

# The Middle Dutch Beast Epic «Van den vos Reynaerde» in International Perspective

ANDRÉ BOUWMAN & BART BESAMUSCA

In his general editor's foreword to volume 17 (1999) of *Arthurian Literature*, Keith Busby characterized the corpus of extant Middle Dutch texts as the 'sleeping giant of medieval literature until recent decades' (p. vii). One of the scholars who has greatly contributed to its awakening is David F. Johnson, who made the *Roman van Walewein* available to the international community by means of an edition and facing English translation in 1992.<sup>1</sup> The accessibility of this Arthurian romance allowed the editors of the Dutch journal *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* to invite three non-Netherlandists to study the Middle Dutch narrative from a comparative point of view. Their articles, which appeared in 1995 and 1996, functioned as the starting point for the international celebrity that the *Roman van Walewein* enjoys nowadays.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to the editors of *Queeste*, it could well be that the Middle Dutch beast epic *Van den vos Reynaerde* will follow in the footsteps of the *Roman van Walewein*. Their proposal to initiate an international discussion on *Van den vos Reynaerde* on the basis of our critical edition and Thea Summerfield's parallel English translation, published in 2009, has led to four contributions which have at least one thing in common: their admiration for Willem's masterpiece. It is clear that Sabine Obermaier, Serge Lusignan, Adrian Tudor and James Simpson greatly enjoyed reading *Van den vos Reynaerde*, and their enthusiasm will doubtless encourage other international scholars to get acquainted with the Middle Dutch animal story. We, for our part, appreciate the interesting points of view expressed by the four authors, as well as their valuable observations and the thoroughness of their arguments. Having no reason to disagree fundamentally with our colleagues, we would also like to avoid minor quibbles about certain details of interpretation. Instead, our reply focuses on two themes that connect, in our view, the various contributions.

## The edition and translation

'Reading in translation,' Tudor writes, 'it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which Willem plays with words, language, and their relation to both deeds and other words' (p. 25). This remark is unmistakably true, but it is worth noting that the reader who makes combined use of the glossary and Summerfield's translation is likely to gain a

1 Johnson 1992. For a revised version, see Johnson and Claassens 2000.

2 Haug 1995, Lacy 1995, Riddy 1996. The series was concluded by a reaction to the three papers: Gerritsen 1996. The three essays were reprinted in Besamusca & Kooper 1999, completed by eight other articles on the *Roman van Walewein*.

very good understanding of the Middle Dutch text. It is exactly this method of reading the English translation (which follows the Middle Dutch closely but not literally) alongside the glossary (which lists and references all word forms found in *Van den vos Reynaerde*) that Obermaier successfully applies in her essay. In addition to her observations, we would like to point out that even though the references in the glossary are limited to a maximum of five line numbers, it is possible to investigate all occurrences of a given word by searching the electronic version of the Middle Dutch text, which is made available on the website of Amsterdam University Press ([www.aup.nl](http://www.aup.nl) > digital > downloads).

The usefulness of the glossary, complemented by Matthias Hüning and Ulrike Vogl's short introduction to Middle Dutch, has been demonstrated by Obermaier. However, neither she nor any of the other three authors would seem to have used the word index, in which the (normalized) words from the glossary are arranged into semantic fields (pp. 347–56). We would like to point out that in our view the word index may enable scholars to study Willem's language thoroughly. After all, the Middle Dutch words elucidate each other as a result of their assignment to semantic fields. Tudor, for example, is struck by the (ironically) pious tone of several passages in *Van den vos Reynaerde* (p. 26–27), a tone which had become influential in thirteenth-century Old French literature (e.g. Gautier de Coinci's *Miracle de Nostre Dame* and the *Chevalier au barisel*). The word index devotes an entire section to religion (see especially 10.2), listing all the words in this semantic field under headings like *Devotion* (GEESTELIJC, HELICH, PALSTER, PELGRIJM, SANT, SCHARPE, SLAVINE), *Prayer*, *Religious service*, *Offering and Eucharist*, *Sacraments*, etc. The words can be looked up in the Glossary and from there the scholar is redirected into the text. Likewise, readers might evaluate and even multiply Simpson's observations concerning tongues, teeth and skin using subsections 2.2.4 *Animals*, 2.2.5 *Mankind*, 2.2.6 *Parts of the body*, 2.2.7 *Workings of the body*, 2.2.8 *Food and drink*.

