

God moete ons ziere hulpen jonnen!

Approaching the Middle Dutch «Van den vos Reynaerde» through the Old French *Roman de Renart*

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The remit for this essay was intriguing. To read and react to the Middle Dutch masterpiece *Van den Vos Reynaerde* with no expectation of prior knowledge, linguistic competence or further research: simply to read the splendid new English prose translation by Thea Summerfield, and the accompanying learned introductory material by André Bouwman and Bart Besamusca,¹ through the eyes of a scholar better acquainted with the Old French tradition. Of course, I had come across *Van den Vos Reynaerde* many times, in references, in papers given at the bi-annual colloquium of the Société Reynardienne Internationale, and in conversation with friends and others Reynardians. From Kenneth Varty and Bart Besamusca to Paul Wackers and Jean Batany, from Japanese members of the Reynardian family to Brian J. Levy and Tony Lodge, the Dutch text had been lent a reputation by immediate colleagues that could not be ignored. Scholans of old French literature are naturally aware that Flemish aristocracy commonly used French and commissioned literature in French. I had been told that *Van den Vos Reynaerde* was the greatest of the burgeoning literature in Middle Dutch during this period. But I had never read it. Below is my initial reaction to the delight of discovering what is, for me, a new Reynardian masterpiece.

Methodology

When approaching the text of *Van den Vos Reynaerde* for the first time, I had just read another adaptation of Branch 1 of *Le Roman de Renart*, namely the third *bande dessinée* by Jean-Marc Mathis and Thierry Martin in a series published by Delcourt.² I had just come to the conclusion that this graphic novel was another welcome addition to the *Roman de Renart* bibliography (or more precisely to the Reynard story). It brings alive, and together, episodes of the Old French story selected by the authors for their particular purpose (largely Branch 1, *Le Plaid*, but also elements from other trial scenes). To some degree it mixes and matches, adding an element of structural clarity and linear chronology deemed necessary by its intended audience; it omits where omission is useful, conflates episodes at will, and embellishes where embellishment is required. All in all, the twenty-first century *bande dessinée* has been put together just as might many other versions of the Reynard story, ancient and modern. I was pleased with this addition to my bookshelves, confident that at some stage I would return to it for work or for pleasure.

1 Bouwman & Besamusca 2009.

2 Mathis & Martin 2009.

Just as serendipitously as many a Reynardian character may stumble into an episode, so did I receive an invitation from the editors of the present volume to read the fine new edition and English translation of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, and put to paper my thoughts from the perspective of a scholar conversant with the Old French version and context but broadly ignorant of the Middle Dutch versions. There were two initial decisions to make: how first to approach such a rich volume, and then how to evaluate the poem itself. It seemed clear that for a scholar who was certainly aware of the existence and significance of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, but who had never read it, it was important to glean some essential details regarding the background to the poem before setting about reading the text itself. The edition allows those of us unable to read Modern Dutch, let alone Middle Dutch, to do so with a degree of critical selection: I decided to read the introduction but not the synopsis of the plot; I wanted to be aware of the literary, cultural and social environment, including key issues such as authorship and audience, and also any salient political undercurrents without which the text itself might not be fully appreciated. I also dipped into the short introduction to Middle Dutch, by Matthias Hüning and Ulrike Vogl, which follows the variants at the end of the edition and translation; this is the sort of background that enables all new readers to approach the text itself with a minimum degree of awareness required. My reason for not reading the introductory synopsis of the plot should, I trust, appear quite commonsense: my brief was to read the text from the position of someone familiar with the Old French version, thence to offer reflection. Let the modern scholars provide the context, but let the medieval author, a certain Willem, do the storytelling.

In this essay I will make a number of general comments, then examine in detail one short episode that is recounted in both texts, but in my eyes with significant differences. This closer examination is, it is to be stressed, based on reading at plot level and with a minimum of secondary reading. This makes comparison more realistic. This essay concludes with remarks regarding how a scholar in Old French literature unable to read Old Dutch might return to *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, and may even be able to suggest some new directions that specialists might like to pursue.

