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## "Bothe the Heye and the Lowe": Role Reversal and Medieval Animal Allegory

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“Bothe the Heye and the Lowe”: Role Reversal and Medieval Animal Allegory

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Dedication

I dedicate my project to two beings.

To the fox at one in the morning who kindly waited next to my car while I summarized my project and adoration of his species before vanishing into the night.

To my grandmother, a specialist in twentieth-century American literature, who when I told her I wanted to study books lovingly said “it doesn’t make much money, perhaps pick something else.”

They’re kindred spirits perhaps...



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## Table of Contents

Introduction: The Role of the Animal.....	1
Chapter 1: The Origin of Role Reversal.....	6
Chapter 2: Role Reversal and Clerical Corruption.....	20
Chapter 3: Role Reversal and Gender Debate.....	37
Conclusion: Animal Roles Today.....	55
Works Cited.....	58





## INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE AND THE ANIMAL

In the fictive thirteenth-century, a knight returned home and discovered his faithful hound—a greyhound named Guinefort—covered in blood. The knight also discovered his young child was nowhere to be found—the cradle was bloodied and empty. Thinking Guinefort was at fault, he slew the dog only to discover the hound had saved his child, who was hiding under the cradle, from deadly snakes. Hearing of this brave beast, people traveled and brought their children to Guinefort’s burial site. Astonishingly, there were reports of sick infants, who had made the pilgrimage to the site with their parents, being cured. Guinefort’s cultural popularity and symbolism as a protector of children grew. The hound became a saint-like figure in Catholic folklore, and the cult of Saint Guinefort continued up through the end of World War I (Lynn).

This use of an animal to depict human behaviors and qualities was a common motif in the Middle Ages, not just in theology but also in art and literature. Tales of fictional and historical animals such as Saint Guinefort were widely circulated—the beast fable/beast epic became a hugely popular genre. In the case of our greyhound, his depiction was that of a brave healer. Other animal figures were depicted as symbols of justice, cleverness, or greediness. Much like the tales of Aesop, these animal fables presented moral issues on the discrepancies of power status. There is often a superior animal—for example, the wolf—being bested by the weaker animal—for example, the fox. Jill Mann discusses this trope of power in her introduction to one of the greatest medieval beast epics, *Ysengrimus*. She argues that the power switch from the dominant wolf figure to the submissive fox figure is one of the core structural elements of the whole poem and representative of a greater social argument of the Middle Ages (Nivardus and Mann xii). I am indebted to this claim because it sparked my discovery that what Mann calls

“turning the tables” pervades not just *Ysengrimus* but most beast poems. The selection of what animals are used to represent what power dynamic comes from the cultural and biological understandings of medieval animals. Mann’s commentary on *Ysengrimus* led me to find that what I call “role reversals” between a higher status figure and a lower status figure were popular tropes in medieval animal poetry. Role reversal particularly helps to showcase different injustices that can be seen in social institutions within the medieval world. A nightingale defending women’s innocence, a fox attacking corruption within the Church—these are two of many examples that involved an animal representing an idea or a group that the animal then defended or fought against. These two in particular, a bird and a fox, would have been some of the more popular animals of choice due to their cultural symbolism.

This role reversal of the originally dominant character being overtaken by the actions and behaviors of the originally submissive character was a popular trope in both medieval folklore and medieval literature—particularly with stories using animals as characters and/or allegories. Role reversal in literature is able to convey that something or someone who was wronged can be made right, and that those who abuse power can be thwarted. Using animals to represent this change allegorically has been popular since antiquity. Classical writers such as Aesop created animal fables in order to teach moral lessons to readers. Aesop took a loose idea, an animal or two encountering a basic problem, and used the story to argue “do not tell lies” or “do not give up.” However, the beast fables of the Middle Ages altered the intended targets of this animal representation in Aesop to extend beyond simply general advice and morals. By applying the trope of role reversal between a dominant figure and a submissive figure, now the symbolism was directed at specific social institutions and customs—not just any person reading the fable.

Figures such as foxes and nightingales were used repeatedly in order to symbolize women's agency or clerical corruption, for example, and how those constructs operated in medieval society. By carefully selecting specific animals for specific scenarios where a fictional role reversal occurs, specific symbolism could be drawn and specific arguments about medieval society could be seen.

In order to understand the effectiveness of this role reversal and the representations of the animals in these poems, we have to have some background of the cultural and biological understandings of different animals in the Middle Ages. Medieval Europe did not have the scientific understanding of animals we have today (as evident by the copious use of leeches). What the Middle Ages did have were bestiaries—amalgamations of observational and cultural understandings of fauna, both fantastical and domestic, that could be used in order to apply allegorical meaning to these figures. Peter Dendle delineates three basic allegorical beings in a bestiary:

1. “For some creatures, the moral is drawn by loose analogy and homiletic exhortation: just as sirens draw sailors by their hypnotic song, so should people not be charmed by flattery or ostentation in general.”
2. “Other animals serve as role models through their natural behaviour: as the ant fetches grains back to the nest over a distance, so should people be industrious in seeking the rewards of salvation...”
3. “Finally, other animals serve as subjects of meditation and instruction not because of what they do, but simply because of what they are. The Phoenix, for instance,

teaches us to believe in the Resurrection because it rises from its own immolation” (193–94).

Having this framework for how to analyze a bestiary allows us to understand the different representations and role reversals seen in medieval animal allegory. Take Guinefort the greyhound, for example. One twelfth-century Latin bestiary offers this excerpt on canine behavior and breeds:

There are numerous breeds of dogs. Some track down the wild creatures of the woods to catch them. Others guard the flocks of sheep vigilantly against infestations of their masters, lest it should be robbed in the night by thieves, and these will stand up for their owners to the death. They gladly dash out hunting with Master, and will even guard his body when dead, and not leave it. In sum, it is a part of their nature that they cannot live without men. (White, *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* 62)

Due to his physiology of being a dog, Guinefort was expected to be a vigilant protector who does not stray from the side of his dead human. It is therefore logical that medieval people interpreted his death as a great misfortune. Now the greyhound was a gift from God, doing divine work in protecting the innocent life of a child from harm. The knight’s mistake of killing this innocent creature is what initiates the role reversal in the story and allows for the representation of Guinefort as a symbol of fidelity and protection to come through. He was killed unjustly, by a figure who was dominant over him—his human Master. The submissive greyhound was slain out of rage by the knight who thought the former had killed his child. Once the latter realized his unjust mistake, his guilt and gratefulness led him to bury Guinefort in a public place and to spread the greyhound’s story of bravery and fidelity to others. Those actions resulted in Guinefort’s fame and his eventual folklore canonization. Becoming a saint elevated him as greater than the knight. The submissive figure—Guinefort—is now greater than the original dominant figure—the knight. Without the context from the bestiary, the importance of the

hierarchical change between human and dog as well as the cultural significance of the dog in medieval culture, the understanding of the story would be lost on us.

The next three chapters will provide examples of such poems where dominant and submissive animals undergo a role reversal that, in turn, allow for the audience to see a symbolic overthrowing of a corrupt power by a logical one. The three poems that will be discussed are *Ysengrimus*, the *Fox and the Wolf*, and the *Thrush and the Nightingale*. In *Ysengrimus*, the popular dynamic between Reynard the fox and Ysengrimus the wolf was born and we find a critique of clerical corruption. That Latin, twelfth-century poem stands alone as its own piece of work. The next two thirteenth-century, Middle English texts can both be found recorded in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86 (Corrie). In the *Fox and the Wolf*, which is not a sequel to the events in *Ysengrimus* but does concern the same characters, this dynamic continues with the now-submissive Sigrim being overtaken once again by the now-dominant Reynard. This work contains a critique of the clerical institution as well. In the *Thrush and the Nightingale*, the nightingale debates with the thrush over the motives behind women in love. Through the power switches and animal character selections in each of these poems, these critiques of medieval societal institutions are able to emerge. The role reversals are made evident through rhetorical devices used in these poems by speaking animals. A variety of literary and philosophical devices—diction, paradox, persuasion, irony—come into play in order to better showcase these power dynamics and, in turn, those specific commentaries on medieval social life.

## CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGIN OF ROLE REVERSAL

Believed to have been first written around 1148 CE (Nivardus and Mann xvi), *Ysengrimus* contains twelve books on the misadventures of the wolf, Ysengrimus, and his enemy, Reynard, the fox. Indeed, it was in *Ysengrimus* that the names of those two characters were first documented (Nivardus and Mann vii) and then repeated throughout much of medieval literature, as we will see in the *Fox and the Wolf*. In *Ysengrimus*, the wolf represents the gluttonous monk and the fox represents the clever and innocent everyday man—or so he seems. Within each book, the reader sees the superior creature, the wolf, consistently thwarted and humbled by the lesser, the fox. In her introduction to *Ysengrimus*, Jill Mann goes into detail on this topic:

The turning of the tables, predator becoming victim, is the structural principle that pervades the whole poem. It is of course evident in the repeated humiliations inflicted on the wolf by the fox, the sheep, the horse, and other animals whom he expects to make his victims. Only once does he triumph, when he successfully devours the bacon that he had promised to share with the fox. Even this fits the pattern of comic reversal, however: the poem opens with the wolf devouring bacon, and closes with him being devoured by pigs (Nivardus and Mann xii).

Mann emphasizes here that the role reversal between the one in power, the wolf, and those below him, the other animals, is a through line in the work. This pattern of role reversal in animal allegory will become a staple in later beast fables. The two works I will discuss subsequently, the *Fox and the Wolf* and the *Thrush and the Nightingale*, both use this narrative element of having the supposed dominant character lose to the supposed lesser character. *Ysengrimus* establishes the use of role reversal in animal allegory as a means to convey a greater message about medieval culture. The use of the pattern of the submissive figure outdoing the dominant figure allows for these commentaries on clerical corruption to come to life. In *Ysengrimus*, the use of role reversal between the dominant predator (the wolf) and the submissive prey (the fox) is a

rhetorical device that enables the theoretically weaker figure to gain power. The reversal symbolizes the corruption within the clergy, due to the former's occupation as a "monachus/monk" (Nivardus and Mann x), being called out and overthrown by the everyday layman, who is represented by the fox. The moral is that those who are clever can outdo those who are corrupt, regardless of their holy status. This can be seen in the poem's diction and specifically in Reynard's use of medieval law in order to best Ysengrimus in "The Oath" segment of Book 6. The fox uses his cleverness by using the logistics employed in legal negotiations—for example, we will see that Reynard uses the concept of a promised good in order to instigate communication between the Ysengrimus and Carcophas, the donkey—so that the wolf feels compelled to listen to him. Reynard will become a consultant for the two of them via his legal trickery, thus gaining the dominant position. *Ysengrimus* as a whole acts as a creation or origin story for Reynard and Ysengrimus' relationship as it is the first time these characters are introduced to the medieval world, this twelfth-century text creates them. The themes and rhetoric used in not just this episode but the whole poem will be seen again and again in other fox and wolf poems as well as other animal allegories.

### **On Wolves in the Middle Ages**

Wolves in classical and medieval history were perceived as apex predators at the top of the food chain. A wolf, for example, would have been a predator to a lower carnivore such as a fox (Nivardus and Mann xii). Giuseppa Z. Zanichelli recounts the wolf's perception in twelfth-century medieval culture: "From classical antiquity onward, the wolf is a negative presence in literature and scientific contexts: Pliny underlines its savagery, and Isidorus calls the wolf 'Rapax autem bestia et cruoris appetens'—that is, a rapacious and bloodthirsty beast" (45).



