Henryson's Figurative Technique in *The Cock and the Jasp*

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The Cock and the Jasp,[1] Henryson's fable about a cock who finds a precious jewel on a dunghill only to discard it in favour of food, is one of the best known fables in his collection, yet it is also one in which his figurative methods have been consistently misunderstood. Most critics who have discussed the fable have felt that the cock is quite right in rejecting a precious jewel for which he has no use and have been surprised to discover in the *moralitas* that he is explicitly condemned for his folly. To account for the apparent reversal of their expectations they have usually adopted one of two positions: either they have concluded that the *moralitas* is a pious afterthought which has a purely arbitrary connexion with the preceding narrative[2] or else they have argued that the shock of the unexpected interpretation is intentional and an essential part of the meaning of the fable.[3] Both of these positions, however, are untenable since they are based on two quite erroneous assumptions, the first of which is that in the fable we are somehow dealing with a real barnyard fowl on a real dunghill and the second, that Henryson's poetic technique in the narrative causes us to sympathize with the cock's point of view.

Some years ago Denton Fox pointed out that the solution to the problem of the apparent discrepancy between tale and moral in *The Cock and the Jasp* 'lies in the fact that Henryson is working on several levels of meaning'.[4] He then went on to explain that in the narrative there are hints which suggest that the cock is to be viewed critically and that he 'symbolizes the man who has abandoned his higher

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[1]All references to the fable are to the version which appears in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, edited by Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981).

[2]See, for instance, R. Bauman, 'The Folk Tale and Oral Tradition in the Fables of Robert Henryson', *Fabula*, 6 (1963), 117; 'Allegorical', *Times Literary Supplement* (10 August 1967), p. 726; D. Murtaugh, 'Henryson's Animals', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 14 (1972), 408, note 3.

[3]See E. Watson, 'Allegorical', *Times Literary Supplement* (31 August 1967), p. 780; H. Roerecke, *The Integrity and Symmetry of Robert Henryson's 'Moral Fables'* (Ph.D dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 75; M. M. Carens, *A Prolegomenon for the Study of Robert Henryson* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1974), pp. 157–58; I. Jamieson, 'The Beast Tale in Middle Scots: Some Thoughts on the History of a Genre', *Parergon*, 2 (1972), 28–30; G. Clark, 'Henryson and Aesop: The Fable Transformed', *English Literary History*, 43 (1976), 8; D. Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden, 1979), pp. 122–23; E. Newlyn, 'Robert Henryson and the Popular Fable Tradition in the Middle Ages', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14 (1980–81), 11; S. Khinoy, 'Tale — Moral Relationships in Henryson's Moral Fables', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 17 (1982), 102; G. Kratzmann, 'Henryson's *Fables*: the subtell dyte of poetry', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 20 (1985), 57–62.

[4]Denton Fox, 'Henryson's Fables', *English Literary History*, 29 (1962), 343.

reason and consequently his superior place in the chain of being in favor of animal cunning and selfish common sense'.[5] Fox is correct, I believe, in emphasizing the figurative, rather than the literal, significance of the cock in the narrative, but the only model he offers for understanding the relationship between the literal and figurative levels of meaning in Henryson's fable is that in which one 'thing', in addition to having a significance of its own, also functions as a 'sign' of another 'thing'.[6] In the discussion of the fable which follows, therefore, I will attempt to redress what I see to be the failures of Fox and other critics by re-examining and redefining Henryson's figurative methods.

The immediate source for *The Cock and the Jasp* appears to have been Walter the Englishman's 'De Gallo et Jaspide'.[7] Walter's fable is extremely brief and consists of an eight-line narrative detailing the cock's discovery of the jasp and his reasons for discarding it, plus a two-line *moralitas* in which the cock is said to illustrate 'foolishness' and the jasp to represent 'the beautiful gifts of wisdom':

> Dum rigido fodit ore fimum, dum quaeritat escam,
> Dum stupet inventa jaspide Gallus, ait:
> Res vili pretiosa loco natique decoris
> Hac in sorde jaces, nil mihi messis habes.
> Si tibi nunc esset qui debuit esse repertor,
> Quem limus sepelit, viveret arte nitor.
> Nec tibi convenio, nec tu mihi; nec tibi prosum,
> Nec mihi tu prodes: plus amo cara minus.
>
> Tu Gallo stolidum, tu Jaspide dona sophiae
> Pulchra notes; stolido nil sapit ista seges.[8]

In his narrative Walter makes no attempt to characterize the cock beyond giving him the human attribute of speech. Nor does he prepare the audience for the figurative

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[5]Fox, 'Henryson's Fables', p. 344.

