. Characters in Medieval Narrative Traditions and their Afterlife in Literature*, ed. by W.P. Gerritsen and A.G. van Melle (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 211-219. For all bibliographical details about the text and its tradition see: H. Menke, *Bibliotheca Reinardiana. Teil I: Die europäische Reineke-Fuchs-Drucke bis zum Jahre 1800* (Stuttgart, 1992). The most recent edition of the text (which will be used here) is *Reynaert in tweevoud*. Vol. II: *Reynaerts historie*, ed. by P. Wackers (Amsterdam, 2002).

<sup>2)</sup> In the fable the horse sees the lion coming towards him and he pretends to be lame because of a thorn in his back foot. The lion presents himself as a physician willing to cure the horse but while he is looking for the thorn, the horse gives him an enormous kick with his hoof and escapes. Cf. G. Dicke and K. Grubmüller, *Die Fabeln des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit. Ein Katalog der deutschen Versionen und ihre lateinischen Entsprechungen* (München, 1987), nr. 393 and 598.

The mare's answer is 'yes' and she adds that the price is written under her right foot. Of course, Reynaert sees through this ruse, and he answers that, alas, he cannot read and that in any case the foal is not for him but for Ysegrim who is waiting in the distance. 'Then, let he himself come', says the mare and Reynaert goes to the wolf and tells him that if he can read, he should go to the mare and purchase the foal. Ysegrim is indignant. Of course he can read. He reads French, Dutch and Latin, and has got a degree in law (vv. 4029-45). He will handle this. And he mocks Reynaert: 'You are completely useless because you cannot read nor write' (vv. 4050-51). Ysegrim goes to the mare, he asks to see the price, is kicked senseless and the mare and her foal escape. When Ysegrim has come to his senses again, Reynaert asks him what type of script it was he had to read (v. 4080-81) and why he did not leave at least a bit of the foal for him. After all Reynaert had been the wolf's messenger. The wolf asks Reynaert to stop his mocking. Under the mare's foot was no script, there were only horse shoe nails. He has not eaten but was wounded severely. Reynaert shows himself astounded. This is almost unbelievable for the fox because he considered the wolf as one of the best clerks in the world. Now he understands that it is true what others have said to him and read aloud from books, i.e. that the best clerks are not always the wisest people. Because they are too focused on the intricacies of their art lay people can sometimes deceive them.<sup>3)</sup>

This is a remarkable scene. Of course there is no real discrepancy between the fox's behaviour in this scene and his more frequent actions in other animal epics. Here he just shows his intelligence by doing as if he were dumb, or at least uneducated. But it remains peculiar that the fox so seldom plays the stupid as he here clearly does.

And there is more. What makes this scene really extraordinary, at least to me, is the way in which here the scholarly, written tradition is evoked and ridiculed at the end. Both the wolf and the fox play their roles with gusto. The wolf boasts about the languages he is able to read, he refers to the places where he has got his education and he uses terms referring to academic educational practices, in

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<sup>3)</sup> The literal text behind this paraphrase of Reynaert's amazement is: *Nu hoor ic wel dat men my heeft / Wel eer geseit ende oec gelesen / In boeken, dat wel wair mach wesen, / Dats dat die beste clercke fijn / Dicwijl die wijste lude niet en sijn. / Die leken vervoeden se by wilen. / Dat doet dat sy so versubtilen / In kunsten, dat sy dair in verdwalen* (vv. 4100-7)

short he seems a really learned clerk.<sup>4)</sup> Reynaert plays his role as illiterate to the very end: when he interprets the events with Ysegrim and the mare as a proof of something that has been read aloud to him, he is the archetypical layperson who needs another to receive knowledge from books. And what was read aloud to him out of a book is that clerical wisdom is not enough to behave wise, that it even in some situations may be a hindrance to a prudent conduct. However, the layperson in this scene pays attention to this lesson, the cleric does not. One could say that here the scholarly tradition is used against itself (or at least against its exaggerated claims to perfection).