First Reading: General Comments

A few general comments can be made on first reading: *Le Roman de Renart*, when taken as an ensemble, and in particular some of the early branches, is a medieval work of genius. *Van den Vos Reynaerde* – albeit read in modern English translation – is no less so. The Middle Dutch text's date of composition, significantly later than the Old French version, is evident in a number of respects. It reads as a more sophisticated, more rounded work than the Old French source. There are obvious differences and similarities in structure, length, episodes, plot twists, and so on, but broadly speaking we have the same story with a different ending. Refreshingly, it is a story with a beginning, middle and end. Now, Old French scholars are only too aware when approaching *Le Roman de Renart* that Branch 1, *Le Plaid*, is not where the 'story' begins (although it

was also the first in many medieval anthologies).³ Scholars know that *Le Plaid* is already the second time Renart is called to court. The sinuous nature of the *Le Roman de Renart* – the complexity of its 40-odd tales, 26 branches and 30,000 lines known to us – is both a strength and a weakness. The joy in reading Willem's story is helped, perhaps a little bizarrely, by the fact that we do not know exactly what went before it in Middle Dutch (or indeed, in Ghent).⁴ Willem has already done the job of putting the material in order for us. Modern readers know enough of the Latin and Old French traditions to enjoy intertext and casual reference/ inference, perhaps almost as much as the original target audience. We perhaps know about as much as his target audience about stories already in circulation for over 100 years prior to *Van den Vos Reynaerde*.⁵

Initial impressions are of a more absolute, more explained, text than readers of the Old French text may usually expect. The reason for this is quite obvious at first glance: Willem has presumably had the opportunity to read branches 1-va of the Old French cycle – plus quite probably other versions, possibly even in Middle Dutch – and make of them a complete, single and cohesive poem; a poem, moreover, of a length and framework conducive to a single evening's entertainment. In rendering the core structure and basic plot of Branch 1 into Dutch, whilst at the same time introducing into his poem references to episodes and instances in other branches which help to explain simmering feuds, underlying loyalties, or character traits, he (or his exemplar?) uses the advantage of hindsight to great effect. This reader is not in a position to comment on broader intertextual echoes, apart from acknowledging their obvious presence in the Middle Dutch text; of course, in the Old French text the intertextual fun is established by the authors of the very earliest texts.⁶ The innovation of the Dutch story's conclusion rounds off quite neatly what is otherwise, originally, an equally un-gainly, if more precisely described, series of narrative episodes. The new ending is a *tour de force*, literary order (if not feudal justice ...) replacing the apparent chaos of Branche 1.⁷ This is a self-standing piece, not another branch of an untidy but interdependent, if at times self-contradictory, anthology. Unlike *Le Plaid*, famously cyclical in

3 The trial in Branch 1 was already 'directly inspired by the earlier French version of the Trial of Renart found in Va', see Lodge & Varty 2001, xv.

4 Anthony Lodge and Kenneth Varty believe that 'there was an earlier *Reynaert* closely related to the fox of the *Ysengrimus* [which] prowled in the forests and the countryside around Ghent for the six or seven decades between these two compositions [i.e. *Ysengrimus* and *Van den Vos Reynaerde*]'. This view is certainly logical given the provenance of both texts: might it be that *Van den Vos Reynaerde* mixes elements of the implied lost Dutch (or indeed Latin) text with Branch 1? See Varty 1999, 25. Undoubtedly the question has been mullied over by many scholars before now. I do note that Willem mentions 'French books', 'Walschen boucken' (v. 8): I would be inclined to take Willem at his word, in the absence of contrary evidence.

5 I have been unable to consult what strike me as two seminal studies in the comparison of Branch 1 and *Van den Vos Reynaerde*: Bouwman 1991; and Van Daele 1994.

6 See Branche II, vv. 1-13; re-use of well-known fables elsewhere; etc. The audience of the Old French text evidently had a wide, and close, knowledge of contemporary literature. It is generally accepted that this was a courtly audience, which explains not only intertextual familiarity, but also the lack of any need to spell it all out. Fun could be had precisely because of this general familiarity. Paul Wackers suggests that this is less the case for the audience of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*. See Wackers 2000, 62.

7 This is not to say that the two texts are so very much different in every respect: the *Roman de Renart* is generally understood to voice a criticism of baronial violence or a statement of desire for the king to impose peace. A sham peace is indeed imposed at the end of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, which may perhaps be an ironic assessment of current political affairs.

character and whose ending returns the animals to court to begin adventures anew, *Van den Vós Reynaerde* offers a conclusion which is neat but whose finality does not obviously invite continuation by other others.

