

On 'Van de vos Reynaerde', the Flemish fox down the ages

Perhaps as a child you read Reynard the fox comics, perhaps he followed you to your Dutch lesson, but is the fox really such a distant character? Erwin Jans refreshes your memory.

Flanders boasts a wealth of medieval literature and one of the highlights has to be the thirteenth-century animal epic *Van de vos Reynaerde* (On Reynard the Fox). The writer introduces himself in the first line as "Willem die *Madoc* maakte" - "Willem who wrote *Madoc*" – and in so doing may have been referring to an earlier and now lost chivalric epic. The story of Reynaerde the fox was often - and still is sometimes - regarded as 'typically Flemish'. This is how Stijn Streuvels described the story in 1909: "Our national work of art, our fairest poem, in which the soul, the blithe breath, the succulent blood, the sway and the swagger, the suppleness of mighty life, in which the pulsating intake of the healthy Flemish mind manifests itself and courses through the entire work like a keen draught of air." However, the Flemish is not the only wind that blows through the story!

Animal stories in the form of folk tales are found in all (primitive) cultures. In the highly developed literatures of India and Greece they were given a moral purport. The animal fables written by the Greek poet Aesop in the sixth century BC continued to enjoy popularity in the Latin version throughout the Middle Ages and inspired Jean de La Fontaine. Yet it is unclear if the epic of the fox should be linked to this tradition. It is nevertheless a fact that in the eleventh century this genre appears in the border areas of the Germanic and Roman cultures (Lorraine, Alsace, Northern France and Flanders). The moral and instructive tenor died out and satire took its place.

Circa 1100 saw the first large collection of fables and stories centred on the wolf, namely *Ysengrimus*, in which the animals have proper names for the first time. The poet who wrote that work in Latin was probably Master Nivardus from Ghent. From then on stories also appeared in the vernacular, starting with French, in which the fox plays a lead role. The animals manifest themselves with increasing clarity as individual characters with their own habits, idiosyncrasies, likes and dislikes. The direct forefather of Willem's version about Reynaert is *Le Plaid* (literally: 'The Plea') which appeared around 1160. It is the first story of a larger collection of fox stories: *Le Roman de Renart*, written by Perrout de Saint Cloude. The French story is the story of a wily fox that plays a dirty trick on the leaders. The Flemish fox goes much further. He is psychologically better motivated. The action stems from the clash between the characters which makes the tale seem very modern. Willem's construction of the story also has the effect of keeping his listeners more in suspense than its French counterpart.

Van de vos Reynaerde opens with a series of serious complaints by the animals about the fox on the day King Nobel is holding court. King Nobel decides to summon the fox. Reynaert manages to play a nasty trick on the first two animals which are sent to bring him to court, Bruun the bear and Tybeert the tomcat. However, Reynaert's nephew, Grimbeert the badger, does manage to persuade him to come to

the court and the fox is found guilty of a whole series of crimes. While the bear, the wolf and the tomcat prepare the gallows, the fox, in a last ditch attempt to escape death, tells King Nobel that a coup d'état is being planned against him, and that not only are the bear, the wolf and the tomcat involved in it, but also Reynaert's very own father and his nephew Grimbeert. The fact that the fox accuses his own family of high treason convinces King Nobel that the fox is telling the truth. A further argument is a secret treasure trove which the fox has seized from his father. The king wants the fox to show him where the treasure trove is, but Reynaert claims to have been excommunicated and to want to do penance by going on a pilgrimage to Rome. The king takes the fox at his word and lets him go and the fox is taken home by Cuwaert the Hare and Belijn the Ram. In his castle known as Malpertuus, Reynaert murders Cuwaert and sends Belijn to King Nobel with a bag. He tells him that it contains a letter, but in reality what is in it is Cuwaert's head. The king rides out to Malpertuus with his noblemen to kill the fox, but Reynaert has already fled.

Reynaert is a special sort of hero. He is cunning, egoistic, deceitful, perverse, violent and sarcastic. He makes a fool of everyone and everything. Foxes were not well liked in the Middle Ages. They were regarded as beasts of prey capable of causing a great deal of damage. As chicken thieves they could cause hunger and even food shortages in the countryside. The fox was also a carrier of rabies and was seen as the personification of the devil. He could pretend to be dead, keeping as still as a corpse, so birds would come up to him and when they were very close, he would gobble them up. In short, the fox was a crafty, malicious and sinister animal.

Over the centuries a gentler version of the Reynaert story developed, as is often the case with folk tales, including the so-called fairytales of the Brothers Grimm which were originally cruel and often obscene. *Van de vos Reynaerde* is not so much an entertaining story about a cunning fox; it is a harsh, satirical and at times sarcastic analysis of medieval society which spares no one.

It is hardly surprising that the Reynaert story has left its mark on literature and illustrations internationally. In Flanders factors such as censorship in the sixteenth century, the Flemish Movement and the simplified children's book gave the potentially chameleonic Reynaert figure a rather more respectable image for a while. The Reynaert adaptations for the stage by Paul de Mont (1895-1950) are now famous. He made his first adaptation in 1925 for Flemish amateur dramatics. In the 1940s de Mont wrote a second version rendered famous by Ast Fonteyne's school performances, which is still regularly performed in amateur circles. Louis Paul Boon wrote a much more gruesome and sombre version of the Reynaert story in *Wapenbroeders* (1955):

"Reinaert, at the outset still a pious, well-meaning man, founds the republic of free men. The first to join is his nephew, the wolf. And the wolf says: yes the republic of the free, everything here is ours, and he seizes Reinaert and tries to devour him. Then Reinaert discovers that he is constantly threatened and robbed, insulted and kicked and resistance sets in. He thinks: it would be much better if I just looked after myself. At that point he starts deceiving and lying to everyone." *Wapenbroeders* is Boon's settlement of accounts with the society he saw emerge after the war and also with the Communist party of which he was a greatly

disillusioned member. So the adventures of the fox are still a mirror, even centuries after "Willem die Madoc maakte" wrote them.

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