REYNARD IN LEICESTERSHIRE
AND RUTLAND

by

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In the counties of Leicester and Rutland are to be found two medieval fox carvings of considerable interest to the historian of literature, for these foxes are probably near relations of Reynard, if not Reynard himself, the villainous hero of the Roman de Renart. In the form we know it, this animal epic was begun about 1175 by a Frenchman called Pierre de Saint Cloud. He told a story—drawing freely on well-known fables—about a fox called Renart and his many enemies, the chief of whom was the wolf called Ysengrin. To begin with, Pierre told how Reynard tried to devour or deceive a number of his much weaker brethren of the countryside—a cock, a titmouse, a cat and a crow. Reynard is shown trying to capture the cock from a farmyard by flattery and the titmouse from a tree-top by feigning friendship. He fails in both cases. Then he meets a cat whom he tries to force into a trap but succeeds only in trapping himself. Next he discovers a crow eating cheese and does his best not only to capture the cheese but the crow as well. In fact, he has to be satisfied with the cheese and four crow feathers. So far, it is obvious that Pierre makes great use of Aesop’s fables; his originality lies mostly in the characterisation of the animals and in the general arrangement and development of the story, for, after these preliminary skirmishes between Reynard and his intended victims, Pierre gives his story its most imaginative twist. He has the fox meet the wolf’s wife, with whom he commits adultery—in the presence of the wolf’s children. Reynard so offends these children that they tell father all that has been going on behind his back when he returns home. Hersent, the wolf’s wife, manages to convince her husband, Ysengrin, that she was overpowered and raped, so together husband and wife set off for revenge. The story is told so ingeniously that Reynard, instead of being caught and punished, manages to take Hersent a second time, in full view of her husband, thereby intensifying the hatred between the fox and the wolf.

This, very briefly, is how the story of Reynard began with Pierre de Saint Cloud—a mixture of classical fable, observation of both animal and human worlds, and original story-telling. To this very popular beginning, other poets added episode after episode. Thus there developed a veritable epic, which we call the Roman de Renart, spreading over the years from about 1175 to 1250. It grew like a rolling snowball. In the earliest episodes good humour and excellent characterisation abound; but these animals were soon used as symbols, and the stories became vehicles for heavy satire which eventually killed the epic as a form of popular entertainment. Nevertheless, there were several new Reynard stories told in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century France, and others were told or translated in Flemish, German and
English. The Flemish story was especially popular: it told of Reynard’s trial before the king of the animals, Noble the lion, accused of many a crime by the other animals. Caxton translated this in 1481, whilst earlier, in the late fourteenth century, Chaucer had exploited Pierre de Saint Cloud’s story of the fox and the cock in telling his Nun’s Priest’s Tale.

With these facts in mind, the object of this article is to describe, explain and comment on the two fox carvings in Leicestershire and Rutland. One is to be found in the parish church of St. Peter’s, Tilton-on-the-Hill, and the other in All Saints’ at Oakham.

The Tilton carving is on the most easterly capital on the north side of the nave. Here, on the western side of this capital, the fox may be seen running off with a goose half-flung over his back, its neck held firmly between his jaws (Pl. Ia). Going clockwise round the capital one next sees, on the north side, a crowned and crouching lion (Pl. Ib). Further round, on the east side, is another animal which is rather difficult to distinguish, partly because the sculpture is rather crude and partly because the animal represented is neither particularly common nor easy to portray. It has something of the uncertain, floppy posture of the puppy; its ears are small and its muzzle is pointed (Pl. Ic). Further round the capital, on the south side, there remains a creature yet more difficult to distinguish chiefly because its head is so badly damaged (Pls. IIa, b and Ia). It is on all fours and has what appears to be mis-shapen but human ears and forehead. The lower part of the face is broken off. Something which resembles a dog-collar encircles its neck and what could be a bell or weight attached to the collar lies horizontally beneath the animal’s chest. One may suspect that this is a crudely executed monkey, and for confirmation that this is a monkey one must go to Oakham.