Nobel is a flawed King, who suffers from rather human imperfections, not unlike other medieval regal literary counterparts such as Charlemagne, Marc, and Arthur.⁸ Willem's text introduces romance elements connected to kingship, and in fact throughout his poem, which would presumably have been unfamiliar to Pierre de Saint Cloud's (?) audience. If the work were composed around 1260, as appears to be the current consensus, Willem will have had the opportunity to immerse himself in vernacular romance circulating widely throughout Europe. He will have witnessed a very marked change in literary tastes and habits, perhaps from Old French verse tales of Arthurian material, compositions relating stories of epic heroes, and the thirst for substantial compilations, such as that by Gautier de Coinci, to the rise of prose and authorial subjectivity.⁹ By 1260 parody, satire and allegory were blossoming. Pious tastes had changed – Virgin miracles, hagiographical romance and lyric are replacing stories of the desert fathers – and epics have changed in character and form from those already being challenged by romance at the time of composition of the early branches of the *Roman de Renart*. France was the engine driving literary change and renewal in vernacular literature across Europe. Willem will by no means have read everything, but who knows what he might have had access to, or heard about, given the Flemish courts' taste for and commission of literature in French. What is clear when reading Willem's text for the first time is that the work sits very comfortably in the canon of the thirteenth century. There are characters that struggle to come to terms with decisions, or who have conflicts of interest, or – like Nobel – show true human imperfection through their actions. Now, it must be stressed that these reflections are based on my methodology as laid out above, and on first reading of *Van den Vós Reynaerde*. There is little to substantiate such initial reflections without digging further into the poem's surprisingly ample bibliography (my astonishment at the range of which is a sign of my own ignorance). It is certainly true that earlier poets and authors such as Chrétien de Troyes, the author of the *Chanson de Roland*, or of course the authors of the earlier branches of the *Roman de Renart*, were perfectly able to write about flawed characters and misplaced loyalties. However, the continual references to confession, amongst other things, lend a post-Lateran IV feeling to *Van den Vós Reynaerde*; the first-time reader might equally detect a *fablialesque* mood in the queen's logic that if Reynaert accuses his own family of misdeeds – in particular treason – then it must be true (vv. 2151–541, in particular vv. 2518–41); and the tone and interests of psychodramas at the beginning of and throughout the thirteenth century, does not pass by imperceptible in the Dutch text.

⁸ Just one example: tricks and lies lead to Belin becoming a victim and target in the final part, a murderer in King Nobel's eyes, quite undeservingly so in the eyes of the audience. Nobel is deceived, and as a consequence weakened.

⁹ Gautier de Coinci is not mentioned indiscriminately: his *Miracles de Nostre Dame* are known to us in at least 114 manuscripts, most copied in Paris and Northern France in the thirteenth century. This is indicative of its popularity in the Middle Ages.

The starting place for these comments is, of course, my own relationship with the Old French text. A reader of the *Roman de Renart* quickly becomes used to jumble: of branches that are sometimes interlinked by theme or protagonists only, of a cycle that is uncomfortably cyclical,¹⁰ or of different moods and contradictory tones (or indeed actions) from episode to episode. It is generally accepted that Branch 1 shows that royal intervention is greeted and welcomed, to calm down unruly (if not ferocious) barons. The Old French Branch 1 – and the other early branches – reveal peace to be the barons' primordial wish (e.g. Br. 1, vv. 65–69).¹¹ Scholars and students of the Old French text are aware of, and fascinated by, changes in aspiration and characterisation that mark the earlier branches from the later one. These are often – too easily – put down to chronology and changes in literary taste. This said, Jean Dufournet was not too far from the mark, in broad terms, when he noted:

Le souci d'amuser cède peu à peu la place à une satire de plus en plus caustique, et aux animaux qui demeurent entre eux (II, va, 1) ou se liguent contre les hommes (v, xv) ou même se mesurent à eux (ix), se substituent des êtres humains.¹²

Whether Willem penned *Van den Vós Reynaerde* directly from Branch 1 of the Old French *Roman de Renart* – with some knowledge of other branches and different redactions and reactions – or directly from a no longer extant earlier Dutch account, is of little importance to this neophyte: clearly, the Dutch text and the French text, divided perhaps by up to 90 years, are very closely linked.¹³ On first reading, it is a joy to rediscover characters, events and episodes, to rediscover the same mobility/ implied movement of the Old French tale; but it is equally a delight to see these themes and motifs expanded, resolved, curtailed, tidied up, and used as the foundation for something different. There is a dénouement that is skilfully developed, satisfying, leaving possibilities for amplification, certainly, but also providing the reader with a complete evening's entertainment.¹⁴ For once in medieval narrative literature, 'more' and 'later' really are just as satisfying as 'less' and 'earlier' – the longer Dutch text, the shorter French – and there is no feeling of padding out for the sake of it. There is without any doubt importance in the dates and provenance of the two versions: a lot of water can flow under the bridge in over half a century, whether political, religious or cultural in nature. And of course, the Dutch text is not in French: this may seem an ab-

¹⁰ The *Roman de Renart* certainly corresponds to Donald Maddox's concept of recurrent constructs which form what he calls 'cyclic signals': characters, events, motifs, episodes, episodic organisation, and idiomatic usages (such as formulae, figures and tropes). The label remains an uncomfortable fit, however. See Maddox 1994, 102–107.