### The comparative approach

Each of our four colleagues has profited from the accessibility of *Van den vos Reynaerde* to compare the Middle Dutch text to French and German parallel versions. We are grateful for this joint point of view, which leads to new insights that will be welcomed by both Netherlandists and critics who do not read Dutch. Understandably, a Romanist who approaches *Van den vos Reynaerde* for the first time is struck by its completeness: Willem's narrative is appreciated, in contrast to 'Le Plaid', as a self-standing tale (Tudor, p. 19–20). Whereas this observation may not come as a surprise to specialists in Middle Dutch, we are intrigued by the joint attention that is paid to the beginning of the third summons episode in *Van den vos Reynaerde*.

Highlighting, as a result of his sociolinguistic approach, the passages in which Latin and French figure alongside Dutch, Lusignan discusses, among other things, Grimbeert's reply to the corrupted Latin that the fox quotes in the opening lines of his confession. According to Lusignan, the badger's remark (*Oem, walschedi?*, l. 1457) re-

veals his mocking judgment of Reynaert's bad Latin (p. 14). Whereas in this interpretation Grimbeert realizes that the fox has produced corrupt Latin, one could, perhaps, also argue, as we have done (note to ll. 1452-59), that the badger wrongly assumes that Reynaert is speaking French. Simpson's interpretation of Grimbeert's reply takes this line of reasoning a step further. In his fascinating view, the badger's reaction reflects the fundamental nature of deception by means of words, that is the language of the would-be cheater is not fully or sufficiently understood by his potential victim (p. 36-37).

Tudor also discusses the beginning of the third summons. Intrigued by the differences between 'Le Plaid' and *Van den vos Reynaerde* in a number of episodes where religion and royal power coincide, he focuses on the reaction of the fox to the king's threatening summons (p. 27-28). In the French tale it is the narrator who states that Renart trembles with fear. While there is no reason to doubt the trustworthiness of this remark, the Dutch narrative features a fox who claims to sigh and tremble with anxiety (l. 1434). Tudor rightfully notes that the reader should instantly distrust Reynaert's words. Interestingly enough, this difference between a sincere fox and a hypocritical one is confirmed by Obermaier's interpretation of another passage in the Dutch text (p. 7-8). When Reynaert begins his public confession at the king's court, he pretends to be sad (l. 2062, 'a picture of misery', according to Thea Summerfield's wonderful translation). This is not the case in *Reynke de vos*, as Obermaier points out. In the Middle Low German version it is the narrator who describes the animal's mood. Like Renart, the German fox is truly full of fear.

The manifestations of royal power that have attracted Tudor's attention include the scene in which Reynaert tricks Cantecler. According to the cock's account of the events at Nobel's court, the fox presented him with *zeghele ende brief* (l. 358), a sealed writ. Misled by the king's seal, Cantecler had the fatal impression that the royal letter announced peace to all the animals. For Lusignan, this passage is one of the six examples that clearly illustrate the prestige that is attached to written documents in *Van den vos Reynaerde*. He links this phenomenon to the importance of written culture for the city of Ghent at the end of the thirteenth century, as attested by the large urban archives that survive from that period (p. 14-15). For Simpson, something else is at stake in this passage. In addition to his observation that Nobel's letter is interpreted first of all through its form, he convincingly stresses that Cantecler, albeit a slow reader, is quick to fit its assumed contents to his own purposes (p. 49). Whereas Lusignan connects passages involving written documents to an urban audience, they reflect in Simpson's view a court culture in which aristocrats wholly depend on literate persons.