On all levels, artistic and biological, the wolf was seen as a violent and greedy predator and was looked down upon. His presence in the poem and whatever activities he performed would have generated a negative reaction from a medieval audience due to this connotation. If the wolf were presented as a religious figure—as he is in *Ysengrimus* (Nivardus and Mann ix)—he would have been seen as representing members of the clergy who were not virtuous but rather corrupt due to his cultural status as a figure of greed. “His decision to become a monk,” Mann writes, “is motivated by greed (Reynard has given him a taste of monastic food), and once admitted, he gives a spectacular demonstration of it by opening all the taps on the monastic wine-barrels and drinking most of the wine” (Nivardus and Mann ix).

T.H. White’s translation of a *Book of Beasts*, the same translation used to discuss dogs in the introduction, has this entry for the section on the wolf: “The word LUPUS, a Wolf, is brought into our Latin language from a Greek derivation, for they call a Lupus a *Licus* (*λύκος*). And they are called *λύκος* in Greek on account of their bites, because they massacre anybody who passes by with a fury of greediness” (*The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* 56). As mentioned previously, bestiaries provided both scientific and folkloristic information on fauna during the Middle Ages. To record this specific definition of a wolf as greedy and violent indicates that such associations were commonly accepted. The greed seen in *Ysengrimus* would have had its roots in this common symbolism. The greedy, powerful wolf is an effective and colloquial character choice in establishing which character is meant to be the dominant figure due to this cultural understanding that had been in place for hundreds of years.

The footnote on the wolf in White’s translation is important because it connects back to the story within *Ysengrimus*: “Once upon a time there was a Wolf who had heard great things

about the clergy in monasteries, and how they did very little work, lived easy and had lamb for dinner. So he decided to be a religious” (*The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* 56). This excerpt establishes the wolf’s character as greedy and lazy, something seen in *Ysengrimus* as well. Mann also acknowledges how, in the poem, Ysengrimus matches the cultural connotation of greed as essential to the wolf’s character:

His decision to become a monk is motivated by greed (Reynard has given him a taste of monastic food), and once admitted, he gives a spectacular demonstration of it by opening all the taps on the monastic wine-barrels and drinking most of the wine. When confronted by the angry monks, Ysengrimus claims that his depredations were designed to prove his worthiness to become a monk-bishop. (Nivardus and Mann ix)

Ysengrimus is now not only a violent and strong carnivore, he is also a member of the clergy—a dominant power in medieval Europe. The character is now at a state of extreme power. However, *Ysengrimus* showcases Reynard the fox’s ability to overthrow the wolf’s status through his use of trickery and cleverness. A prime example of this role reversal is the episode of “The Oath” in Book 6. Reynard’s use of rhetoric and logic in this episode will become a pattern seen not just within *Ysengrimus* but also within the next poem we will discuss, the *Fox and the Wolf*.

White’s translation highlights that even the etymology of the term “lupus” stems from the greed the ancient Greeks observed in the nature of the wolf’s attacks while Zanichelli’s commentary offers the understanding that the wolf was seen as a vicious and dangerous predator. Another work, Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, helps fill out the medieval interpretation of the wolf’s symbolism.

It is a violent beast, eager for gore. Concerning the wolf, country folk say that a person loses his voice if a wolf sees him first. Whence to someone who suddenly falls silent one says, “The wolf in the story.” Certainly if a wolf perceives that he is seen first, he puts aside his bold ferocity. (253)

Isidore’s analysis of the wolf combines the ideas of the previous two commentaries and provides insight on the wolf’s ability to manipulate others. The fact that a wolf can make a human lose their voice shows that medieval people were aware of the predator versus prey power switch occurring between the dominant person and the submissive wolf. This is an important realization as it validates the notion of role reversal we will see in *Ysengrimus*, only now it is the wolf being taken down by the figure lower than him, the fox, instead of the former taking down a human. Manipulation will also be the main principle of this power switch: Reynard will use his speech to best Ysengrimus just as the wolf manipulated the humans with their ferocious presence according to Isidore.

### **On Aristotelian Persuasion and Classical Irony**

The precursor event to the story in “The Oath” is that the wolf has lost his skin as a result of the fox’s clever foolery. With Ysengrimus needing skin, he wants to ask the king for help. Reynard instead suggests to him that Ysengrimus is owed a skin by Baldwin, the elder—the father of Carcophas, the donkey—and he should ask Carcophas for the favor.

<p>Tunc constante fide senis ista susurrat in aurem:  “Patruē, non nobis hoc bene cessit iter.  Nil nobis cum rege; potest nimis ille, feroxque viribus intendit; nil pietatis habet.  Res a rege tuas non vi, non arte tueris; sunt tibi mutata lucra petenda via.  Balduinus senior, ‘Bona’ qui ‘Fiducia’ fertur, pellicium patri debuit ipse tuo, reddere quod blande monitus cum saepe negasset,  denique censores constituere diem.  Debitor interea mortem exactorque tulerunt, causaque maiori cessit inacta minor (ll. 363-373).</p>	<p>Then with his usual trustworthiness he whispered in the old man’s ear: “Uncle, this journey hasn’t turned out well for us. We shouldn’t take up with the king; he is too powerful, and brutally relies on force; he has no mercy. You won’t protect your property from the king by skill or strength; you should seek for profit by a different route. Baldwin the elder, who was nicknamed ‘Good Faith,’ owed his hide to your father, and since he had often refused to hand it over when requested politely, finally the judges appointed a day of settlement (ll. 363-373).</p>
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The lead-in to Reynard's speech states that he spoke to the wolf with his "constante fide/usual trustworthiness" (363). This is a statement of classical irony—the irony seen in the eyes of classic philosophers such as Aristotle or Plato—as the former is not being truthful with his words towards the latter. The fox uses Aristotle's theories of persuasion in his dialogue with the wolf in order to successfully manipulate him into going into the physical trap.

Aristotelian and Socratic philosophy were important elements of medieval philosophy because their works had been translated into medieval Latin by people such as Marius Victorinus (Spade). Aristotle, in particular, wrote about the relationships between humans, plants, and animals in his work *De anima*. This text specifically discussed the souls of these beings and led to much psychological debate in the Middle Ages (Oelze 24). Animals, both human and inhuman, and their observable behavior patterns and applicable symbolism were of interest to Aristotle. He also wrote about how humans interacted with one another, especially with regards to persuasion. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes Aristotle's theories on persuasion as follows: "technical means of persuasion are either (a) in the character of the speaker, or (b) in the emotional state of the hearer, or (c) in the argument (*logos*) itself" (Rapp). Reynard follows these strategies, which is why he is able to institute that role reversal in the poem. He makes the conversation focus solely on what appears on the surface level to be his compassion and care for Ysengrimus by speaking about the wolf's situation from a collective voice. The use of "us" and "we" on Reynard's part builds rapport with the latter, giving him better control of the emotional state of the wolf. Finally, the fox uses logic in orchestrating his point as to why the wolf should listen to him. The former does this through referencing how Ysengrimus is owed a piece of property by Carcophas and making assessments on what has not

worked for the wolf in the past. By successfully following Aristotle's strategies, Reynard is able to establish his authority in the episode and begin the process of this role reversal between predator and prey, as Mann refers to it.

In addition to Reynard's use of Aristotelian persuasion, the fox also employs classic irony. The idea behind Socratic irony is that one figure strategically misrepresents oneself with the goal of fooling the other for personal gain. Melissa Lane addresses the application of classical irony in her chapter "Reconsidering Socratic Irony":

For 'irony' is, in a representative definition, "saying something with the intent that the message is understood as conveying the opposite or an otherwise different meaning" although we must immediately ask, understood by whom? Sometimes, by an addressee who is expected to understand the irony, in which case irony can be a graceful and playful way of conveying meaning. At other times, when the addressee is expected to be obtuse to it and the irony is intended for reception by a third party, irony can be a mocking and even savage way of discriminating between those capable of understanding one's true meaning and those who are blind to it. (237–38)

Lane emphasizes the idea that Socratic irony can be used in order to convey a message to a third party, which in this case would be the reader. The wolf is the obtuse addressee in this scenario while the fox is the one responsible for using irony to show the audience a greater idea. That greater idea, here, is the corruption within the clergy. The conversation between the two mimics a Socratic dialogue. The fox's representation in medieval culture, as discussed previously, also lends itself to this execution of Socratic irony in that the fox was often used for observational commentary. His character was meant to create a discussion about everyday life, often in a humorous and satirical way. He is a representation of a layman. Therefore, to use irony in this fashion to address this greater point about the clergy in conjunction with the fox character allows this point to reach the reader clearly and with power.

We will see this same use of persuasion and irony again in the *Fox and the Wolf* as well as in the *Thrush and the Nightingale*.

### “The Oath”

Ysengrimus, however, makes a point of calling out the duality of Reynard’s behavior.

<p>“Nescio, te, Reinarde, parem cui suspicer esse; tu meus es fautor, tu meus hostis item. At monitis ubicumque tuis obtempero, laedor; cedo tamen, veluti sis michi fidus adhuc.” (ll. 393-397)</p>	<p>“I don’t know, Reynard, into what category of persons to put you. You’re my protector and you’re also my enemy. And whenever I comply with your advice, I come to harm. But I consent, as if you were still loyal to me.” (ll. 393-397)</p>
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The wolf realizes that the fox appears to be a “fautor/friend” (394) but also his “hostis/enemy” (394). He lays out just how Reynard is prone to double crossing him and seems to be heading logically in the direction of calling him out and therefore not taking his advice. But this does not stop him from listening to Reynard, showcasing both how the fox is a master of persuasion and also that the wolf is simple-minded and pays no mind to his recognition of Reynard’s trickery. Mann’s previous statement on the role reversal in *Ysengrimus*, the predator becomes the prey, is showcased here as well (Nivardus and Mann xii). The wolf, who should be in power, cedes to the hierarchically lower animal, the fox. Symbolically, the fact that Ysengrimus acknowledges Reynard’s trickery and yet still goes on with his plan shows how strong the latter’s coercive skills really are. To make someone admit the truth about a situation and yet have them still repeat what will do themselves damage, that is a peak level of manipulation. It is essentially the definition of insanity, repeating something hoping you will receive a new result.

Having already begun to start the power transition from the submissive figure to the dominant one, Reynard goes on to talk to Carcophas and include him in his plan to sabotage

Ysengrimus. The fox and the donkey return to the wolf and what follows is a sequence focusing on legality. Reynard acts as a consultant and explains how the wolf is owed a skin from the donkey.

<p>Tunc seriem causae a fundo perstrinxit et addit:          “taliter haec retines debita tamque diu.          Quot tu pensus oves (hoc dampnum ponderat horno)          hanc massam dampni mittit amore tui.          Laetius ac citius tam solvere iusta memento,          quam superas sensu divitiisque patrem. (ll. 425-431)</p>	<p>Then he sketched the outline of the case from its foundation, and added: “In this way, and over so long a period, have you withheld these dues. As for all the sheep that have added to your weight (he estimates this loss by his annual drop on profits), he remits the amount of this damage through affection for you. Take care to pay what is due just so much quicker and more cheerfully as you surpass your father in wealth and wisdom.” (ll. 425-431)</p>
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Reynard treats the interaction between Carcophas and Ysengrimus as a contract, as though the latter were requesting what was due from the former, whose responsibility it was to provide the item in question. The diction used here in particular is legal: “causae/case” (425), “debita/dues” (426), “hoc dampnum ponderat horno/he estimates this loss by his annual drop on profits” (428), “mittit/remits” (429), “solvere usta memento/to pay what is due” (430). These phrases and words all create the impression of a contract, as though the exchange of the skin between Carcophas and Ysengrimus were legally binding and owed by some theoretical law of the medieval animal kingdom. The fact that in this scenario Reynard is the mediator indicates his level of power in the situation. The fox is responsible for presenting the donkey’s claims to the wolf and, in turn, convincing the two parties to come to an agreement. He has complete control over his plan to fool Ysengrimus, down to the actual layout and enactment of the events via his decision to use a logical legal structure to his argument. This is a different kind of power control that the fox has from a story we will discuss later, the *Fox and the Wolf*, where Reynard will enact power through

the same use of persuasion and logic but with an emphasis on religious coercion instead of legal coercion.