[6]The terminology I am employing here derives from St Augustine and is explained by J. Chydenius in 'The Theory of Medieval Symbolism', *Societas Scientiarum Fennica: Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum*, 27, 2 (Helsingfors, 1960), 5–8. Fox does not use the same terminology, but in his commentary on Henryson's figurative technique in *The Fables* states: 'Henryson's animals, while remaining animals, signify men, while we are continually reminded that men encompass or fulfil (but sometimes are no better than) animals' ('Henryson's Fables', p. 341) and 'Henryson creates a whole visible world, and the characters and incidents of this world are solid and substantial in themselves, as well as being figures which "show forth the wisdom of the invisible things of God"' ('Henryson's Fables', pp. 347–48).

[7]All references are to *Recueil général des Isopets*, edited by J. Bastin, 2 vols (Paris, 1929–30), II (1930), 8.

[8]'The cock, while digging in the dung with his beak, while looking for food, while being astonished after finding a jasper stone, said: "precious object of innate beauty, in a worthless spot, embedded here in the dirt, you have no value for me. If you had been found now by the person who ought to have found you, your glitter, which the muck conceals, would be brought to life by artifice. I am not fitting to you, nor you to me; I am no use to you, nor you to me; I prefer things of less worth." By the cock you should understand foolishness and by the jasp the beautiful gifts of wisdom; such a crop has no appeal for a fool.'

equation of the cock with 'wisdom' or offer any indication that the cock is acting other than sensibly in casting aside a precious jewel for which he has no use. It is only in retrospect and after the jasp has been figuratively equated with 'wisdom' that the cock's action can be seen to be foolish. The narrative in 'De Gallo et Jaspide', therefore, does not have a simple exemplary function but rather has a meaning quite independent of, and even contrary to, the *moralitas*. This situation has been brought about by the fact that Walter is employing more than one figurative mode. While the cock is a metaphoric representative of the human world and functions as a 'sign' only, the jasp functions as both a 'thing' and a 'sign' and is literally a precious jewel in the narrative, and figuratively 'wisdom' in the *moralitas*.

In *The Cock and the Jasp* Henryson has considerably expanded Walter's narrative as well as his *moralitas*, and his additions to Walter's version of the fable have significantly altered the nature of the relationship between tale and moral. The first noticeable difference between Henryson's fable and that of Walter concerns the presentation of the cock. Henryson does not merely humanize the cock by giving him the ability to speak but imbues him with a specific personality by mentioning that he is poor and that he is 'Richt cant and crous' (l. 65). The latter phrase, as Denton Fox has stated, is somewhat ambiguous, since it can be used in a heroic or in a humorous sense.[9] Taken in the former sense it would suggest that the cock was brave and bold like a true romance hero, but if *cant* is read as 'lively',[10] and *crous* as 'jaunty' and 'self satisfied',[11] then the implication is that the cock has rather too good an opinion of himself. That Henryson intended the phrase to imply criticism of the cock seems to be indicated by his use of the word *richt* as an intensifier at the beginning of the phrase and by the following statement, 'albeit he was bot pure' (l. 65), which is syntactically anticlimactic. Even if *crous* is not interpreted in a derogatory sense, though, the conjunction of the phrase 'cant and crous' with the detail of the cock's poverty is sufficient to produce a mock heroic effect which in turn serves to underline the cock's self-importance.

As well as introducing details which serve to characterize and to criticize the cock, Henryson, in his portrayal of the cock in the opening stanza of the fable, skillfully combines human and animal characteristics. Not only does he use the word *crous*, which was applied to both animals and humans,[12] to describe the cock,

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[9]Fox, 'Henryson's Fables', p. 344 and *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, p. 196, note to l. 65.