The examples we have given in this section of our reply illustrate the willingness of our colleagues to carry out interdisciplinary research, a willingness which we value greatly. Only an interdisciplinary approach can do full justice to *Van den vos Reynaerde* and many other texts that are part of the complicated literary landscape in medieval Flanders. In this county two vernaculars existed: Dutch in the North-West, French in the South-East, the latter holding greater social prestige, which explains its usage by the high nobility and urban elites in the North-West. The two resulting literatures were certainly not produced and consumed in isolation. They must have interacted: intertextuality does not stop at a language border. It is high time that Middle Dutch

and Old French texts produced and consumed outside 'France' are studied in their historical 'regional' contexts, which were partly bilingual.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

We have no doubt that the four articles published here will encourage readers who do not master Dutch to get acquainted with *Van den vos Reynaerde*. But do they also open new doors for Netherlandists? We firmly believe that this is the case. Aside from the many valuable remarks on details, these essays present food for thought on a more general level too. Obermaier teaches us, for example, that one could think of ways to apply the glossary to other Middle Dutch texts. Lusignan shows how productive a sociolinguistic approach to *Van den vos Reynaerde* can be for our understanding of the narrative and the social-historical circumstances that may have influenced its composition. Tudor makes us, among other things, aware of the interesting phenomenon that the Dutch tale is a thirteenth-century narrative which deviates from the contemporary French Renart stories by ignoring new trends like symbolism and allegory. Simpson invites us to read *Van den vos Reynaerde* in a way that is unusual among Netherlandists, who seem to have little taste or talent for 'adventurous reading', as Frits van Oostrom has put it.<sup>4</sup> Simpson's thought-provoking associations and daring analogies remind us of Alfred Adler's fascinating attempt to study the Old French *chansons de geste* synchronically, applying the methods of structural anthropology (Lévi-Strauss).<sup>5</sup>

Our final remarks are directed at future readers of *Of Reynaert the Fox*. When consulting our edition, please note that we have published a number of errata on the website of Amsterdam University Press, which we have copied here for sake of convenience.<sup>6</sup> It may be useful, furthermore, to know that our edition is also available in the online library OAPEN (Open Access Publishing in European Networks), see [www.oapen.org](http://www.oapen.org). We sincerely hope that this extended accessibility will allow a large audience to enjoy the Middle Dutch tale in a way that is comparable to the indisputable pleasure with which our four esteemed colleagues have read the text. We are grateful for their contributions.

3 Bouwman 1991 (on cooperation between Romanists and Netherlandists). See also Sleiderink 2003 (on Dutch and French literature in Brabant), Van der Meulen 2010 (on Dutch and French literature in Hainaut), Besamusca 1993 and Bouwman 1998 (on intertextuality in Dutch romances composed in Flanders).

4 Van Oostrom 1991, p. 20.

5 Adler 1975.

6 (1) pp. 236–245 – Due to a composition error, line 3348 in the Middle Dutch text (*dat icse droughe dor hu lieve*) was transferred from the bottom of p. 236 to the top of p. 238. This error has resulted in two discrepancies. First, on pp. 238–239, 240–241, 242–243, 244–245 the English translation is consistently one line ahead of the Middle Dutch text. Secondly, from the Middle Dutch line numbers on pp. 238, 240, 242 and 244 one line should be subtracted throughout (3350 is actually 3349, 3355 is actually 3354 etc.).

(2) p. 341, s.v. VOET – instead of: '[...] foot (ca. 30 cm) 2024' read: '[...] *foot* (ca. 30 cm) | voet 2024'.

(3) p. 367, s.v. Frontispiece – instead of: 'F. 205 recto (cf. lines 2081–2164)' read: 'F. 192 verso (cf. ll. 1–62)'.

*Addresses of the authors:*

Leiden University Library, P.O. Box 9501, 2300 RA Leiden, A.T.Bouwman@library.leidenuniv.nl  
 Utrecht University, Department of Dutch, Trans 10, 3512 JK Utrecht, A.A.M.Besamusca@uu.nl

*Address of the translator:*

Vanvitelliweg 35, 5624 KJ Eindhoven, thsummer@iae.nl

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