The case continues between the three characters with Carcophas playing along with Reynard's plan by suggesting that since Ysengrimus is an untrustworthy figure—which goes along with the cultural understanding of the wolf as malicious and greedy—he should swear before a pile of holy relics to prove his innocence in procuring the skin. The fox explains this wariness to the wolf.

<p>Te tua iura putat (totiens extranea tollis) non dilaturum sponte fuisse diu. Aut igitur testes, quis possit credere, quaerit, aut ut praeiures pignora sacra super, et de stirpe sus cum lectis ipse refellet aut legem auxilio deficiente feret. (ll. 483-487)</p>	<p>He thinks that (so often do you take what belongs to others) you wouldn't of your own accord have deferred claiming your property so long. He asks, therefore, either for witnesses in whom he can trust, or that you should first swear an oath on holy relics. (ll. 483-487)</p>
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In response to this proposition by Carcophas, Ysengrimus defaults to the person in power—Reynard—for advice on whether to swear over the relics. In this moment, the wolf has effectively delegated the dominant position in the scenario to the submissive figure, the fox. Legality and religion have combined here. By giving Reynard this power, the role reversal has officially occurred. The plaintiff—the monk Ysengrimus—has been overtaken by the mediator—the trickster Reynard.

The wolf asks the fox what he thinks he should do. The latter advises that the former should do whatever Carcophas asks him to do.

<p>“Quid consulis actu?” “Solvere si vellet, rector ille foret; quaerit recta tamen.” “Vis iurem?” Patruē, quidni? Audacter iura, perdere turpe tua est.</p>	<p>“What action do you advise?” “If he were willing to pay, he'd be acting with more propriety, but what he's asking for is within his rights.” “Do you want me to take the oath?” “Uncle, why not? Swear boldly; it's</p>
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Scit bene Carcophas, quod non evadere possit; quaerit cancellos, solvere taedet eum.” (ll. 495-500)	shameful to lose what’s yours. Carcophas knows well that he can’t escape.” (ll. 495-500)
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By taking advantage of Ysengrimus’ need for the skin and his wariness of trusting others, as made evident by his previous exclamation about not fully trusting Reynard, the fox is able to manipulate the wolf into doing what he wants him to do via his position of power in this legal scenario. Since Reynard is now counseling Ysengrimus, he uses his power to manipulate him into agreeing with Carcophas’ request under the guise that it will enable him to get the skin. In reality, the fox takes the wolf to where the supposed relics are, which is really a disguised trap. When Ysengrimus puts his foot onto the platform, thinking he is going to take a relic to swear his fidelity on, the trap closes and takes hold of his paw (510-516). He is stuck and Reynard has bested him, again.

There is another clever layer to his trap. When bringing Ysengrimus to the relics, Reynard tells him that only those who swear on the relics in honest truth can pick them up. Anyone who swears falsely, much like anyone who lies in court, will be caught and the contract between Ysengrimus and Carcophas will be void. There being no relics there, only the trap, Reynard is able to play off Ysengrimus’ capture as a sign from the saints that he committed perjury by not paying money to the church.

“debuerat nummus tua iuramenta praeisse placandis sanctis, nec datus ille fuit! Pignus ob hoc temet sanctus sibi vendicat ipsum. Me quoque ne capiat sanctus, abibo, mane! Non poteris redimi, plus nummo pignus amatur; pes vadium nummi vel pede maius erit.	“Money ought to have formed the prelude to your oaths; you didn’t give any money to placate the saints! Because of this, the saint claims you yourself as a surety. I’m off, in case the saint seizes me as well—you stay here! You can’t be ransomed; a surety is generally preferred to money. Your foot, or something more valuable than your foot, will
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Mancipium sanctis collo corioque dicarer, si vadium vellent credere, nempe negant.” (ll. 527-534)	be the pledge for your money.” (ll. 527-533)
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By describing how Ysengrimus must have been captured, Reynard is able to call out the wolf’s greediness by saying that it is the wolf’s history of not donating money to the church that caused him to get caught. He is again able to prove his mastery of trickery and to turn the tables. To add to his tricks, Reynard cleverly tells Ysengrimus, “Mancipium sanctis collo corioque dicarer, si vadium vellent credere, nempe negant/Your foot, or something more valuable than your foot, will be the pledge for your money” (533-534), which is exactly what the latter ends up having to do in order to escape from the trap. He bites his own foot off (550).

### **Effects of Role Reversal**

This trope of the trickster fox seeming honest in the face of God as bait to get the wolf into his trap will be seen again and again in the development of the beast fable. In *Ysengrimus* it is a constant theme but in the next work we will look at, the *Fox and the Wolf*, the former fools the latter in the same way. “The Oath” demonstrates Mann’s concept of role reversal, this construct that through cleverness the state of animal hierarchy and thus the hierarchy of the clergy can be challenged and overthrown. Understanding that Ysengrimus as a figure is monastic and his cultural recognition is that of greed, having the lowly trickster fox overthrow the greedy monk allegorically creates this image of corruption within the clergy being attacked head on and even being taken out. It also establishes the “underdog” trope and explains the Reynard the fox epic timeline that emerges afterwards. Charles C. Mish offers this on the popularity of Reynard up into the seventeenth century, several hundred years after *Ysengrimus* circulates:

Moreover, the tale of the fox had immediately given signs hinting at its future popularity; the first edition was soon followed by two more, dated 1489 and 1494 respectively, and it

is almost certain that Wynkyn de Worde also produced an edition, undoubtedly provided with cuts, before 1500, though no copy of such an issue is known today. (328)

Clearly, by these statistics, the cleverness of Reynard tricking Ysengrimus over and over again was appealing through the Middle Ages and beyond. The work is titled eponymously, leading readers to believe that the work should favor the eponymous figure. However, *Ysengrimus* does not do this. Reynard is the character who ends up on top in the end with Ysengrimus very clearly at the bottom. The main character of the text may be the wolf but the sympathy of the work lies with the fox's character instead. This implies that the poet believed or hoped that audiences would react favorably to the fox and he would be a well-loved character—which, given Mish's quotation above, has proven to be true. Role reversal has a lot to do with this attachment. People enjoy the underdog figure. Characters trying to dispose of those above them abusing their power are enjoyable to read and are often relatable. Reynard has this element in the poem. His clever use of rhetoric makes reading about his shenanigans in fooling Ysengrimus comical and entertaining. The act of watching the former best the latter generates a connective response to readers who may, perhaps, feel as though they themselves are looking for some form of justice from someone above them. The proxy of relating to the submissive character's ability to gain dominance in the story is that the message being presented—in *Ysengrimus* this would be the critique of the clergy as corrupt and being outdone by the clever layman—is relatable to the audience. The wolf looks stupid and greedy while the fox looks clever and fun. The latter winning emphasizes his positive traits despite his conniving trickery. If the poet was hoping for their audience to agree or sympathize with their opinion that the clergy has corrupt figures inside and that it is up to the layman to best him, then the use of role reversal in connecting the audience to Reynard as opposed to Ysengrimus was successful.

This success of connection in *Ysengrimus*—as well as the poem being a keystone text in the beast epic chronology—establishes the motif of role reversal throughout other medieval beast tales. Mann emphasizes that without this text there would not be any of the more famous beast fables commonly associated with medieval literature. She writes,

It is important, first of all, because it initiates a major literary tradition. It stands at the head of the long line of medieval beast-literature—the line that includes the *Roman de Renart*, *Reinhart Fuchs*, *Van den Vos Reinaerde*, and a whole host of others. It is the first work to make the underlying hostility between the fox and the wolf into the dynamic force of a full-length narrative. (1)

*Ysengrimus* acted as the origin point in establishing the use of role reversal between two animal characters in order to showcase the “underlying hostility” that Mann refers to above. That hostility allows for the greater critique of, in the case of this poem, the corruption within the clergy through the symbolism of the wolf as a monastic figure and the fox as a layman. We will see this religious symbolism through role reversal again in the *Fox and the Wolf*, but we will also see role reversal used to symbolize gender constructs in the *Thrush and the Nightingale*. *Ysengrimus* acted as the originator for this ideology and the originator of the storyline between the fox and the wolf in medieval literature.

## CHAPTER 2: ROLE REVERSAL AND CLERICAL CORRUPTION

As we saw in chapter one, *Ysengrimus* uses the motif of role reversal between the dominant figure (Ysengrimus) and the supposed submissive figure (Reynard) in order to showcase how power status can be flipped through rhetorical cleverness and logic. This role reversal or power switch can symbolically reference things beyond simply the submissive figure overtaking the dominant one. The wolf ends up being completely at the bottom of the predator/prey hierarchy in nature and this pattern of thwarting the wolf will repeat itself throughout medieval literature. Indeed, the exchange of power between Ysengrimus and Reynard became a popular motif. The latter maintains his newfound power over the former after the events seen in the previous chapter, Reynard's symbolism evolves from an everyday trickster to a corrupt clergyman—just as Ysengrimus was before he was overthrown by Reynard. We can see this new association in a Middle English text called the *Fox and the Wolf* (also seen as the *Vox and the Wolf*). It can be found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86 (Corrie). In a review of Thomas Honegger's *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry*, Richard Newhauser writes: "Honegger observes that already in the late thirteenth-century English adaptation of the *Roman de Renart*, *The Vox and the Wolf*, animals serve the chief purpose of entertaining and amusing the audience rather than instructing it through their symbolic and allegorical dimensions" (257). While this quick summary of the poem is helpful in understanding its comedic qualities, Honegger's statement does not validate the fact that there are allegories at play in the work. This chapter will focus on analyzing the symbolism used and unpacking the role reversal seen between the fox and the wolf and its broader connotations. Looking at the two poems sequentially can thus help to create a stronger, more complete image of how role reversal

in animal allegory can convey greater symbolism, particularly negative messages about clerical power in the Middle Ages. While the focus in *Ysengrimus* was on the wolf, this poem's focus is on the development of Reynard's character. Both poems contain similar themes, such as critique of religious authority, and similar uses of rhetoric, such as manipulation of diction and the use of logic in arguments. The *Fox and the Wolf* shows us a commentary on the clever nature of clergymen and their extreme power over others. On the one hand, Reynard is a figure who allegorically represents corruption within the clerical institution. On the other hand, he perfectly employs several elements of classical philosophy. He specifically uses Aristotelian persuasion, Socratic dialogue, and litotes in order to get what he wants. This is the same clever fox as in *Ysengrimus* who uses rhetoric to his advantage. These two sides to his character, the corrupt clergyman and the brilliant philosopher, allow the audience to observe the corruption that his character exposes.