[10]For such a reading see *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue from the Twelfth Century to the End of the Seventeenth*, edited by Sir William Craigie and A. J. Aitken (Chicago and London, 1931–), I, 430, and Fox, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, p. 196.

[11]See *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, I, 752, and Fox, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, p. 196.

[12]See *Middle English Dictionary*, edited by Hans Kurath, *et al.* (Ann Arbor, 1954–) p. 722, Charles Mackay, *A Dictionary of Lowland Scotch* (London, 1888), p. 35; *Scottish Dictionary and Supplement*, edited by Dr Jamieson (Edinburgh, 1841), pp. 196–97, 274.

but also, while giving him the human attributes of poverty and pride, he indicates his animal nature by stating that he possesses 'feddram fresch and gay' (l. 64), that he *Fleu* (l. 6) onto a dunghill to obtain his dinner, and that he discovered the jasp while *scraipand* (l. 68) in the dust. Such a deliberate juxtaposition of human and animal characteristics should immediately alert us to the fact that the cock is not to be viewed as a real barnyard rooster but rather serves as a vehicle for observing the bestial aspects of human conduct.

A second important addition that Henryson has made to Walter's fable is his inclusion of a stanza about wanton servant girls who are so anxious to get out to play that they sweep out jewels along with other household rubbish:

> As damisellis wantoun and insolent
> That fane wald play and on the streit be sene,
> To swoping of the hous thay tak na tent
> Quhat be thairin, swa that the flure be clene;
> Iowellis ar tint, as oftymis hes bene sene,
> Vpon the flure, and swopit furth anone,
> Peraduenture, sa wes the samin stone. (ll. 71–77)

In discussing this stanza Denton Fox has remarked: 'On the one hand the stanza further establishes the tone of barnyard realism by explaining and domesticating the jasp. On the other hand the "Damisellis" provide an excellent parallel to the cock: like him, they pay no attention ("tak na tent," "cair na thing") to a jewel of great value because they are entirely preoccupied with their animal appetites.'[13]

George Clark and Douglas Gray have also commented on the stanza. Clark believes that 'The cock's early rising and diligence, "To get his dennar set was al his cure" (67), contrast with the idleness and indifference of the hypothetical girls',[14] while Gray claims that Henryson 'has teased us . . . by his digression on the wanton damsels (which we read as implying that the cock has a higher estimation of the jewel than they).'[15] Although there is evidence for each of these assertions, none of the three critics mentioned has satisfactorily explained the function of the stanza. The truth is that the girls serve both as a parallel and as a contrast to the cock. Like the cock they are motivated by appetite, but unlike him, and contrary to what might be expected, they have no interest in lost jewels. When the cock begins his address to the jasp in the following stanza, his deference, which is more appropriately human than animal, sets up a comic inversion which extends and develops the mock heroic element of his characterization in the opening stanza and makes it impossible for us to take his subsequent arguments seriously.

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[13]Fox, 'Henryson's Fables', p. 342.
[14]Clark, 'Henryson and Aesop', p. 7.
[15]Gray, *Robert Henryson*, p. 123.

Another way in which Henryson has substantially altered Walter's narrative is through the additions he has made to the cock's speech. In Walter's fable the cock justifies his decision to cast aside the jasp by stating that he prefers things that are of less worth. Henryson not only amplifies this statement by rendering it as:

> I lufe fer better thing of les auaill,
> As draf or corne to fill my tume intraill. (ll. 90–91)

but adds another two stanzas describing the sort of food the cock prefers to the jasp and emphasizing his need to appease his hunger:

> I had leuer go skraip heir with my naillis
> Amangis this mow, and luke my lifys fude,
> As draf or corne, small wormis, or snaillis,
> Or ony meit wald do my stomok gude,
> Than of iaspis ane mekill multitude;
> And thow agane, vpon the samin wyis,
> May me as now for thyne auaill dispyis.
>
> 'Thow hes na corne, and thairof I had neid;
> Thy cullour dois bot confort to the sicht,
> An that is not aneuch my wame to feid,
> For wyfis sayis that lukand werk is licht.
> I wald sum meit haue, get it geue I micht,
> For houngrie men may not weill leue on lukis:
> Had I dry breid, I compt not for na cukis.' (ll. 92–105)