¹¹ On this aspect of the *Roman de Renart*, see Roguet 1994.

¹² Jean Dufournet in Dufournet & Méline 1985, 1, 6.

¹³ An indispensable study on the relationship between *Van den Vós Reynaerde*, the *Roman de Renart* and possible exemplars – including various Old French manuscript families – is Bouwman 1992. Bouwman suggests that Willem composed *Van den Vós Reynaerde* using at least two French exemplars. He notes major differences with versions of *Le Plaid*, not just in the new treasure episode which concludes *Van den Vós Reynaerde* but scattered liberally throughout the first half of the poem. See p. 489 for Bouwman's conclusions regarding this issue.

¹⁴ I am fascinated by Wäckers' comment regarding the new ending: 'During the thirteenth century the relation between the French king and his vassals deteriorated continually. The way the relation between Nobel and his vassals is treated in *Van den Vós Reynaerde* could reflect this state of affairs. The very ambiguous reconciliation between Nobel and his vassals at the end of the story seems to me to be especially meaningful in this connection.' See Wäckers 2000, 68.

surd statement, but it does suggest the need to address the characteristics of translation and *réécriture* in the Middle Ages. *Van den Vos Reynaerde* is patently more *réécriture* than translation.

Second Reading: Tone

On closer inspection a number of aspects are striking. Perhaps strangely, perhaps logically, my more detailed scrutiny of *Van den Vos Reynaerde* is informed less by the Old French *Roman de Renart* than by other thirteenth-century French texts, most of which in some way or other deal with feudal tensions, the integrity of the court (epic, romance), or tensions between unruly elements, Church and King. Social and political climates change during the thirteenth century, as can be seen in many texts composed at this time. Traditional themes of feudal and clerical conflict become common not only in epic – and by extension beast epic – and romance, but also in vernacular miracle stories and pious tales, comic fabliaux, lyric poetry, allegorical works, and so on. Certainly though it is impossible to ignore Branch 1, *Le Plaid*, which is littered with fascinating authorial/ narrative interventions, as is *Van den Vos Reynaerde*. The opening of the Old French text has always struck me as almost as religious as feudal in nature, littered as it is with details of sex crime/sin, and a small number of important religious references: ‘Asencions’¹⁵ (‘Ascension Day’, v. 15); ‘li seint’¹⁶ (‘the relics’, v. 39); ‘Par trestoz les sainz qu’on aore/ C’onques se Damledex me secore/ C’onques Renart de moi ne fist/ Que de sa mere ne feïst’¹⁷ (‘By all the saints that we venerate/ and may Our Lord bless me,/ I swear that Renart never did to me/ anything that he would not do to his mother’, vv. 148–51); ‘Pasques’¹⁸ (‘Easter’, v. 161); ‘Onc, foi que doi sainte Marie,/ Ne fis de mon cors puterie/ Ne mesfet ne maveis afere/ Q’une none ne poïst fere’¹⁹ (‘Never, by the faith I owe Holy Mary,/ did I do anything debauched with my body/ nor wantonness nor any depravity/ that a nun would not have done’, vv. 175–78);²⁰ ‘Qar si me face Dex pardon’²¹ (‘May God forgive me’, v. 189); etc. Of course, the sex crime is a potential feudal disaster, but it would also be a religious offence for which penance would be required. The feudal aspect of the situation is clear from the beginning, and the Christian references would not be out of place in a *chanson de geste*; the comic nature of *Renart* brings, for me, the latter to the fore, at least in the opening of the text. I see here almost a precursor to anti-clerical comic fabliaux, *exemplum* material removed from its natural home in the twelfth century and deposited into in an uncomfortable new context.

¹⁵ All quotations from Dufournet & Méline 1985. Translations are my own. This refers to the day Noble calls the animals to court.

¹⁶ Renart is supposed to swear on the relics.