### **On Foxes in the Middle Ages**

The decision to use a fox as a symbol of deceit comes from the standard medieval interpretation of a fox's disposition. As mentioned in chapter one, *Ysengrimus* was responsible for creating the character of Reynard and instilling in him associations of trickery and cleverness. However, those interpretations come from the same scientific and cultural background that established the wolf's disposition as well. Willene B. Clark and Meradith T. McMunn discuss how animal observation and moral interpretation were popular in medieval literature through the circulation of the Christian *Physiologus*—which translates into English from Greek as *The Naturalist*. It was the premier founding text for the creation of the medieval bestiary and circulated around the second century CE. The typical bestiary emphasized the ethics of the

animal world as providing lessons on ethics in the human world. There were elements of spiritual and theological influence. They note specifically: “The bestiary, like the *Physiologus*, became a popular source for sermon writers” (2–3).

Foxes are native to Europe and popular hunting animals (Yamamoto 113). It is no surprise that they were a common presence in these texts and many other translations and interpretations of their medieval symbolism have been produced. A bestiary would have labeled a fox, like the wolf, as a beast, an animal with aggressive tendencies and a predilection for freedom and independence (White, *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* 7). T.H. White’s translation of a twelfth-century Latin bestiary describes the fox as “a fraudulent and ingenious animal” (*The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* 53). White also translated a piece from that same manuscript that likens the fox to a Satan-like figure, suggesting that the fox was seen in the Middle Ages as a temptor of innocent creatures from whom he tried to gain something, usually through the guise of false piety, which we will see in the poem. As White translates:

The Devil has the nature of this same. With all those who are living according to the flesh he feigns himself to be dead until he gets them in his gullet and punishes them. But for spiritual men of faith, he is truly dead and reduced to nothing. Furthermore, those who wish to follow the devil’s works perish, as the Apostle says: ‘Know this, since if you live after the flesh you shall die, but if you mortify the doings of the foxy body according to the spirit you shall live.’ And the Lord God says: ‘They will go into the lower parts of the earth, they will be given over to the power of the sword, they will become a portion for foxes.’ (*The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts* 54)

This translation lines up perfectly with Isidore of Seville’s commentary on the fox in the

*Etymologies*:

Foxes (*vulpes*) are so named as if the word were volupes, for they are ‘shifty on their feet’ (*volubilis* + *pes*) and never follow a straight path but hurry along tortuous twistings. It is a deceitful animal, tricking others with its guile, for whenever it has no food it pretends to be dead, and so it snatches and devours the birds that descend to its apparent corpse. (253)

Familiarity with both of these interpretations helps readers to understand the *Fox and the Wolf*. If two separate sources were citing the fox as deceitful, then that allegory would have been widely known and accepted. The medieval audience would see the fox—Reynard—and immediately know that the story that unfolds would be one concerning deceit, fraud, and cleverness. He may masquerade as an honest animal but, like Satan, he is only out for himself. Reynard in the *Fox and the Wolf* is similar to the wolf in *Ysengrimus*—a greedy and selfish creature associated with religious corruption (here Satan, specifically). However, the wolf would still be considered, at least biologically, to be the dominant figure. The role reversal, with Reynard outdoing Ysengrimus (called Sigrim in the *Fox and the Wolf*) remains. As we will see, the fox should dominate over the cock—which he does not—and the wolf should dominate over the fox—which he does not either. Reynard's use of rhetoric follows the same rhetoric he used in *Ysengrimus*. His use of logical structure, irony, and elements of persuasion all facilitate his appropriation of power.

Dorothy Yamamoto claims that the medieval understanding of a fox was that of an animal who relies on observation for self-gain but also one who was associated with the daily aspects of life, which provides and clarifies the truthfulness that can be seen behind the fox's schemes. His ability to provide commentary on the reality of a situation is related directly to his ability to observe the world and then act upon what he sees in order to gain what he wants.

Yamamoto writes that

The fox is therefore an animal of the periphery which is at the same time inextricably meshed in the dealings of everyday life. It is this paradox which provides the key to its significance. For the fox, the arch-deceiver, becomes a way of articulating the presence of deceit, of false-seeming, within the various institutions of society. (Yamamoto 58)



Yamamoto's phrase, "animal of the periphery," is a perfect characterization of the medieval symbolism of the fox. They are cunning beasts who often show up in stories in order to provide satirical commentary on the situation the story is addressing. It is their clever and humorous nature that reveals a dark honesty underneath. In this way, the Satan character emerges. Foxes are simply there, on the "periphery," and yet they play a vital role in showing readers the real truth in a seemingly mundane situation. The fox's character optimizes this allegory in the *Fox and the Wolf* because his rhetorical, logical, and humorous behavior demonstrates the problem of the church as an institution. This institution was, of course, an essential part of medieval culture. Catholicism was a part of everyone's daily life, just as Yamamoto referred to the fox's interactions being tied to the "dealings of everyday life." What makes the fox such a valuable asset and animal choice for the poem is his capability of using his seemingly ordinary everyday interactions as a fox in order to provide a critique of the corruption within the clergy. His allegorical role is similar to that of Shakespeare's fool in the 17th-century *King Lear*, a character who on the surface seems to be created solely to provide comic relief but in reality tells the audience the truth about a situation. All of these character descriptions—an arch-deceiver, the Devil—place Reynard in a prime position to be an allegorical figure responsible for exemplifying corruption and manipulation.

Other critics have commented on how these principles and fox stories provide readers with insights into clerical corruption occurring in the Middle Ages. Sacvan Bercovitch, for example, writes that within the Reynard story the "clever stratagem is a serious clerical satire, a protest directed against those priests who indulged, like the fox, in gluttony and lechery, and who, at the duped layman's expense, perverted their holy office to their own profane ends"

(Bercovitch 288). What Bercovitch is particularly referring to in this quotation is a scene that will be discussed later on in the chapter where Reynard is stuck in a well and has to manipulate Sigrim to get him out. He writes about how the image of the corrupt clerical fox with the innocent layman wolf around the two buckets would have been an image well understood by medieval people as a biblical reference to the well of spiritual blessings, which Bercovitch discusses in a note:

The concept of the well of spiritual blessings appears in both the Old Testament and the New. Jewish Theologians allegorized the “wells of salvation” of which Isaiah speaks (12:3) and also the sayings that “the mouth of a righteous man is a well of life” (Proverbs 10:11) or a “wellspring of wisdom” (Proverbs 18:4). (289)

The tale will make a mockery of this symbol by the end of the tale when the corrupt figure lures the innocent figure into the well through coercion and deceit. Sigrim, though guilty in previous stories of greediness, will be innocent and thinking that he is ensuring his spiritual well-being. His pious confession means that he has “the mouth of a righteous man” and, ironically, reverses the phrase “a well of life” by giving Reynard “life out of the well” since he helps him escape. This play on biblical text is just another instance of the power of role reversal and how that rhetorical tool helps to address a greater criticism—in this case the notion of the clergy being corrupt. We will see it again in the next chapter with the *Thrush and the Nightingale* containing references to Genesis and the Virgin Mary.

### **The Fox and the Cock**

With this cultural understanding of the fox’s medieval symbolism in mind, we can now turn to the *Fox and the Wolf*. The tale begins with Reynard entering Chauntecler’s home because he is hungry and the cock’s home happens to be open. When he enters, Chauntecler leaps up above Reynard in order to escape him, which in turn creates a dynamic of different hierarchical

levels in the poem which will be repeated throughout. Chauntecler is up high, metaphorically seeming to assert dominance over Reynard's character, while Reynard is down below, as he was the intruder coming into his space. It is a visual reversal of power—the prey is up high and the predator down low. We will see this again when Reynard talks with Sigrim in the pit when he uses clever coercion to raise himself to the same spot and then above his counterparts. The repetition of this pattern, where Reynard starts on both a physically and morally lower level, and then uses his cunning and his skills of deception to climb up to a higher level, allows the story to progress (and for Yamamoto's "arch-deceiver" idea to continue developing.) This begins the pattern of role reversal between predator and prey that *Ysengrimus* established.

When Chauntecler confronts Reynard for entering his home and scaring his hens, the latter responds by trying to gain leverage on the situation.

<p>'Be stille, Ich hote, a Godes nome!          Quaþ þe wox, 'Sire Chauntecler,          Þou fle adoun, and com me ner.          I nabbe don her nout bote goed:          I have leten þine hennen blod;          Hy weren seke ounder þe ribe,          Þat hy ne mi3tte non legour libe,          Bote here heddre were itake,          Þat I do for almes sake.          Ich have hem letten eddre-blod,          And þe, Chauntecler, hit wolde don goed.          Þou havest þat ilke ounder þe splen,          You nestes nevere daies ten:          For þine lifdayes beþ al ago,          Bote þou bi mine rede do.          I do þe lete blod ounder þe brest,          Oþer sone axe after þe prest.' (ll.36-52)</p>	<p>"Be still, I command in God's name," replied the fox. "Sir Chauntecler, fly down and come near me. I've done nothing but good here. I have let your hens' blood; they were sick under their ribs and might not live any longer unless their blood was taken, which I did for the sake of charity. I have let blood from their veins, and it would do you good, Chauntecler, for you have the same sickness under your spleen. You haven't nested with your hens for ten days, because your life-days are all gone unless you do as I advise and let your blood under your breast. Otherwise ask soon for the priest."<sup>1</sup></p>
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<sup>1</sup> Citations to the Middle English of the *Fox and the Wolf* are drawn from Elaine Treharne's edition unless otherwise cited; citations to the Modern English translation are from the edition by George W. Tuma and Dinah Hazell, unless otherwise cited.

Reynard begins his defense by claiming a connection to God. “Be stille, Ich hote, a Godes nome!”/“Be still, I command in God’s name.”” This reference to the divine establishes him as a seemingly religious figure and even creates an image of Reynard as just due to his seemingly religious nature with this invocation. He furthers this respectful or just image by referring to Chauntecler as “Sir Chauntecler/Sire Chauntecler,” a title of respect. We saw this same use of titles as a method of manipulation on Reynard’s behalf in *Ysengrimus* with his reference to the wolf as “Patruē/Uncle.”

Reynard then uses a logical argument to defend himself from Chauntecler’s accusations. Logic was used in *Ysengrimus* and we will see it again in the next chapter with the *Thrush and the Nightingale*—an animal allegory poem that is in MS Digby 86 as well. The same way the nightingale will use logic to defend her stances and succeed in the *Thrush and the Nightingale*, so does Reynard here. Reynard is arguing in order to save himself and to possibly even prove himself more clever and sly than Chauntecler. He first claims that he has “done nothing but good here/nabbe don her nout bote goed” by letting the blood of the hens. He says that, in fact, he did it for “the sake of charity/Ɔat I do for almes sake.” To state that his letting of the blood was charitable both furthers his image of a good, almost medical figure but also institutes the beginnings of a logical argument that he follows with a second and arguably more powerful claim about Chauntecler’s status as a viable male among his hens. Reynard points out that Chauntecler had not lain with his hens in ten days. This emasculates Chauntecler. It questions his viability and status as the dominant figure because, since he is not mating with his hens, he is not asserting his masculine authority.

Reynard also puts himself on a high level of divinity that is also paradoxical with “Oþer sone axe after þe prest/Otherwise ask soon for the priest.” He has stated how and why he did a charitable service for Chauntecler by killing his hens and even states that Chauntecler himself is sick. We can infer that the former is arguing that the latter should be eaten as well since he is just going to die from his sickness anyway. To say that unless Chauntecler gives himself to Reynard as food he should ask for a priest means that Chauntecler is near death and needs to ask for his last rites as a Christian. It brings clerical language, particularly clerical language focusing on death, into the poem that will be followed up on when Reynard is in the bucket later on. The fox, here, is arguing that the cock should simply let Reynard kill him because Chauntecler would die anyway. The fox’s delivery is particularly convincing largely due to his rhetoric. He has adopted this character of a doctor or a priest seemingly looking out for the well-being of this innocent chicken. However, when you break down the actual message, one realizes Reynard is trying to manipulate Chauntecler into doing what he wants.