As well as expanding the cock's speech in order to focus attention on his desire for food, Henryson departs significantly from Walter's version of the fable by having his cock adopt the high style. In Henryson's fable, the cock begins his address to the jasp with the eloquent double apostrophe, 'O gentill Iasp, O riche and nobill thing' (l. 79), and concludes it with a series of rhetorical questions linked by repetition and anaphora and culminating in an invitation (involving the use of personification and courtly language) to the jasp to pass out of the filth of the dunghill to its rightfull place:

> 'Quhar suld thow mak thy habitatioun?
> Quhar suld thow duell, bot in ane royall tour?
> Quhar suld thow sit, bot on ane kingis croun
> Exalt in worschip and in grit honour?
> Rise, gentill Iasp, of all stanis the flour,
> Out of this fen, and pas quhar thow suld be;
> Thow ganis not for me, nor I for the.' (ll. 106–12)

The cock's eloquence creates the impression that he knows what he is doing in casting aside the jasp, but the incongruity of such eloquence in a barnyard setting undercuts this impression and renders him a pompous, comic figure. Moreover, it

quickly becomes obvious that, in his speech, he is using rhetoric to justify his animal appetite. By playing off the style of this speech against the context and by having him ironically defend sensual appetite with a display of reason and eloquence, Henryson does not allow us to take the cock's words at face value but shows him to be an opinionated, deluded creature who is controlled entirely by appetite and who is willing to pervert his reason to its demands — an apt vehicle, in fact, for viewing man's essential animality.

What an examination of Henryson's additions to Walter's narrative has demonstrated, therefore, is that Henryson consciously alienates, rather than engages, our sympathy for the cock. Consequently, the *moralitas*, in which the cock is condemned for his foolishness as he is in Walter's fable, should come as no surprise. Having said this, it is now necessary to look more closely at the nature of the relationship between tale and moral in Henryson's fable and particularly at the methods he uses to establish the relationship.

After concluding the narrative by telling us that the cock went off to seek his food, leaving the jasp lying on the ground, Henryson proceeds to explain the properties of the jasp:

> This iolie iasp hes properteis seuin:
> The first, of cullour it is meruelous,
> Part lyke the fyre and part lyke to the heuin;
> It makis ane man stark and victorious;
> Preseruis als fra cacis perrillous;
> Quha hes this stane sall haue gude hap to speid,
> Of fyre nor fallis him neidis not to dreid. (ll. 120–26)

It is not certain whether the *moralitas* actually begins at line 120 or whether it follows line 126,[16] but it is generally agreed that this stanza, which is not found in Walter's fable, serves as a transition between story and morality. In a recent article on *The Cock and the Jasp*, James Khinoy has suggested that in Henryson's fable the jasp is really a jacinth, as in Lydgate's version, since the jasper 'lacks all of the qualities' of the stone found on the dunghill.[17] Khinoy cites a number of authorities in support of his view, but notably absent is any reference to *De proprietatibus rerum* of Bartholomaeus Angelicus.

In his section on jasps, Bartholomaeus describes the jasper stone as follows:

> Iaspis est Gemma viridis, smaragdo similis, sed crassi coloris simpliciter est. Eius species sunt septemdecim, dic Isid . . . quamius autem eius color praecipuus sit viridis, tamen multos habet alios intermixtos. Eius virtus est reprimere febres & hydropisim in his, qui gestant ipsum caste. Iuuat etiam

[16]See Fox, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, pp. 197–98, note to ll. 120–26.
[17]Khinoy, 'Tale — Moral Relationships in Henryson's Moral Fables', pp. 102–04.