¹⁷ Hersant defends her honour.

¹⁸ Isengrin and Hersant married on Easter Day.

¹⁹ Hersant continues her (perfidious) defence.

²⁰ This is a deliciously ironic line at a time when convents and monasteries were both, from afar and from within, sometimes viewed as little better than whorehouses and centres of depravity.

²¹ Bernard the donkey’s unfortunate, but innocent, turn of phrase.

Van den Vos Reynaerde has a different atmosphere in its opening lines. For a start there is the prologue, an interesting elaboration proper to *Van den Vos Reynaerde*. This includes in a relatively short space – 40 lines of 3470 – a dedication, a (mock?) moral, a declaration of authorship including a name and previous *œuvre*, a bitter tone towards certain individuals, a complaint about an existing unfinished Dutch Reynard text,²² an intriguing reference to French sources, and a whole lot more. What an information-packed, if conceivably stylistic, way to begin the poem! *Van den Vos Reynaerde* is set at Whitsuntide (v. 41),²³ around a week before Ascension Day; and relics are mentioned in line 83 – but we wait then until v. 170 for the next religious reference (a simple oath, ‘By God ...’). Admittedly the Dutch work is longer, more substantial, with greater space, but to this reader the difference in tone – cosmetic some may argue – is striking. What I feel to be a marked dissimilarity of tenor continues: vv. 170–76 of *Van den Vos Reynaerde* remind this reader of *Renart* (‘So help me God’...) but a wait until v. 315 for the next similar oath does not. Whether deliberate or a natural result of the alterity of Branch 1 for the author of *Van den Vos Reynaerde*, something significant has changed.

Willem however does follow the tone of pious material that, by the mid-thirteenth century, had become influential in the vernacular; indeed, in Old French a number of works of true genius had been composed, and were widely copied, in the vernacular. Now, it would be naïve simply to put down a religious influence to these works – Gautier de Coinci’s *Miracle de Nostre Dame*, the *Vie des Pères*, innumerable prayers and Saints’ Lives found in thirteenth-century Old French manuscripts, Miracles, short narratives about hermits and more worldly characters – when such a flavour is equally present in *chansons de geste*, romance, and of course mainstream hagiography. But a twenty line section during Grimbeert’s words in defence of his uncle Reynaert (vv. 263–81) ring of vernacular works designed to entertain and edify. The audience would have heard similar words, in a different context, many times before. These lines are uproariously funny in a beast epic, not just because of their falsehood, but also because, ironically, of their truth:

Reynaert is a law abiding man.
 Since the King proclaimed his peace
 On pain of punishment,
 I know for a fact
 That he behaved no worse than
 If he were a hermit or recluse.
 Next to his skin he wears a hair shirt.
 Within the past year he ate no meat,
 Neither of wild nor tame animals.
 So someone said who yesterday came from there.

²² There may be/ have been mileage in studying rather different the French and the Dutch attacks on previous versions by Perrot/ Arnout.

²³ Whitsuntide or Pentecost marks the opening of the season in which fighting was allowed by the Church – fighting was banned from Advent to the Epiphany and Lent to Pentecost – hence its apposite use in the Dutch text as a signal to the audience: ‘It’s that time, Renart is in trouble again...!’ Of course, Renart/ Reynaert breaks (or challenges) all rules, so this temporal reference may in both texts carry little value.

He has left Malcroys,
 His castle, and has built a cell
 Where he now lives.
 He surely has no other possessions
 Or income
 Than the alms given him.
 Pale he is and thin with doing penance.
 Hunger, thirst, sharp chastisement
 He suffers for his sins.' (vv. 263–81)

An animal wearing a hair shirt is a good joke in itself. But these lines conflate also common themes in successful religious material such as the Old French *Chevalier au barisel*, a gem of a text which feeds off numerous traditions, from epic (unruly barons), romance (codes of courtly behaviour) and stories of outsiders (the protagonist is an outlaw) to proselytising (hermits preaching penance) and miracles (a true miracle takes place).²⁴ The constituent parts of both *Van den Vos Reynaerde* and *Le Chevalier au barisel* seem identical. In *Van den Vos Reynaerde* we have a senior court member advising the king, sincerely it appears. *Le Chevalier au barisel* is a viscerally intimate portrait of post Lateran IV conversion, painting at times a brutal picture of a journey from outlaw to saint, damnation to salvation. It tells of a bold bad baron, who is persuaded by his knights to visit a holy hermit to confess, but in a spirit of such stubbornness that he violently refuses to repent of his many sins and crimes. Eventually, after much turmoil and great physical suffering, there is a true repentance. In this story there is feudal and religious tension reminiscent of epic, beast epic and romance, and physical suffering for the protagonist begrudgingly finding salvation reminiscent of Saints' Lives. This story is the light to *Van den Vos Reynaerde's* shade. My general point is that, all in all, *Van den Vos Reynaerde* slots neatly into the traditions currently doing the rounds and finding success in Northern France. Its tone does not slot quite so neatly into the pre-Lateran IV world.