The fact that Reynard was so convincing in this scene is due largely to his use of medieval philosophical rhetoric. As was seen in chapter one, Aristotelian theories of persuasion describe the structure through which Reynard was able to manipulate his targets into falling into his traps. Firstly, based on the medieval analysis of the fox figure described by White and Yamamoto above, the fox is a character meant to win in points of conversation or where persuasion is needed. Foxes symbolize cunning, wit, and ingenious behavior. Secondly, the figure that Reynard has to persuade is Chauntecler, who is in a compromised emotional state. Chauntecler is heated over the loss of his hens and over Reynard’s questioning his viability,

therefore his ability to defend himself calmly is compromised. In this way the vernacular Middle English assists his manipulative tactics with its use of double negatives.

Reynard also employs the use of litotes in his speech, or the use of negatives in order to understate an important point. The *OED* defines litotes as an “ironic understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary” (“Litotes”). This use of clever negation creates an elusive quality to Reynard in his dialogue with Chauntecler. Reynard tells Chauntecler “I have leten þine hennen blod;/Hy weren seke ounder þe ribe,/þat hy ne mi3tte non legour libe,/Bote here heddre were itake” which translates literally to “I have let the hen’s blood; they were sick under the rib, that they might not live longer, unless their blood was taken.” If Chauntecler had listened carefully to Reynard’s dialogue, he would have realized the nonsensical nature of his claims and that Reynard was a crook. At first glance, it seems as though Reynard provided Chauntecler with a favor. In fact, he claims he did this blood-letting out of “charity.” However, the litotes here warps the meaning and interpretation of his motives. He is essentially saying: “If I did not kill them, they would have died.” This is obvious. Everything dies eventually. To say that if it were not for him killing these animals they would have died is ironic and pointless. But it sounds particularly clever when one hears it for the first time. It is a weird twist of humor where dying by Reynard’s hand was acceptable but not by the natural process of life. However, the fact that this interpretation is not what one first sees proves that the fox’s manipulation of diction allows him to get away with his behavior. He sounds polite and speaks from a physically lower level so as to appear less threatening. As White notes, he is “ingenious” in planning how to get what he wants from Chauntecler and later from Sigrim. Reynard wins.

Finally, Reynard's arguments are constructed logically. "Logos," or logic, is one of Aristotle's means of persuasion to persuade others. Reynard provides a seemingly logical argument as to why he should eat Chauntecler, even if he does not end up being allowed to do so. The reader is at first compelled to agree with the fox's logical argument and thus proves that logos was used. He executes a flawless completion of persuasion through Aristotle's guidelines, indicating how clever he really is to be able to both understand this philosophy and also use it correctly. He would have been seen as intelligent in the Middle Ages due to this execution, something that helps in showing just how clever a clergyman has to be to get away with their own selfish deeds.

### **The Fox and the Wolf**

This manipulation continues throughout the poem. After escaping Chauntecler, Reynard comes across a well or pit with buckets, which creates the next problem for him to solve. He climbs into the pit to try to find water and food and ends up getting stuck at the bottom. While Reynard is trying to figure out how to escape from the pit, a wolf wanders by.

<p>Ɔer com a wolf gon after Ɔan,  Out of Ɔe depe wode blive,  For he wes afingret swiƆe  NoƆing he ne founde in al Ɔe ni3te  Wermide his honger aquenche mi3tte.  He com to Ɔe putte, Ɔene vox iherde,  He him kneu wel bi his rerde,  For hit wes his nei3ebore,  And his gossip, of children bore.  Adoun bi Ɔe putte he sat.  Quod Ɔe wolf, 'Wat may ben Ɔat  Ɔat Ich in Ɔe putte ihere?  Hertou Cristine oƆer er mi fere?  Say me soƆ, ne gabbe Ɔou me nout,  Wo haveƆ Ɔe in Ɔe putte ibrou?' (ll. 108-122)</p>	<p>A wolf came quickly out of the deep woods, for he was very hungry. He had found nothing all night with which he might quench his hunger. He came to the pit and heard the fox, whom he knew well by his voice, for he was his neighbor and close friend since childhood. He sat down by the pit and said, "What may it be that I hear in there? Are you Christian or my companion? Tell me the truth, and don't lie; who has brought you into the pit?"</p>
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The wolf, who is known as Sigrim in this story—phonetically not far off from “Ysengrimus”—is an old friend of Reynard’s and recognizes him in the pit. He addresses Reynard with similar courtesy that Reynard used with Chauntecler, though here Sigrim is acting out of honesty where Reynard had been acting out of coercion and deception. This is an interesting observation after having analyzed *Ysengrimus* because the wolf in that story was a greedy and falsely pious figure. Here, the power switches from the role reversals between the fox and the wolf in *Ysengrimus* has changed the characters’ behaviors and mannerisms. We will see that Sigrim is now much more of an honest simpleton trying to genuinely do right in the eyes of God, even if his hunger makes him still greedy.

As in *Ysengrimus*, Aristotelian persuasion and rhetoric is prevalent in the Fox and the Wolf. At this point in history, two new translations of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* had been produced (McKeon 29). His philosophical theories’ popularity had increased since *Ysengrimus*’ publication and it is no surprise that Reynard’s character continues to employ these Aristotelian techniques of persuasion and logic in order to fool Sigrim into doing his bidding. This time the parallels between Reynard symbolizing a corrupt clergyman and his counterpart, Sigrim, being an innocent layman are more explicitly drawn out than with Reynard’s interaction with Chauntecler. Reynard cleverly takes advantage of Sigrim’s compromised state—he is hungry—to use logical reasoning to get Sigrim into the pit. The same way a gluttonous friar might cleverly deduce that a medieval man felt guilty about a sin and then take advantage of that guilt in order to weasel money out of him, so does Reynard manipulate and win over Sigrim.

Yamamoto’s claim about the fox being able to poke holes into societal institutions can be seen in this altercation. Reynard describes the pit as Paradise and entices Sigrim to enter, which



he can only do if he confesses his sins. Since there is not a priest with them, Sigrim begs Reynard to act as one for him. Reynard at first refuses but eventually Sigrim ends up convincing him. In fact, it is only when Sigrim refers to Reynard as “Master/Maister” that Reynard agrees to listen to his confessions and even encourages him to confess everything in order to be absolved. There is irony being used here in the fact that Paradise is now underground where Hell should be. Reynard, being a Satan-like figure, tricks the innocent bystander into thinking they are really entering Heaven when they are only going down into Hell. This calls to mind Bercovitch’s comments previously on the word play being used in the poem. The use of physical levels here, below ground and above ground, also ties back into the hierarchical levels of the poem and how, just as Reynard emasculated Chauntecler in order to get above his level, Sigrim has had to give Reynard authority over him in order to get what he wants. The fox once again starts at the bottom and has to use his cleverness in order to get to the top. The use of “Master/Maister” as a rhetorical device signifies the switch of levels is coming as it denotes the change in power in this dialogue. The role reversal seen with the submissive Chauntecler beating the dominant Reynard is seen here with the submissive Reynard besting the dominant Sigrim. Furthermore, Reynard tricks Sigrim into giving him this power and then abuses it in order to save himself. This element of the power switch further supports the image of a corrupt clergy, a theme both in this poem and in other medieval works of poetry. The fox, in this scenario, symbolizes corrupt institutions in an animal allegory and the Church was certainly one of the most corrupt of all. Given the emphasis on religious language in the poem, especially from Reynard, the poem castigates corrupt clergy and the church.

This dynamic between Sigrim and Reynard, the innocent layman versus the corrupt clergyman, are great representations of the classical or Socratic understanding of irony during the Middle Ages. We saw this as well in *Ysengrimus* when Reynard uses irony in order to fool the wolf into thinking he is on his side and trying to help him get skin. Here again the wolf is the one on the opposing end of the one practicing this irony, the fox. Looking at Reynard as a symbol of corrupt clergy, his use of irony in order to gain control of the situation implies that the clergy does the same thing—use the tools they have in order to fool those who may try to gain power over them. Their Socratic dialogue highlights this. Reynard says very little in comparison to Sigrim; he simply asks him questions, and it is the latter’s detailed answers and inquisitions that let the former pick the words he needs to use in order to set his trap. Such is the clever and tricky nature of the medieval fox.

Reynard continues to outsmart Sigrim with his irony and Aristotelian techniques. The former fools the latter again with the section on the wolf’s wife.

<p>‘Gossip’ quod þe wolf, ‘for3ef hit me,      Ich habbe ofte sehid quod bi þe.      Men seide þat þou on þine live      Misferdest mid mine wive:      Ich þe aperseivede one stounde,      And in bedde togedere ou founde.      Ich wes ofte ou ful ney,      And in bedde togedere ou sey.      Ich wende, also oþre doþ,      þat Ihc iseie were soþ,      And þerfore þou were me loþ. (ll. 209-219)</p>	<p>“Good friend,” the wolf continued, “forgive me. I have often said evil of you. Men said that you had sinned with my wife. I perceived you one time and found you in bed together. I was often quite near and saw you together in bed. I supposed, as others do, that what I saw was true, and therefore you were loathsome to me.”</p>
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Sigrim appears to be lulled into Reynard’s clever speech and trickery by claiming that while he saw both Reynard and his wife sleeping together, he must have been wrong for accusing them of impure activity. As with Chauntecler, Reynard has once again managed to make another

character doubt their own credibility, even with something that appears to be obvious. In true Socratic fashion, the fox did little but let the wolf talk and occasionally ask questions. By doing this, the former is able to gain power over the latter.

Once Sigrim has finished confessing, Reynard convinces him to jump into the other bucket and thus switch spots with him in the well. To conclude his manipulation, and to perhaps mock Sigrim for being a fool, Reynard says, “Ich am þerof glad and bliþe, þat þou art nomen in clene live. Þi soule-cnull Ich wille do ringe, And masse for þine soule singe./I am glad that you are taken in a pure state. I will ring the death knell and sing a mass for your soul.” By ringing the death knell and singing mass it means that Reynard has fully adopted the figure of a priest who is ushering a recently confessed, and therefore pure, layman into Paradise upon their impending death. By proxy, Reynard is killing Sigrim as he would have liked to have killed Chauntecler, only this time instead of eating hens he leaves Sigrim to die in the pit. Reynard’s escape from the well also metaphorically implies the success of the fox trapping the wolf compared to the failure of the former to kill the cock. Reynard had made reference to last rites with Chauntecler as well.

To drive home Reynard’s symbolic connection with the clergy, Sigrim is later found by friars who are described as “sley/sly,” an adjective often associated with foxes and used to imply deceit and cleverness. Sigrim is played twice by these cunning characters. Sigrim had first referred to Reynard also as “mi fere/my companion” which can also be translated as “my friar,” so since the start of this whole escapade the notion of Reynard as a clergyman was present. Sigrim, in a way, gives him the opportunity to play to that word and create this charade to save himself. The wolf also showcases the role reversal between the two poems, *Ysengrimus* and the *Fox and the Wolf*, here through diction: Reynard had referred to Ysengrimus with terms of

clerical respect in the previous poem and here Sigrim refers to Reynard in this way. The power dynamics have completely shifted.