I find this ironic stance very funny but I also think that it could only be taken in a specific phase of the intellectual development of Western Europe, namely during the time that literacy was spreading fast and knowledge from books became easily available for many people but on the other hand oral transmission of knowledge and ideas was still a normal phenomenon. I think here of the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century (the period in which *Reynaerts historie* was written). In an earlier phase, when literacy was only a prerogative of a small elite, scholarly knowledge would not have been ridiculed because its status was too high. In a later phase, when reading was a normal skill for most people, an author would have no reasons to construct the image of an illiterate so precise as it has been done here.

This is a large claim and it cannot really be proven. But a comparison of the original version, just discussed, with the scene in the later tradition of *Reynaerts historie* corroborates my line of reasoning. *Reynaerts historie* has been printed in Dutch twice, once in prose (1479)<sup>5)</sup> and once in verse (ca. 1490)<sup>6)</sup>. The verse version was the source of the Low German *Reynke de Vos* (Lübeck, 1498), and thus of the whole German Reynke tradition. The prose version was translated into English and printed by William Caxton (Westminster, 1481). This translation started an English tradition. In the printed Dutch prose version Reynaert's jibing words are very comparable to what we have seen above. He knows that lay people are sometimes more clever than clerks because someone did read it aloud

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<sup>4)</sup> Although there is one moment he creates doubt about his abilities: he says that he can read all types of script as if they were his name (vv. 4046-47). Being able to recognise one's name in script is probably not a sign of a very good education ...

<sup>5)</sup> Menke, *Bibliotheca Reinardiana*, I, pp. 111-14.

<sup>6)</sup> Menke, *Bibliotheca Reinardiana*, I, pp. 115-16.

to him.<sup>7)</sup> In William Caxton's text, however, Reynard himself can read. He says: *Now I here wel it is true that I long syth haue redde and herde...*<sup>8)</sup> Of the printed Dutch verse version we only have fragments which do not contain this part of the story, and in *Reynke de vos* the story about Ysegrim and the mare is told but Reynaert's remarks on the folly of clerks were not translated, so these two texts cannot be used for a comparison. In the later Dutch Reynaert editions and in the English Reynard editions the remark on the folly of clerks is characterised as a proverb so the whole aspect of literacy versus orality is no longer present.<sup>9)</sup>

These data seem to suggest that the literary play with (and against) the usefulness of the written, scholarly tradition is still possible at the end of the fifteenth century but that then already one might oversee the joke or think it unimportant. From the sixteenth century onwards the sentiments of authors and publics towards books have become so different that this joke from the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century is no longer appreciated.

I have written about an (at least for me) fascinating detail from a Middle Dutch text and about the larger socio-cultural developments that could perhaps be used to explain it. But this type of study is only possible when one has access to good editions of historical texts. And this seems a good reason to publish it here, in homage to our esteemed colleague Noboru Harano, who has dedicated such a large part of his academic career to the preparation of excellent editions for the scholarly community all over the world.

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<sup>7)</sup> *Ny hoer ic dat waer is datmen mi welneer gheseit ende ghelesen heeft...* Cf. *Van den vos Reynaerde. I. Teksten. Diplomatisch uitgegeven naar de bronnen voor het jaar 1500*, ed. W. Gs Hellinga (Zwolle, 1952), p. 239, version P, ll. 3057-60.

<sup>8)</sup> *The History of Reynard the Fox. Translated from the Dutch original by William Caxton*, ed. N.F. Blake (London etc., 1970), p. 59, ll. 38-39.

<sup>9)</sup> For specific bibliographical details about the tradition of these Reynaert/Reynard editions see Menke, *Bibliotheca Reinardiana*, I, chapters IV and V. As representatives of both traditions I have consulted the edition Verdussen (Antwerp, ca. 1700) [cf. Menke, pp.155-56] and the edition Allde (London, 1620) [Menke, p. 213-14, nr. 11].