The Oakham fox is also on a capital—the most westerly on the south side of the nave. He is to be seen on the north side of this capital with a duck in his jaws (Pl. IIIa). The duck seems to be half-flung over his back. Immediately behind him are two ducks, one pulling at his brush and the other pecking at his rump. Going clockwise round the capital one sees, on the south side, a large human head, female to judge by the headgear (Pl. IIIb). This is confirmed by her hands, which grip a distaff pointing after the fox. Above the distaff are two more ducks and below it is a bobbin of wool. This woman, who is presumably about to chase the fox whom she has interrupted in the act of stealing one of her ducks, is rather curiously represented. Her head has been carved vertically so that one would expect her body to appear below, down the column. But the sculptor had only the relatively narrow band of the capital in which to work, so the arms and hands holding the distaff are carved horizontally between the woman’s head and the group of ducks attacking the fox. The sculptor has also tried to show a back view of the woman as one will see by going to the south-west side of the capital: extending to the left, away from the head, badly proportioned and very cramped are the woman’s feet, legs and back (Pls. IIIb and IVa). The sculptor thus depicts both back and front views of the woman horizontally and her head and face vertically. Continuing in an anti-clockwise direction round the capital, one next sees a monkey facing (most probably running) away from the woman (Pl. IVa). This monkey has much in common with the Tilton
monkey; they differ only in small details—in particular by the fact that the Oakham monkey grasps the chain attached to its collar by the left forepaw, for the Oakham monkey also has a collar round its neck, and from this collar hangs a chain made of quite large links; and at the end of this chain, under the monkey’s belly, is a bell or weight—probably a bell because the sculptor has partially hollowed it out, though there is no evidence of a clapper. In none of the stories which have come down to us about the monkey and the fox is there any reference to a collar or chain, bell or weight round the monkey’s neck. It is probable that the sculptor had seen only fettered monkeys, so that is how he portrays them. But, to complete the description of the Oakham carving, there is, between the heads of the monkey and the fox, a grotesque composed of two intertwining, snake-like creatures, each biting the other’s tail and forming a horizontal figure eight (Pls. IIIa and IVb). This grotesque seems to have nothing to do with the story behind the other figures: it is merely a space-filler.

A local explanation of the Oakham fox scene is as follows: “a fox (representing the Abbot of Westminster) runs off with a goose (the great Tithes) leaving behind the goslings (the smaller Tithes). A monkey with a heavily-weighted collar follows (the local clergy too overburdened to carry on their work) and, finally, a man with a broom (the Abbot sweeping up and making amends, by building the Trinity Chapel, etc.).” For the historian of literature the story behind these sculptures is rather different. The woman who pursues the fox with a distaff is well known as Dame Malkin to readers of Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and anybody who has studied the medieval iconography of this tale knows that, in most cases, sculptors substitute a goose or a duck for the cock who is the fox’s victim in Chaucer’s story. I am, in fact, in the course of studying the iconography of the *Roman de Renart* and allied fox fables in medieval English art, and have, so far, traced more than two hundred sculptures, paintings, etc. Quite a large number—about twenty—illustrate this particular story of the fox and the cock, though, in most cases, the victim is a goose. Indeed, the only example of the cock in this context which I have been able to trace is on a fifteenth-century roof boss in the south porch of St. Margaret’s at Cley-next-the-Sea, Norfolk. Otherwise, one finds a goose or a duck as in Manchester Cathedral and Beverley Minster where this scene is depicted on misericords, both dating from the very early sixteenth century. These are undoubtedly inspired by Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* because they contain other details mentioned by him; details such as Dame Malkin’s house, children and quacking ducks. Another misericord depicts this same episode at Ripon (dated 1489) where one sees another Chaucerian character—Colle the dog who pursues the fleeing fox. Very obviously inspired by Chaucer are other misericords at Norwich (1480) and Whalley (c. 1430). Less obviously Chaucerian, but certainly belonging to the same tradition, are misericords at Minster-in-Thanet (1410), St. Botolph’s, Boston (c. 1390) and Winchester College Chapel (c. 1390). As Chaucer composed his *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* about 1390 it is most unlikely that the last two named sculptures depict this episode as told by him; they are probably inspired by a legend which, perhaps, also partly inspired Chaucer. The Ely misericord, which shows a woman in the act of bringing down her distaff
on a fleeing fox's rump—fleeing with a duck in his jaws—cannot be Chaucer-inspired since it is dated 1338; nor can the stained-glass version of c. 1315 in York Minster; nor the two manuscript paintings which depict this scene in the Smithfield Decretals (c. 1340) nor the one in the Queen Mary Psalter (also c. 1340). The Oakham sculptures, dated to the early fourteenth century, thus belong to this pre-Chaucerian group. Here it is relevant to mention and quote a fifteenth-century popular song which belongs to this legend (earlier versions of this song may have existed and may have been, in part, Chaucer’s source for this episode in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, and, of course, for some of the sculptures and paintings):

The fals fox came unto our croft,
And so our gese ful fast he sought.
With how fox, how; with hey fox, hey!
Come no more unto our howse to bere our gese aweye!

The fals fox came unto our styte,
And toke our gese ther by and by.
With how fox, how . . . etc.

The fals fox came into our yerde,
And ther he made the gese aferde.

The fals fox came unto our gate,
And toke our gese ther wher they sate.

The fals fox came unto our halle-dore,
And shrove our gese ther in the flore.

The fals fox came into our halle,
And assoyled our gese both grete and small.