Nicolai von Kreisler makes an interesting argument about Sigrim's position in the poem furthers the corrupt clergy analogy. "If the satire of the tale is leveled at the corrupt clergy," he writes, "the irony produced by the parallels and contrasts between Reneard and Sigrim show that the English writer meant it to be leveled with even greater vigor at the corrupt laymen who made clerical chicanery so possible" (von Kreisler 658). While this critique of the wolf's character as showcasing the fault of the innocent in the *Fox and the Wolf*, von Kreisler's commentary diminishes the problematic nature of the clergy taking advantage of this innocence that is being called out in the poem. Sigrim did provide Reynard the opportunity to manipulate him, but this provision also makes it possible for the symbolism of the corrupt clergy to pull through. Reynard is at fault for being a sly and clever priest, Sigrim only wanted food and to get to Paradise—very innocent and noble desires. An allegorical picture of the medieval clergy needing the medieval lay people who in turn feed into that corruption is created. When thinking about role reversal in the poem, the notion that Sigrim has now gone from being a greedy monk who is aware of the benefits of his position to an innocent bystander who acts out of desire for food and religious salvation strengthens the idea that the wolf character has changed from Ysengrimus to the *Fox and the Wolf*.

Around a century later than this manuscript's theorized circulation, Chaucer will write his own version of the Chauntecler and Reynard story in the 14th-century "The Nun's Priest's Tale." The story contains similar principles: the dominant fox tries to best the submissive cock and loses. The fact that *Ysengrimus*' and the *Fox and the Wolf*'s character dynamics—the switch in

authority or “underdog” story—remained popular not only in the one hundred or so year difference between *Ysengrimus*’ circulation and MS Digby 86’s circulation but until *The Canterbury Tales*’ creation in the 14th century shows how successful animal allegories were. Medieval people must have enjoyed the fox and wolf dynamic as much as we enjoy them today due to the wide circulation of these tales throughout the Middle Ages. They are effective in conveying whatever critiques of society the poets wish to express because of the safe distance in the characters’ compositions as animals while showcasing their behavior as human-like. We can enjoy Reynard taking down the greedy Ysengrimus while hoping for some support for the innocent Sigrim because we as humans have also experienced similar altercations with figures hierarchically above us. It is why role reversal in these two stories was successful—medieval and modern audiences often wish for corrupt and powerful institutions to be overthrown, for justice to be served (to use Bercovitch’s terms). By applying the scientific information from bestiaries to these animals, the predator/prey or dominant/submissive character dynamics between the fox and the wolf are able to convey this commentary.

However, role reversal in animal allegory is not uniquely used only for exposing clerical corruption. Other criticisms such as debates on gender can be brought out using this rhetorical tool, as we will see in the next chapter on the *Thrush and the Nightingale*.

### CHAPTER 3: ROLE REVERSAL AND GENDER DEBATE

In the previous two chapters, we have seen how two characters—the fox and the wolf—showcased how the role reversal of the dominant and submissive animals were able to critique clerical corruption within the Middle Ages. However, the narrative device of role reversal itself in animal poetry extended beyond just foxes and wolves and their relationship to the clergy. One example of this is the thirteenth-century, Middle English poem *the Thrush and the Nightingale* within MS Digby 86, the same manuscript containing the *Fox and the Wolf*. The poem is in the style of medieval debate poetry, specifically bird debate poetry. These debates used bird allegories, rhetoric, and role reversal in order to explore tensions in medieval human life, just as *Ysengrimus* and the *Fox and the Wolf* did. The *Thrush and the Nightingale* in particular focuses on elements of love and gender within the debate between two birds and the following role reversal provides a victory for the woman’s perspective. Essentially “the debate contains alternating speeches through which the thrush and the nightingale expound their beliefs,” as R. T. Lambdin writes in his summary of the work (2). Another summary of the elements of the poem can be found in Honegger’s *From Phoenix to Chauntecleer: Medieval English Animal Poetry*: “If, instead of the two birds, we had the abstractions ‘the Misogynist’ and ‘the Courtly lover’ contending with each other, the poem would neither lose nor gain very much—with the proviso that the ‘typological twist’ would be more difficult to motivate” (139). This analysis helps to connect the rhetorical devices used in this poem to the previous two works we have discussed. The characters may have changed—we are now dealing with birds—and the emphasis’s target has switched—we are now talking about gender and love—but the use of animal allegorical representation and a role reversal by the end of the poem is still the same. The

poem offers a critique of medieval gender stereotypes and opinions, specifically the varying opinions of women's autonomy in relation to love and religious authority. The nightingale's support of women is showcased logically and positively in contrast to the thrush's dislike of women. The nightingale uses relevant, Christian symbolism such as the Virgin Mary in her defense while the thrush uses historical, pagan symbolism in his. The former's combination of logical execution and use of current figures of note makes her argument the stronger of the two and that is why she wins. The resulting conclusion drawn from this win is that medieval women are in fact virtuous and honest in love, even if male authorities in the church or nobility implied otherwise. The role reversal from the submissive female figure, the nightingale, and the dominant male figure, the thrush, continues this trend of power dynamics within animal allegory in order to provide a specific commentary on medieval social life—in this case, medieval gender roles and a critique of the gender hierarchy in the Middle Ages.

### **The Gender Problem**

In the 1200s, men held dominant power in most aspects of medieval society. Women were usually allocated to a domestic sphere while men occupied more powerful positions. Barbara A. Hanawalt writes, "A woman's reputation might hinge on her ability to remain in a particular, acceptable space. The space might be a house, village, or city quarter depending on her economic activity and her social class" (19). The fact the occupations listed in this quotation for women are all related to her physical location as opposed to her capabilities—Hanawalt refers to domestic spheres and not occupational titles, which a man might be associated with—showcases the realms in which women had authority. This separation of authorities between the sexes in the Middle Ages was an integral part of society and determined educational

opportunities as well as the opportunity for upward mobility. Men having power and women having less also allowed repressive behavior and opinion to abound in this time period. As we will see in the poem, the thrush's opinions about women are that they are evil and selfish creatures and out for themselves. Medieval gender dynamics explains who the dominant and submissive figures should be in the poem. The thrush, the male, seemingly holds the power while the nightingale, the female, is theoretically meant to be subservient to his position and arguments. The fact that this poem is in the style of a debate helps to showcase this unequal display of power between sexes due to the structure of debating. A debate needs two parties to argue opposing sides and one of those parties must win. In this poem, we have a female bird and a male bird debating opposing opinions on gender. The characters being gendered adds an exciting dynamic to the poem because now the birds have a personal stake in their arguments—they will want to defend their gender's reputations. It makes for an entertaining read and therefore allows for the underlying arguments to be more approachable and detectable. Debate structure also helps apply rhetoric to a poem. Solopova and Lee write that, "Debate as a rhetorical exercise, analytical tool, and method of discovering truth, was used in various institutional contexts," and so applying it to this bird debate aids the nightingale in defending women and discredits the thrush in attacking women since his rhetoric is less logical and his tone is more aggressive, therefore his argument is less persuasive (143).

### **On Birds in the Middle Ages**

The first bird introduced in the poem is the nightingale, the female bird. "The nightingale is on bi nome/That wol shilden hem from shome;/Of skathe hoe wole hem skere." The nightingale is the bird debater who favors women and who wants to "shilden hem from shome"



(14). She holds a protecting and supportive standpoint on women—she wants to protect their reputations from shame and damage. This desire to protect women is directly tied into the medieval biological and cultural understanding of a nightingale. White’s bestiary translation includes the following definition of a nightingale,

She is an ever-watchful guardian, too, for she warms her eggs with a certain hollow of the body and with her breast. She tempers the sleepless labour of her long night’s work by the sweetness of her song, and hence it is seen that the summit of her ambition is to cherish her young and to warm the eggs, to the best of her ability, not less by her sweet tones than by the heat of her body.” (139–40)

This description fosters the image of the nightingale as a maternal figure, a character meant to protect and defend the innocent. She does this in the poem and, as we will see, she does it well. As in White’s translation, the nightingale in the poem uses her song (or rather her diction) in order to defend the innocence of women. It is “the sweetness of her song” that will lead to her winning against the thrush, meaning it is her use of rhetoric (specifically word choice) that will triumph over the thrush’s lack of tact and correct usage of a logical debate.

The nightingale as a symbol was popular in both classical and medieval poetry. In the four most popular bird debate poems, the nightingale is always one of the two debaters (Conlee, xxii). John W. Conlee provides some poetical history on the nightingale in *Middle English Debate Poetry*. He writes that “frequently the nightingale was thought of as the herald of spring” and “even more frequently she was considered to be the inspirer of romantic love or sexual desire” (Conlee, xxiii). This description of the nightingale’s symbolism in classical poetry expands upon the bestiary definition above. She is not only a guardian of the innocent, but also a symbol for love. Putting those two concepts together, the nightingale culturally and poetically

represents this singer and protector of virtue and true love—anything or anyone she defends would then automatically be associated with these ideas.

The thrush, on the other hand, had a more negative symbolism in medieval culture. As Conlee writes, “The thrush was often portrayed as a cantankerous and complaining bird, and the author of the *Thrush and the Nightingale* appears to be drawing upon this reputation” (Conlee, xxiv). This understanding of the animal explains why he is the character in the debate with the more aggressive and malicious opinions on women. He would have been seen as an annoying and argumentative character by the medieval audience and therefore choosing the thrush emphasizes his character’s nature. Like Ysengrimus’ attributes of greed and maliciousness, the dominant character in this poem is associated with negative imagery as opposed to positive imagery. This association sets up the dominant figure for the role reversal, as we have seen with the wolf in the past two poems. Having an audience expecting to not like the thrush’s “cantankerous” ways creates an expectation for readers to disagree with his opinions—even if they would have been popular ones such as male authority over female authority.

### **The Debate**

The thrush’s aggressive nature can be seen the moment he enters the poem. His introduction is immediately followed by his arguments:

<p>The threstelcok hem kepeth ay;  He seith bi nighte and eke bi day  That hy beth fendes ifere,  For hy biswiketh euchan man</p> <p>That mest bileueth hem ouppon;  They hy ben milde of chere,  Hoe beth fikele and fals to fonde,  Hoe wercheth wo in euchan londe---  Hit were betere that hy nere! (ll. 16-24)</p>	<p>The male cock constantly attacked them;  He said by night and also by day  They are all demons,  Because they deceive every man</p> <p>Who puts most faith in them;  Although they are gentle in manner,  They are fickle and false when tried,  They cause misery in every country---  It would be better if they didn’t exist! (ll.</p>
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16-24)
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It should be noted here that the thrush is identified as male in Middle English with the word “He.” This is a significant plot detail given to us because having a male argue against women creates a different image than a woman arguing against women. It establishes the gender dynamic and focus of the poem. The threstelcok—or thrush in Modern English—is arguing against women, as seen in the phrase “hem kepeth ay” (16). The narrator claims here that the thrush said “bi nighte and eke bi day/that hy beth fended ifere” (17-18), which roughly translates to “by night and also by day/That they are all demons.” The reasoning behind the thrush’s argument here is this, “For hy biswiketh euchan man/That mest bileueth hem ouppon;” (19-20) which roughly translates to “For they bewich every man/That puts most faith in them.” The language used by the thrush in these lines is religious. Words like “fendes” and “biswiketh” are supernatural words that can be associated with Christianity along with the words “demons” “bewich.” The language creates an image of the thrush similar to that of a medieval, Christian man accusing a woman of witchcraft, an image that shows just how lowly the thrush thinks of them—something reinforced by his vocative phrase, “Hit were betere that hy nere!” (24) This brings to the audience’s attention that the thrush—and possibly the nightingale—are religious creatures. This will become important later when interpreting the ending of this poem, which is dominated by the image of the Virgin Mary. In fact some critics argue that the cult of the Virgin Mary is actually the core of the whole poem (Kikuchi 200).