A final point is important: reading in translation, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which Willem plays with words, language, and their relation to both deeds and other words.²⁵ This aspect is key to the humour of the *Roman de Renart* (and indeed to the farces so popular with guilds in later centuries). Given that it is also central to other comic traditions absolutely at their height when Willem set about composing *Van den Vos Reynaerde* – the fabliaux of Rutebeuf are practically contemporaneous, it would seem – this is one feature that new readers of the Dutch text naturally wish to explore further; I am under no illusion that scholars able to read the Middle Dutch text have been doing so for years. Suffice it to say, to round off these broad comments, that the multifunctionality of the text, the fact that it could clearly appeal immediately to – indeed be commissioned by – members of the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie (i.e. different social communities), and that it fits so well into the mid-thirteenth-century canon, are markers of *Van den Vos Reynaerde's* brilliance.

²⁴ The standard edition is Lecoy 1973.

²⁵ Jill Mann's scholarship has been most influential in examining the contrast between words and deeds (*dicta* and *facta*) or rhetoric and reality, in a number of traditions. Cf. for example Mann 1988; Mann 2009.

The Third Summons: Religion and Performances of Christian Faith

It is too simplistic to pick narrative differences and similarities at will; this has already been done by a number of works listed in the bibliography of the Bouwman and Besamusca edition. I will therefore concentrate on one example regarding religion and performances of Christian faith.²⁶ This has already been alluded to above. I am struck by changes – presumably consciously chosen – to a small number of key episodes, where religion and regal power come together. The Third Summons is one such instance. The gist of the issue is the same in both texts: Renart/ Reynaert is summoned to face the king; he knows that he will be found guilty, and sentenced to death; pilgrimage is a factor in saving his skin in both versions (the differences regarding the treasure episode are of little consequence for the time being). In the French text, Grimbert delivers the news in the most solemn way: he lists Renart's crimes (or is that 'sins?'), lets him know what the consequence will be this time round, and, presumably not receiving any visual glimmer of hope from Renart – the *jongleur's* art is tested to its limit with such tension and actorly 'business' – delivers the summons and instructs Renart to break the king's seal. Renart trembles like a leaf, solemnly breaks the seal, and understands his fate upon reading what is written:

Mesire Nobles li lions,
 Qui de totes les regions
 Est des Bestes et rois et sire,
 Mande Renart honte et martire
 Et grant ennui et grant contrere,
 Se demain ne li vient droit fere
 Enz en sa cort devant sa gent.
 Si n'i aport or ne argent,
 Ne n'ameint hon por lui deffendre,
 Fors la hart a sa gole pendre. (vv. 995–1004)

[My Lord Noble the Lion, who of all the world's animals is king and sovereign, promises Renart shame and torture and terrible cruelty and harm, if tomorrow he does not come to be answerable to the Court, before his vassals. Futile for him to bring gold or money, no need to come accompanied by someone to defend him, bring only the rope with which to be hung by the neck]

This is a written message of shocking value, whose solemnity is underlined by the king's seal. The breaking of the seal is a 'gift' to any reader/ performer/ *jongleur* trying to bring drama to the moment. The sentence – to be hung – implies both a worldly judgement and a Final Judgement. And presumably, it implies eternal damnation. Renart appears mortified (vv. 1005–7). Ashen faced, he invokes God, and he very, very quickly suggests surreptitious *moniage*, at Cluny or Clairvaux. But he is acquainted with so many hypocritical monks that he could not stay (!); better that he obeys the king. Grimbert suggests Renart confess to him, since no priest is nearby. His confes-

²⁶ My observations in the main correspond with many hinted at by Bouwman in Bouwman 1992, especially 490–493.