The fals fox came unto our cowpe,
And ther he made our gese to stowpe.

He toke a gose fast by the nek,
And the goose thoo began to quek.

The good-wyfe came out in her smok,
And at the fox she threw hir rok.

He threw a gose upon his back,
And furth he went thoo with his pak.

However, in neither the Nun’s Priest’s Tale nor this popular lyric is there any mention of the monkey. One must look elsewhere for an explanation of his presence in the Oakham sculptures.
One must first take into account the numerous other examples of the fox and monkey together in medieval English art, for they are often depicted in each other's company, the monkey usually assisting the fox in some capacity or other. For example, a misericord in Beverley Minster shows the fox preaching to geese from a pulpit with a monkey behind him, holding a dead goose. There is a very similar misericord scene in Bristol Cathedral, and yet another in St. George's Chapel, Windsor. On a misericord in St. Mary's, Beverley, and in St. Botolph's, Boston, the monkey may be seen offering first aid to the fox and on another misericord in Beverley Minster he tends the fox in bed. In fact, there is a seventeenth-century work called The Shifts of Reynardine, Son of Reynard the Fox which claims to be an original English continuation of the Continental Reynard-epic, telling the story of an alliance between Zani the Ape and Reynardine the Fox. Zani, with his associates, steals equipment from a sleeping pedlar, and with this he equips the fox as a physician. However, the episode of the theft from the sleeping pedlar in this “original” story may be found depicted on sixteenth-century misericords in Beverley Minster and Manchester Cathedral; on a fifteenth-century misericord in St. George's Chapel, Windsor; and in the fourteenth-century Smithfield Decretals! In short, there is considerable evidence that tales based on an alliance between the fox and the monkey or ape were common in medieval England. The Oakham capital is unique in its suggestion that there was a variant of the common tale of the fox pursued by a woman with a distaff in which the monkey played an active part. I write “active” because in two other representations of this episode the monkey may be seen looking on, in some passive role. In the lower left-hand margin of f. 175 r. of the Smithfield Decretals one sees the woman with distaff pursuing the fleeing fox; in the lower right-hand margin is the monkey, sitting on his hind quarters and looking over his shoulder at the woman. It is really difficult to say whether or not he is supposed to be connected with events in the fox's corner of the folio. However, at York Minster, and on the right-hand side of the fox-woman-distaff scene, a monkey sits facing and, apparently, observing the fox. In both the Smithfield Decretals and the York stained glass the monkey has a bird on his outstretched arm, identifiable as an owl in the manuscript but quite unidentifiable in the stained glass. It is interesting to note that these three representations (Oakham, York, Smithfield Decretals) are all pre-Chaucerian, as if, before Chaucer, the monkey had some traditional role in this adventure but, after him, and under his influence, that role was suppressed. When one re-examines the Oakham capital (putting aside the local interpretation) it is evident that the monkey is also fleeing from the woman, as he would if he had been helping the fox to steal one of her ducks. And the sculptor went to some pains to show that the monkey was running away from the woman by including a rear view of her: the fox runs away before her, the monkey from behind.

Mention of the Shifts of Reynardine turns one's thoughts back to the Continental tales of Reynard the Fox—to the French Roman de Renard, composed by various writers between c. 1175 and c. 1250; but more especially to the Flemish version made in the thirteenth century. The earliest adventure of Reynard the Fox involves his flattery and capture of Chantecler the Cock,
and it has been established that Chaucer knew an early French account and drew upon it when he wrote his *Nun's Priest's Tale*. But neither here nor in any other literary account of this adventure (one thinks in particular of the classical and medieval fabulists, especially Aesop and Marie de France) is there any mention of the monkey. The story told by the Oakham capital remains unique by virtue of the active part played by the monkey. It is an important piece of evidence in the argument that the fox-monkey alliance is a peculiarly English development of the Reynard-epic, for investigation on the Continent yields no evidence of such a close alliance, neither in literature nor art.

The Continental Reynard's staunchest ally was the badger. These two were not as close as the monkey and fox seem to have been in England; they did not go around together perpetrating one crime after another, but whenever Reynard got himself into trouble and had to appear before a court of justice, he could always rely on the badger to put in a kind word for him. In the particularly famous case when Reynard was accused by Chantecler of having killed his sister-in-law (a hen called Coupée) and by the crow of having killed his wife, Reynard was brought before Noble the Lion, king of the animals, and made to answer for his crimes. His only friend on this occasion was his cousin Grimbert the Badger. Bearing in mind the English fox-monkey and the Continental fox-badger alliances it is a fairly simple matter to explain the Tilton sculptures. Here one sees that the fox has just stolen a goose; one may imagine that he will have to account for this crime to the lion, and that he will be supported before the lion by his friends the badger and the monkey. It is probable, therefore, that this is Reynard himself, Noble, Grimbert and an ancestor of Zani. In the thirteenth-century Flemish version of this episode (not translated into English until 1481 by Caxton), and in the thirteenth-century French continuation of the Reynard epic called *Renart le Nouvel*, the monkey does, in fact, play a very minor, friendly role, so it is just possible that the Tilton sculptor had one of these Continental accounts in mind. There is, after all, ample evidence from the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sculptors which clearly depict Dame Malkin and Daun Russell (the fox's name in Chaucer) that the substitution of a goose for the literary artist's victim, the cock, was common. There is a good reason why the sculptor should make this substitution—the long neck of the goose lends itself to a much more pleasing composition than the shorter neck of the cock, hen or crow, etc.