The nightingale offers her rebuttal in defense of women.

<p>‘Lo, it is shome to blame leuedy,  For hy beth hende of corteisy;  Ich rede that thou lete.  Ne wes neure bruche so strong  Ibroke with righte ne with wrong  That wimon ne mighte bete.</p> <p>Hy gladieth hem that beth wrowe,  Bothe the heye and the lowe,  Mid gome hy cunne hem grete;  This world nere nout yif wimon nere,</p> <p>Imaked hoe wes to mones fere;  Nis nothing also swete.’ (ll. 25-36)</p>	<p>‘It’s shameful to criticize ladies,  Since they are well-bred and courteous;  I advise you to leave off.  There was never so great a breach  Caused rightly or wrongly  That a woman could not heal.</p> <p>They cheer up those who are angry,  Both the high and the low,  They can greet them pleasantly;  This world would be nothing without woman,</p> <p>She was created as man’s companion;  There is nothing so sweet.’ (ll. 25-36)</p>
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The nightingale tells the thrush here that “it is shome” (25) to speak of ladies with the distaste that the thrush just described them with. The word “shome” connotes a tone of condescension. This creates an image of the nightingale behaving like a scolding mother who is telling her child that he should be ashamed of what he just said. Her reasoning for why he should be so embarrassed or ashamed is because she believes women “beth hende of corteisy” (26). She says here that women “are bred of courtesy” and therefore she “rede that thou lete” (27). The vocabulary of these three lines—“shome,” “corteisy,” and “rede” is polite in the sense that these words all connote a sense of respect. They are words that call to mind courtly or noble behavior due to their polite undertones. It is a stark contrast to the language that the thrush used to describe women, which were all words associated with religion, the supernatural, and evil. The thrush is a more voracious and intense character while the nightingale is a more demure and respectful character—stereotypical attributes of men and women.

The nightingale continues defending women. She tells the thrush that “Ne wes neure bruche so strong/Ibroke with righte ne with wrong/That wimon ne mighte bete” (28-30). The

nightingale is claiming that women can fix any problem, regardless of whether it was a just or unjust problem. She goes on to explain just how women are able to do this.

<p>Hy gladieth hem that beth wrowe,          Bothe the heye and the lowe,          Mid gome hy cunne hem grete;          This world nere nout yif wimon nere,            Imaked hoe wes to mones fere;          Nis nothing also swete.’ (ll. 31-36)</p>	<p>They cheer up those who are angry,          Both the high and the low,          They can greet them pleasantly;          This world would be nothing without woman,            She was created as man’s companion;          There is nothing so sweet.’ (ll. 31-36)</p>
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There is a reference here to Genesis in line 35, “Imaked hoe wes to mones fere” as the nightingale is saying “They were made to be man’s friend”—alluding to God making Eve as Adam’s companion in the story of Genesis. This rhetorical choice, using a biblical reference as evidence to support her pro-women stance in this debate, is a strong rebuttal to the religious and supernatural imagery that the thrush used in his anti-women speech. It is strong because it is a rebuttal that uses the same theme—religion—as the argument the nightingale is trying to refute. Considering these debaters are also birds discussing human behavior, having them display this comprehension of human religious text and figures gives the thrush and the nightingale anthropomorphic attributes. The birds no longer seem like birds because they are debating important human problems, with important human evidence, the Bible. More importantly, these examples remind readers of the biological necessity of women in reproduction and population. Women are essential as we will see later with the example of the Virgin Mary as representative of an instance when a man was a non-essential part of reproduction—Mary conceived immaculately.

The debate continues with the thrush’s response to this rebuttal. His opinions on women have not been swayed and he uses the next 12 lines in order to further argue his point. He claims

that from personal experience he can vouch for his negative opinions of women: “Hy beth feire and bright on hewe,/Here thout is fals and ountrewe,/Ful yare Ich haue hem fonde” (40-42).

When reading these lines it is good to remember that this is a thrush speaking—not a human man. He says “ful yare Ich haue hem fonde” but, as a bird, how could he have the same knowledge of human women the way a human man would? Readers have to take a step back and remember the anthropomorphic nature of the thrush and the nightingale that the poem has presented to us and how this affects the way we see these animals. It detracts from the validity of his arguments due to his status as a bird. As a bird, he cannot know human women with the same intimacy as a human man. The same way the fox was able to best the wolf with his use of logic and because the wolf was easily fooled, so this moment marks the emergence of the role reversal between the dominant character and the submissive character. The thrush begins to show weaker debate abilities, both in language and evidence, than the nightingale and so the hierarchical levels begin to shift.

The thrush continues his rant against women in the lines, “Alisaundre the king meneth of hem;/In the world nes non so crafti mon,/Ne non so riche of londe.” (43-45) The thrush is saying here that King Alexander, who he claims to be the cleverest man in the world with the most land, hated women. The point of noting King Alexander is human is important because, again, the thrush is a bird. He is not a human arguing about human issues; he is a bird claiming to have personal experience with human issues—a claim difficult to believe as human readers. But to reference this human, pagan, male king—a very masculine and aggressive figure in history—as siding with him on issues of womanhood, it is a rhetorical device that tries to sway the reader into siding with the thrush. With these connotations, it relates the behavior of the thrush to this

figure because the thrush is also aggressive, masculine, and trying to assert authority. It makes his argument more believable at face value—it brushes aside the incredibility that comes from the thrush saying he has “long experience” with women and that is how he knows they are evil.

The nightingale “wes wroth” (49) by the thrush’s response, according to the narrator. She replies to him with the following lines,

<p>‘Fowel, me thinketh thou art me loth, Sweche tales for to showe. Among a thousent leuedies itolde Ther nis non wickede iholde Ther hy sitteth on rowe.</p> <p>Hy beth of herte meke and milde, Himself hy cunne from shome shield Withinne boures wowe, And swettoust thing in armes to wre, The mon that holdeth hem in gle, Fowel, wi ne art thou hit icnowe?’ (ll. 50-60)</p>	<p>‘Bird, it seems to me that you are hateful To tell such stories. Among a thousand ladies all told, Not one has a reputation for wickedness Where they sit in a row.</p> <p>They are meek and mild of heart They can protect themselves from dishonour Within the chamber walls, And are most delightful to embrace For the man who gladly holds them; Why don’t you admit it, bird?’ (ll. 50-60)</p>
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She addresses the thrush as ‘Fowel’ twice in this segment. Audibly, the word sounds like the other English word “foul.” It brings to mind disgust, something bad or rotten. The fact that the nightingale is using that word vocatively and under the influence of anger it makes the connotation between “fowel” and “foul” malicious and cutting. It also is far more impersonal than giving the thrush a name or her saying “Thrush.” It alienates her further from him out of her anger at his arguments and opinions on women.

### **The Role Reversal**

This vocal recognition of “fowel” also is a reminder from the nightingale that the thrush is in fact a thrush and not a man. He has made claims about understanding human women from first-hand experience, which is impossible due to his status as a bird and not a human being. He

holds himself on a human level and, through his language mentioned previously, speaks with a very human-like nature. This also shows that the nightingale is aware of her bird status as she never references the women in this poem with the first person plural pronoun of “we.” She always refers to the women as the third person singular pronoun of “they.” She separates herself from the human women and, by proxy, recognizes her status as a non-human—i.e., a nightingale.

The nightingale’s recognition of her bird status is important because it shows that the nightingale is a more logical character. She understands her situation as a bird and calls out the hubristic nature of the thrush for speaking as though he is human. The exclamation of “fowel” reads almost as though she is trying to bring the thrush back into the reality of his bird-ness. The nightingale, ironically, appears more human in this way because she argues with logic and clarity yet still maintains awareness of her status as a bird. This is, again, another marker of those roles reversing. The submissive character is a better debater, employing that same Aristotelian method of persuasion as the *Fox and the Wolf* and *Ysengrimus* by using logic and rhetoric, while the dominant character is losing power due to his ineptitude. The thrush goes on to say “I take witesse of Adam,/That wes oure furst man,/That fond hem wycke and ille” (70-72). He uses the word “oure” which implies that he is grouping himself and the nightingale into the category of human because he is referencing Adam as “our first man” and not “the first man.” The recognition of the thrush’s incorrect display of a human identity questions the validity of his arguments due to his false referral to himself as a man and not a bird.

The nightingale continues creating a positive image of women by recounting the observations she has of them.

Ich habbe leue to ben here, In orchard and in erbere	I have leave to be here, In orchard and in arbour,
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<p>Mine songes for to singe.</p> <p>Herdi neuere bi no leudi Bote hendinese and curteysi, And ioye hy gunnen me bringe.’</p> <p>‘Of muchele murthe hy telleth me, Fere, also I telle the, Hy liueieth in longinge.’ ‘Fowel, thou sitest on hasel bou, Thou lastest hem, thou hauest wou, Thi word shal wide springe” (ll. 97-108).</p>	<p>To sing my songs.</p> <p>I have never heard of any lady Anything other than good breeding and courtesy, And they have given me delight.’</p> <p>‘They tell me of much pleasure, My friend, as I tell you, They live in desire.’ ‘Bird, you sit on a hazel branch, You blame them, you are in the wrong, What you say will spread widely” (ll. 97-108).</p>
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She expresses in these lines how “hy” have told “me” about their longings and desires and that is why she can vouch for their good nature. They told the nightingale, who was “In orchard and in erbere/Mine songes for to singe” and therefore was in their presence out of joy and out of her doing what she as a nightingale naturally does—sing. This is a real image. Many people do talk to the birds and the other forest fauna while they are out in an orchard, and it adds weight to the nightingale’s argument and strengthens the paradoxical argument that the nightingale is the more “realistic” and even more “human” of the two birds. She is logical, provides plausible evidence, and never uses any crude or vulgar language in retaliation to the thrush’s arrogant and vulgar opinions of women—again proving her power over the illogical thrush.

### **The Power of the Virgin Mary**

At the very end of the poem, the nightingale provides her most powerful evidence in favor of women’s validity, the Virgin Mary. This is a complete change from her usual evidence of actual conversations or observations with women in her orchards; she now adopts the same

debate approach as the thrush—to use famous historical figures that would have resonated with medieval readers.

<p>Thoru warm wel al this world iwend, Of a maide meke and milde; Of hire sprong that holi bern That boren wes in Bedlhem, And temeth al that is wilde.</p>	<p>Through the one who changed all this world, A maiden, meek and milde; From her came the that holy child Who was born in Bethlehem, And tames all that is wild.</p>
<p>Hoe ne weste of sunne ne of shame, Marie wes ire righte name, Crist hire ishilde! (ll. 170-177).</p>	<p>She knew nothing of sin or shame, Mary was her true name, May Christ protect her! (ll. 170-177).</p>

We arrive now at the previously referenced Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, a maiden “ne weste of sunne ne of shame” (175). She is an incredibly powerful woman who should not be insulted—something the nightingale is implying the thrush has been doing by saying that all women are bad. Bakker discusses the nightingale’s brilliant usage of Mary as evidence in his thesis *Nightingales Never Lose: Forced Closure and Irresolution in Some Middle English Debate Poems*:

Her offering of the Virgin Mary as an example of a good woman represents an argument at the fourth level of legitimation. This involves the reference to the society’s over-arching symbols, to argue against which is to invite ostracism and rejection. It would have been quite impossible to argue that the Virgin was not good (“She was pregnant before she married; her Son’s comments to and about her are hardly complimentary and loving” etc), and it would have been difficult to ask for other examples of good women: such a demand might in itself imply that the Virgin was not good enough (“Oh, so the blessed Virgin is not good enough for you? You want more?”) The thrush, wise and expedient, shuts up and gets out as quickly as he can” (28–29).