sion is of course long and meandering, not always morally accurate, but it contains truth. Indeed, it is a glorious example of the art of dramatic monologue, but it still remains a confession (one of a number in the *Roman de Renart*). Whilst we should not be taken in by it, nor can we blithely dismiss it as a partially sincere attempt to unburden his soul before certain death. As should any good confessor, Grimbert implores Renart not to commit such sins again, should God save his life (vv. 1097–101). There is a sort of absolution (if mockingly macaronic). The following day the tone has changed: prayers have turned more openly disdainful, but they are still said. Grimbert and Renart leave for court on line 1143, one long confession, one night, one brief address to his family, and 200 lines following on from Grimbert's departure from court. The written message, however mockingly its dictation might be recounted, carries not just a feudal but a Christian message that Renart (and it is to be presumed the audience) fully recognises. Only false pilgrimage will get him out of hanging – but he confesses, more or less correctly, and at length, just in case. This episode occupies 200 lines of the total 1620, not counting the pilgrimage itself. Renart's ensuing antics at the monastery, where Grimbert angrily accuses Renart of a false confession (vv. 1162–67), do not necessarily mean that there was no sincerity in Renart's words the night before: for an instant, the written message has a profound affect on the *goupil*, as we have seen. It is the narrator who tells us of the ashen-faced fox, of his racing heart, not the fox himself. Here therefore there is an element of doubt regarding Renart's true feelings. Much of the Christian element may be a charade, but not, I believe, the initial fear.²⁷

Now, the Dutch text reads differently. From reading the translation I suspect that the narrative third summons is oral rather than written in nature, with Grimbeert passing on the demand to attend court by word of mouth, not in a written document which, in the *Roman de Renart*, instantly carries (sometimes mock) *gravitas*; there is no farcical composition scene, then no solemn breaking of the king's seal, no instant (or indeed subsequent) effect on Reynaert's physical disposition – which is key in my understanding of Branch 1 –, there is no instant confession, suggested by the badger, no absolution and admonition not to act so badly if God spares him his life. Certainly, these do come, later, but Grimbeert does not stay the night at Manpertuus; at this time there is no concern for Reynaert's soul, just his skin and the lives of his family. The Dutch version is touching; it is less ambiguous in that Reynaert has no reason to speak so tenderly of Hermeline and of Reynardijn and Rossel (vv. 1407–20). All Reynaert thinks of is escape, family, heritage. The line 'Grimbeert, nephew, may God reward you' (v. 1421) has little obvious value; perhaps it is thanks for bringing the summons ... Reynaert's words, if they are to be believed, are words of concern for his home and estate, which he will leave entirely unprotected (vv. 1422–29). The nature of his confession and the shenanigans at the monastery carry quite a different value, therefore, than what goes on in the Branch 1. In the Dutch text it is through Reynaert's own words that we learn that he trembles with fear – words instantly to be distrusted – and it is Reynaert who suggests confession in the first place. It is important not to stretch

²⁷ I am only too happy to concede to the argument that this episode mocks the penitential fervour pervading many communities pre-Lateran IV, but I cannot accept that my reading here is not just as valid.

the point too far: any Reynardian words or deeds are to be mistrusted; but the feature is striking none the less. Willem has by 1260 had the opportunity to read, or hear about, so many Reynardian confessions in so many languages and episodes and contexts; he can take what he likes from Branch 1, then augment, change and adapt at will. And he does so splendidly, as do Mathis and Martin as mentioned above ...

Neither medieval text is superior when recounting this episode. The French text has the merit of true ambiguity before seizing the opportunity of mocking loose monks and other characters before the barons taking their leave of Maupertuis. The Dutch text stresses family tenderness but also inheritance and protection of land and property. The Dutch text is more realistic – an odd word to use when studying Renart, Reynaert – in the sense that Reynaert is anxious about having something to return to from court. The French version is realistic in that for a fleeting moment Renart, perhaps, thinks of his soul. The ensuing business of both – Reynaert's all-consuming desire during his confession (vv. 1725ff), his animal instincts kicking in, calmed only by his 'human' reason²⁸ – is interesting but largely immaterial: this episode has the potential to say as much about life in Northern France in the late twelfth century as in the mid-thirteenth-century Low Countries. What has been selected from Branch 1, and what has been taken from other Reynardian confessions, or invented by Willem, may help understand, just a little, the nature of life, comedy, politics, Christianity and anti-clericalism in both periods and regions.