To conclude, the Tilton sculptor seems to have been familiar with the adventures of Reynard as told by one or other of the Continental story-tellers, and since this capital dates in all probability from the fourteenth century, it is of great importance to the historian of literature for there is no other evidence yet brought to light in England to prove that this part of the *Roman de Renart* was known here before 1481.
NOTES


2. From the back page of a folder, on sale inside the church, called A Pilgrim’s Guide, written by “A.J.R.” with the aid of Canon G. E. Britten.


5. My authorities for the dates of misericord carvings are E. Phipson, Choir Stalls and their Carvings (1896) and, more commonly, F. Bond, Woodcarvings in English Churches, vol. I (Misericords), 1910. The Manchester misericord is dated c. 1508 and a photograph of it is reproduced in the frontispiece of K. Sisam’s edition of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale (see note 3). The Beverley misericord is dated 1520 and is also reproduced in Sisam’s frontispiece.

6. See lines 608-35 of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale.

7. See line 617 of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale.

8. The Manchester misericord is on the south side of the choir.

9. The Thanet misericord is on the south side of St. Mary’s, north; that at Whalley in St. Mary’s, south side.


11. Reproduced in Sisam’s frontispiece.

12. For the date and a full description of this unique stained-glass representation of this episode, see Dean Milner-White’s York Minster, An Index and Guide to the Ancient Windows in the Nave (1959). The window in question is on the north side, third from the east.

13. See 49 verso and 175 recto.

14. See p.192 of G. Warner’s edition of the MS. (British Museum, 1912). For the dates of the Smithfield Decretals and the Queen Mary Psalter see M. Rickett, Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages (1954), xiv, xv, 143.


16. From p.44 of R. Hope Robbins’ Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries (1952). The part of the MS. from which this song is taken may be dated 1492.

17. North side, fourth from west.

18. Fourth Garter stall, south side.

19. At Beverley, on the south side; at Boston, in the upper stalls, north, 19th from west.

20. Right supporter of misericord, north, seventh from west.

21. The Shifts were edited many times during the seventeenth century; see, for example, the edition by T. Olive for E. Brewer, 1681, 1684, 1701, etc., with the title The History of Reynard the Fox, to which may be added a second part, the Shifts of Reynardine. An important study of the popularity of this work has been published by Charles C. Mish entitled “Reynard the Fox in the Seventeenth Century”: Huntington Library Quarterly, xvii (1953-4), 327-44.

22. At Beverley, upper stalls, south, sixth from west; at Manchester, south, eighth from west. The latter is reproduced as plate 33 in M. D. Anderson’s Misericords (1954).

23. Dated 1484.

24. There are several illustrations; see ff. 149 r. and v., 150 r. and v., and 151 r. These are reproduced on plate xl of Janson’s book (cited in note 1). See also plates xli to xliii, and pp.217-25, where Janson comments on the pedlar and apes theme.

25. Janson reproduces paintings of the monkey holding an owl on his outstretched arm in scenes completely divorced from the fox (see plates xxii c and d). He sees them as parodies or satires—see p.166. Both paintings, I note, are English in origin.

26. This adventure is related in the very earliest of the branches of the Roman de Renart; it is usually described as Branche II—see R. Bossuat, Le Roman de Renart (Paris, 1957), 11—17, and is dated c. 1175.

27. See K. O. Petersen, On the Sources of the ‘Nonnes Preestes Tale’ (1898).
28. See *Branche I* of the French *Roman de Renard* (and Bossuat, *op. cit.*, 32-42) and the Flemish thirteenth-century translation and adaptation of this *branche* which became better known than the French and was translated and published by Caxton in 1481.

29. This has been recently edited—by D. B. Sands, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, *translated and printed by William Caxton*, 1481 (Harvard University Press, 1960).

30. For dating, see Pevsner, *op. cit.*, 254.

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Thanks are due to T. F. Roylance (Plate IVa) and the National Monuments Record (Plates IIIa and b) for their permission to reproduce their copyright material.