

= The Fox , the Wolf and the Husbandman =

The Fox , the Wolf and the Husbandman is a poem by the 15th @-@ century Scottish poet Robert Henryson and part of his collection of moral fables known as the Morall Fabillis of Esope the Phrygian . It is written in Middle Scots . As with the other tales in the collection , appended to it is a moralitas which elaborates on the moral that the fable is supposed to contain . However , the appropriateness of the moralitas for the tale itself has been questioned .

The tale combines two motifs . Firstly , a husbandman tilling the fields with his new oxen makes a rash oath aloud to give them to the wolf ; when the wolf overhears this , he attempts to make sure that the man fulfills his promise . The fox mediates a solution by speaking to them individually ; eventually he fools the wolf into following him to claim his supposed reward for dropping the case , and tricks him into a draw @-@ well . The moralitas connects the wolf to the wicked man , the fox to the devil , and the husbandman to the godly man . A probable source for the tale is Petrus Alfonsi 's *Disciplina Clericalis* , containing the same motifs , and William Caxton 's *Aesop 's Fables* ? though the tale is a beast fable , not Aesopic .

= = Source = =

A probable source of the tale is Petrus Alfonsi 's *Disciplina clericalis* , which has the same three motifs : the rash promise of the husbandman ; the wolf mistaking the moon for cheese ; and the wolf that descends into the well via a bucket , thereby trapping himself and freeing the fox . However , the discussion of legality and the questioning of language that take place alongside these motifs are entirely Henryson 's invention . Whereas the moral of Alfonsi 's tale explains that the wolf lost both the oxen and the cheese because he " relinquished what was present for what was to come " ( Latin : *pro futuro quod presens erat dimisit* ) , Henryson 's moralitas more fully involves the husbandman .

Another source may be *Aesop 's Fables* as published by William Caxton ? scholar John MacQueen considers this more likely than *Disciplina clericalis* ? although the tale itself is not Aesopic but rather of the beast fable ( also beast @-@ epic ) genre . The plots of such works are more complicated than their Aesopic counterpart , tend more towards ribaldry , and feature the fox making a victim of the wolf .

= = Synopsis = =

= = = Tale = = =

A husbandman tilling the fields with his new , untrained oxen is made furious by their wrecking of the land . In his anger he makes the rash oath that the wolf " mot have you all at anis ! [ may , at once ] " . However , the wolf is lying nearby with the fox , and , overhearing it , promises to make him stay true to his word . Eventually the oxen calm down , but on the way back home the wolf jumps into their path . The wolf asks where the husbandman is driving them , since they are not his , to which he confirms that they are and asks why he is being stopped since he never offended the wolf before . The wolf reminds the husbandman of his earlier declaration , to which he replies that a man may say things that do not mean anything . They argue , and the husbandman reproaches the wolf for not having a witness ; in response , he produces the fox . The creature takes it upon himself to mediate the dispute , and takes each aside in turn . To the husbandman he says that he would lend his expertise to help him were it not for the " grit coist and expence " of doing so ; the husbandman offers him half a dozen of the fattest hens he has , to which the fox acedes and goes off . To the wolf he says that the husbandman has offered an unparalleled block of cheese in exchange for him dropping the case .

The wolf , after some complaint , agrees to this and the two proceed through the woods after the prize ? all the while the fox considers how to trick the wolf . Eventually , as the wolf complains of the fruitlessness of their quest , they arrive at a draw @-@ well with buckets on each end of a rope .

Seeing the reflection of the moon in the water at the bottom of the well , the wolf believes there to be cheese down there and lowers the fox down to pick it up . When he complains that it is too heavy for him to lift alone , the wolf jumps into the other bucket and descends to help . However , this pulls up the other bucket , into which the fox has jumped , and so the two swap places ; the wolf at the bottom of the well and the fox safely escaped . The narrator professes that he does not know who helped the wolf out of the well , but that the tale is at an end .

= = = Moralitas = = =

The wolf is likened to a wicked man who oppresses others . The fox is likened to the devil . The farmer is likened to the godly man , with whom the fiend finds fault . The woods where the wolf was cheated are corrupting goods that man longs to get . The cheese represents covetousness ; the well that contains it is fraud and fantasy , which draws men downwards into hell .

= = Analysis = =

As with other tales in the collection , the moralitas of The Fox , the Wolf and the Husbandman can be considered at odds with the tale itself . Lianne Farber highlights a number of these discrepancies , and says that the allegory " does not hold true in any traditional sense " . Amongst the inconsistencies is that the fox , not the wolf , is the figure that argues with and finds fault in the husbandman ; the " woods of the world " are not traversed by the husbandman , in spite of the moralitas suggesting it is applicable to all men ; Farber argues that even assuming the moral to be true is problematic , since it apparently suggests that the godly man must bribe the figure of the judge , and that this does not affect his godly status . Furthermore , the absence of the legal discussion and the binding quality of words from the moralitas suggests to Farber that the " intricate legal framework ? has no impact whatsoever in resolving the issues with which it is supposed to deal " . In contrast , Philippa M. Bright considers that the moralitas of this tale , as well as several others , create " an additional sense which co @-@ exists with the literal narrative and extends and complements it thematically " ; treating literal details symbolically and establishing the sense through direct comparisons .

According to Dorothy Yamamoto , the significant themes in the tale are " solidity and vacancy , substance and illusion " . The cheese that apparently resides in the well is only an illusion , not a solid object , and similarly the fox creates a surface reconciliation between the wolf and the husbandman , but which betrays his real intentions . Through their frequent misuse , words that should convey real value are emptied of meaning . As an example , Yamamoto highlights the fox 's tail on which the wolf and husbandman make their pledge ? which body part she says is used by the fox in other tales to blind his foes , and is thereby a highly inappropriate object to use .

= = = Modern edition = = =

Henryson , Robert ( 2009 ) . The Testament of Cresseid & seven fables . Trans. by Seamus Heaney . London : Faber and Faber . ISBN 9780571249282 .