I have chosen just one episode where direct comparison is possible and potentially rewarding. Certainly, reading the text at plot level can appear superficial, but it can also help formulate research questions and suggest methodologies to help us understand better not only the relationship between the texts, but also the composition, authorship and reception of each individually. This brief examination is certainly a more focused way of responding to the startling new material I have discovered in *Van den Vôs Reynaerde*. It strikes me that specialists may profit from examining a brief common episode across available manuscripts, in both languages. This might offer new insights into our knowledge of transition and manuscript history. A study of patronage and subsequent ownership, still concentrating on a single short episode, might also bring something new to our understanding of authorship, reception, reading and performance.

Conclusion

I must finish as I began, with thanks to Besamusca, Bouwman and team for their scholarship and generosity in producing such a superlative introduction to *Van den Vôs Reynaerde* for those of us who find Dutch linguistically challenging. If the present essay, and volume, opens any new doors for scholars working in this field, the credit is firmly due to the editors of the new edition and translation.

The Dutch text may well date from the 1260s, but it does not mirror new Reynardian literature dating from the same period in French. Its developments, additions

²⁸ This very clear conflict between instinct/ reason here is very striking, and reminiscent of the Old French text.

and re-workings of the original Old French branches are writerly. They create logical plot connections and useful explanations; they do not fundamentally change the meaning in the same way as would the fashionable use of allegory. It strikes me that *Van den Vos Reynaerde* is informed by a rounded overview of vernacular literature rather than trends shaping new works at the very same period; currents of symbolism and allegory run through later developments of the *Roman de Renart* (such as *Renart le Nouvel*). This remark is potentially trite but is still worth noting given the remit for this essay. My final broader assessment would be that *Van den Vos Reynaerde* is less replete with belly-laughs than Branch 1, its comic nature appealing more to a measured audience/ reader quite used to the juxtaposition of entertainment and edification.²⁹ This is a subtle text full of subtle laughs, a comedy of delicate contrasts (to adapt the well-known Jaussian concept): Reynaert's accusation of his own family members (regarding his father and the conspiracy) is 'proof enough' that he speaks the truth; this is a very medieval, if delightfully manipulated, twist on the value of the *serment* (vv. 2239–2545). And, the fact that this logic is applied by the queen – a woman – means that it is fundamentally flawed! Still, adherence to due procedure – at least before the new ending – appears important. Initially this gives the appearance of a text paying much greater lip service to rules and regulations, a more mature piece – sensible, even – for an audience occupying a different time and space to that of *Le Plaid*. This general comment, and my more specific analysis above of a single section, is about as far as it seems prudent to go; not only is further commentary/ comparison difficult due to differing provenance, date, audience, authorship, textual and intertextual traditions, but also the impressive bibliography that *Van den Vos Reynaerde* justly boasts is evidence that much ink has already been spilled on some of the key issues that I may, or may not, have touched upon in this essay.³⁰ Just as Reynaert uses public confession to get himself out of a sticky spot after his trial, so too must I now use the same device: I happily leave further comment and comparison to those better qualified to draw them. *God moete ons ziere hulpen jonnen!*³¹

Samenvatting

Dit essay benadert de Nederlandse tekst vanuit een kritische kennis van *Le Roman de Renart*. Er worden een aantal algemene opmerkingen in gemaakt: de uitwerking van de oorspronkelijke Oudfranse *branches* is literair; er worden in de plot logische verbanden en nuttige verduidelijkingen gecreëerd die de betekenis van het origineel niet fundamenteel veranderen; hoewel *Van den Vos Reynaerde* uit de jaren 1260 dateert, biedt de tekst geen weerspiegeling van de nieuwe Reynaertliteratuur in het

²⁹ For a succinct discussion of why studying comedy in medieval texts is so difficult, see Paul Wackers' seminal essay Wackers 1990. My general avoidance here of the whole issue is justified by the complexities outlined by Wackers.

³⁰ In a future study I would be especially interested in religion, the role of the barons, movement, the use of props and performance potential.

³¹ *Van den Vos Reynaerde* (v. 10): 'May God favour us with his help!'

Frans uit dezelfde periode; hij sluit echter wel mooi aan bij bepaalde literaire tradities die onder invloed stonden van het Vierde Concilie van Lateranen; *Van den Vós Reynaerde* verraaft een grondige kennis van de volkstalige literatuur eerder dan van de modieuze trends waardoor nieuwe werken in dezelfde periode werden bepaald. Naast dergelijke brede suggesties, vergelijkt het essay een episode van de Nederlandse en Oudfranse teksten in detail. In zijn geheel geeft *Van den Vós Reynaerde* de indruk een rijper stuk te zijn, voor een publiek dat in een andere tijd en ruimte leefde dan dat van *Le Plaid*.

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