The reason the Virgin Mary is so important to this poem and to its positive representation of women is because Mary is the first and only piece of evidence provided by the nightingale that the thrush cedes to, essentially forfeiting his win. As Bakker writes above, the thrush surrenders and flies away due to this reference.

<p>‘Nightingale, I was woed,  Other I couthe to luitel goed  With the for to striue.  I sugre that Icham overcome  Thoru hire that bar that holi sone  That soffrede woundes fiue.  Hi swerie bi his holi name,  Ne shal I neuere sugren shame  Bi maidnes ne bi wue.  Hout of this londe willi te,  Ne rechi neuere weder I fle,  Awai Ich wille driue! (ll. 181-192)</p>	<p>‘Nightingale, I was mad,  Or too ignorant,  To argue with you.  I say that I am overcome  Through the woman who bore that holy son  Who suffered five wounds.   I swear by his holy name  That I will never slander  Unmarried women or wives.  I will leave this country,  And I don’t care where I fly to,  I’m getting out of here!’ (ll. 181-192)</p>
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The thrush says here that he “was woed” (181) and that he is “overcome/Thoru hire that bar that holi sone/That soffrede woundes fiue” (184-186). The thrush claims that even he will respect the power and name of Mary and therefore cannot slander her. This forfeits his argument that all women are bad because she is evidently one who is purer than most, according to the nightingale’s description of her. He recognizes his loss and therefore says “Hout of this londe willi te;/Ne rechi neuere weder I fle,/Awai Ich wille drive” (189-192). Like the bird he actually is and not the human he has been masquerading as during this debate, he says he will leave the country and he does not care where he “fle.” He has taken ownership of his loss and is acting upon it here, something that might cause the reader to question what exactly just happened in this quick ending to the poem.

The thrush ceding to the nightingale is the evidence that the role reversal from his dominant position to the nightingale’s submissive position has occurred. He has forfeited the debate, literally giving up his status and chance of winning by agreeing with her that the Virgin Mary is valid evidence of women being good natured.

The Virgin Mary would have been a figure that was worshiped and held with high regard, a kind of moral goal or role model for women—especially in Medieval Europe. At the time of this poem’s circulation, the Virgin Mary had gained immense popularity throughout England due to the reigns of King Henry III and his son, King Edward I. Charles Farris offers this interpretation of the history of Mary’s power in medieval Europe:

Edward’s itinerary, oblations and almsgiving all suggest Edward’s commitment to the Virgin Mary and that it intensified in the second half of his reign, particularly the second half of the 1290s. The origins of this commitment can clearly be attributed to Henry III’s example and encouragement. However, explaining the intensification is more problematic. It may be that Edward sought in the Blessed Virgin Mary to fill a void left by the loss of Eleanor of Castile in 1290 and Eleanor of Provence in 1291. (139)

According to Farris, Mary’s iconography seems to have been used by Edward in order to try to fill a void missing from the deaths of both Eleanor of Castile and Eleanor of Provence, two powerful noble women in Europe at the time. By replacing them with Mary, that missing image of a lady of the people was filled and, by proxy, the Virgin Mary as a pure and just figure gained more notoriety throughout the Catholic segments of medieval Europe. The nightingale therefore employed incredible cleverness by using Mary as evidence in defense of women. She calls forth a current, popular, Christian figure unlike the historical, perhaps well-known, pagan figures such as Alexander the Great that the thrush uses. This makes her evidence more persuasive and, in turn, has greater sway over audience members than the thrush’s. Beyond the infallibility of Mary’s purity, the thrush also loses his ability to win over the nightingale due to her clever evidence choice given the historical context surrounding the Virgin Mary in the 1200s. To call her forth would create a kind of validity in the nightingale’s character and argument for medieval people because the nightingale is using the ideal icon for woman’s purity and morality—Mary. This validity is seen in the fact that thrush retreats and accepts that he was wrong about his

arguments because the Virgin Mary is pious—meaning that the nightingale is indeed correct and the image of medieval women that she has painted for us as readers would be, to the thrush, a now correct image.

In the same way that the wolf in *Ysengrimus* was doubly powerful due to a) being a wolf, a dominant predator and b) being a monk, a member of the powerful medieval church, the nightingale has gained two levels of power through her use of the Virgin Mary as evidence for women's innocence. The male character has given power to the female character who has provided a strong woman in the church in her defense of women. The thrush's secession from the argument proves that the Virgin Mary is in fact powerful and the nightingale, though a bird, is a female as well. She is now powerful in both her gender and in her status as the winner of the debate.

It is a curious decision to have her come out on top compared to the male character because there was such a strong division between men and women's power in the Middle Ages—particularly in the church. To have a vernacular poem showcase a strong, female figure winning would have gone against the general consensus of women's attributes and argumentative abilities. The fact that the poem was written in the vernacular at the time also means that some wealthy women would have possibly been able to read it—the same applies to wealthy men. The vernacular language would have theoretically increased the audience size than a poem such as *Ysengrimus* which was written in Latin, a language of the nobility or academia. Women were able to have a relatively decent education by the twelfth century, as Shirley Kersey documents in “Medieval Education of Girls and Women.” She writes, “Twelfth and thirteenth century village coeducational schools existed to teach reading and writing. It was common practice for girls to

be admitted to elementary schools but not grammar schools, and to be taught the vernacular, not Latin” (190). Whether women who were not in the nobility would have read this text is another discussion, but the fact stands that this text would have at least, linguistically speaking, been accessible to a wider audience by the language choice given Kersey’s explanation of the educational system available to both women and men when this poem was circulating. Given the new prominence of the Virgin Mary at the time due to King Edward I, this debate could have been painting a kinder light on women in order to follow with the changing religious iconography. Women were not gaining more power in the church, but to have a vernacular poem use the Virgin Mary as a powerful piece of evidence in favor of women’s purity would certainly have shown potential female readers they held worth in medieval society, even if only in a religious context.

Similar to how Ysengrimus went to Reynard for advice in *Ysengrimus* and how Sigrim confessed to Reynard in the *Fox and the Wolf*, the debate within the *Thrush and the Nightingale* follows the same trajectory of a verbal and rhetorical submission by the dominant animal to the weaker one. The side effect of this role reversal, as has been seen in the last two chapters, is that the argument or implication that is being made by the supposed weaker animal is victorious both in the story and in the eyes of the reader. The only difference this time is that the emphasis drawn from this power switch is on gender discrepancies and not clerical corruption. The power of language between the two birds, how the nightingale is polite and virtuous with her remarks while the thrush is short and harsh, suggests how medieval people viewed gender roles and gender stereotyped behavior. To be feminine was to be kind and gracious, according to the nightingale. To be feminine was to be malicious and conniving, according to the thrush. The

nightingale behaves in this kind and gracious way in her debate while the thrush behaves with malice as he connives how he will win the argument. The nightingale wins through her perfect execution of debate style, her understanding of constructing a succinct and logical argument in response to a violent and intense one, allowing her to win. She provides an unbeatable example of ideal womanhood to the thrush, the Virgin Mary. The thrush focuses his argument into an inaccurate first-person narrative and applies pagan historical examples, which is what led him to lose. He could not match such a perfect example such as the Virgin Mary and his lack of emotional regulation already made his debate seem weak. Nobody likes an emotionally turbulent argument. People like arguments that are easy to follow, logical, and with an occasional addition of sly cleverness (i.e., the nightingale's clever use of 'Fowel'). In this way, the nightingale is much like Reynard in her use of intellect and logic in order to convince the thrush that her opinions are correct and should be followed or listened to.

The *Thrush and the Nightingale* employs the same role reversal seen in the previous two poems; however it emphasizes a unique point. Clerical corruption is no longer the message being evoked from the role reversal due to the two birds' debate focusing on opinions on female attributes. The nightingale's power switch to a dominant position does not come from her species being more powerful than the thrush's. It comes from her gender being the inferior gender during the Middle Ages. The social issues that the allegories addressed have changed, but what remains the same is the method in which this poem allows those allegories to come across. There is still role reversal, still instances of the submissive character using rhetoric to their advantage. There is even religious imagery employed here; it was seen between the fox and the wolf and now too

between the thrush and the nightingale. But now it is women who are given the platform for defense, women who get to take advantage of the power shift in animal poetry—not men.



## CONCLUSION: ANIMAL ROLES TODAY

These three poems, *Ysengrimus*, the *Fox and the Wolf*, and the *Thrush and the Nightingale* all used rhetoric in order to give the submissive character the chance to overtake the dominant character. The stronger predator became the weaker prey and the “stronger” figure was outsmarted by the “weaker” figure. Regardless of the emphasis of the argument being symbolized—whether it was a critique of clerical power or a critique of gender constructs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—the use of role reversal alongside brilliant usage of medieval rhetoric was able to connect the audience to the supposed submissive character in order to showcase that the character is, in fact, the dominant figure. These animal allegories gave a voice to individuals in the Middle Ages who may have felt marginalized, taken advantage of, or unheard in society at the time. Because the *Fox and the Wolf* and the *Thrush and the Nightingale* were written in vernacular Middle English, that meant that the theoretical audience who could read the texts was expanded compared to the Latin used in *Ysengrimus* which may not have been accessible to people outside the nobility or the clergy.

One thing these poems demonstrate very well is that, regardless of whether you are a reader in 1200 or 2000, everybody likes an underdog. Everyone wants to see that big, obnoxious, institutionalized figure being brought down by the clever, sly, everyday man or woman. These animal allegories would not have circulated as widely or created such lasting fabliaux as *Reynard the Fox* if that were not the case. Animal allegory survives in children’s tales today, Aesop is still widely read in hopes of teaching good morals to young children. Rarely these days, however, is there a novel or poem using animal symbolism as the main trope. George Orwell’s 1945 *Animal Farm* is perhaps the most popular recent use of animal allegory in a work of fiction intended for

an adult audience. That story also features role reversal, the pigs gaining power over the other animals which should theoretically be able to overtake them, and showcases a greater commentary on society—a critique of Stalinist Russia. Orwell tried to express the flaws in that system and by writing about it with animal symbolism he was able to separate humanity from the corrupted society just enough that the corruption is seen in the world of *Animal Farm*. By seeing those things in these animal figures and these role reversals, his opinion could come out. That is exactly what medieval poets were able to do with *Ysengrimus*, the *Fox and the Wolf*, and the *Thrush and the Nightingale*—cleverly use popular connotations of animals and show them engaging in human conflicts that involve a change in power, all in order to evoke a specific response to or interpretation of the state of the world at the time.

The fact that we as readers can notice human behaviors in these animals and then understand the greater critiques of society that they are showcasing proves that figures like Reynard exist, just not in fox form. To have elements of your life presented to you, to be made aware of how something or someone is wronging you, and to still follow along with that figure's games is truly a feat of perfect persuasion and slyness. We become like Ysengrimus, listening to what he has to say and following along—all the while knowing that it is we who are being called out. We become like the thrush, angry and trying to prove a point while being taken down by the cleverness of the nightingale. There is still clerical corruption and debates on gender happening today several hundred years after the circulation of these texts. Perhaps if we still had these animal allegories in greater circulation, if we could still see these role reversals happening in poetry today, then we could recognize and change those aspects of human behavior. Or perhaps

if we still had these poems we could at least laugh at our world a little more, enjoying the pranks of the fox figures in our modern society and siding with the debates of the nightingales.

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