> parturientem, fugat phantasmata, & inter pericula fecit hominem tutum, interiorem refrigerat ardorem, fluentem compescit sanguinem & sudorem, luxuriam cohibet & impedit conceptum, menstrua constringit & hemorrhoides, si pluuerisetur datus cum lacte, vecera inueterata sanat, sordes oculorum purgat, & visum acuit & confortat, maleficiis & incantationibus resistit, efficacior est in argento quam in auro.[18]

If Henryson's description of the jasper stone is compared with that of Bartholomaeus, it will be seen to be very similar. Henryson, like Bartholomaeus, refers to a mixture of colours, and to the capacity of the stone to keep a man safe from danger as well as to check fevers (*fyre*, l. 120) and dropsy (*fallis*, l. 120). Of course, there is no proof that Henryson took his description of the jasper stone directly from Bartholomaeus, but the similarity between the two accounts indicates that he was at least drawing on the same lapidary tradition.

Once Henryson has explained the physical characteristics and virtues of the jasp, he goes on to indicate its spiritual significance:

> This gentill iasp, richt different of hew,
> Betakinnis perfite prudence and cunning,
> Ornate with mony deidis of vertew,
> Mair excellent than ony eirthly thing,
> Quhilk makis men in honour ay to ring,
> Happie, and stark to haif the victorie
> Of all vicis and spirituall enemie. (ll. 127–33)

In equating the jasp with wisdom, Henryson is following the example of Walter, but the parallels he establishes between the physical powers of the jasp and the spiritual efficacy of prudence and cunning (l. 128) (*i.e.*, wisdom and learning), show that he is still drawing on the lapidary tradition in which it was common for gems and their properties to be given Christian allegorical and moral significances, as, for instance, in Marbod's *Liber de Gemmis*. It is not until the next stanza that any attempt is made to link the spiritual significance of the jasp with the precious stone discovered by the cock on the dunghill.

Like the concluding stanza of the cock's address to the jasp in the narrative, this stanza opens with a series of rhetorical questions linked by anaphora:

> Quha may be hardie, riche, and gratious?

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[18]Bartholomaeus Angelicus, *De rerum proprietatibus* (Frankfurt, 1601; reprinted, 1964), pp. 742–43. 'Jasper is a green stone similar to the emerald, but of a deeper colour. There are seventeen varieties, as isidore says, and although the colour of the jasper is mainly green, many species nevertheless show a mixture of colours. It has virtue in checking fevers and hydropsy in those who wear it, provided that they live chastely. It also assists women in childbirth, it dispels fantasms, keeps a man safe in the midst of dangers, cools inner heat, tends to inhibit conception, and checks menstrual flow. If powdered and administered in milk it heals old sores, clears the eyes and strengthens the vision, wards off curses and spells, and it is more effective when set in silver than when set in gold.'

Quha can eschew perrell and auenture?
Quha can gouerne ane realme, cietie, or hous
Without science? No man, I ȝow assure.
It is riches that euer sall indure,
Quhilk maith, nor moist, nor vther rust can freit:
To mannis saull it is eternall meit. (ll. 134–40)

In the praise of *science* (*i.e.*, learning, including theology) in this stanza there are echoes of the Biblical praise of wisdom.[19] Furthermore, words such as *riches* (l. 138) and *meit* (l. 140) call to mind the earthly value that the cock placed on the jewel and his rejection of it in favour of food. By redefining such words, by placing them in a spiritual context, and by means of the other echoes he sets up in the stanza, Henryson highlights the false earthly values of the cock and makes the point that wisdom is the most valuable possession a man can have. However, although Henryson has established a number of links between the spiritual significance of the jasp and the value it has for the cock in the narrative, these lines do not provide a basis for the figurative reading. This is provided by the stanza which explains the physical properties of the jasp. For Henryson as for Walter, therefore, the jasp does not function as a descriptive symbol or mere 'sign' but is treated as an interpretative symbol, that is to say as a 'thing' which, in addition to having a significance of its own, is also a 'sign' of another 'thing'.

The method Henryson uses to uncover the figurative significance of the cock is quite different. Unlike Walter, he does not directly equate the cock with foolishness but claims that he may be *likened* to a fool:

This cock, desyrand mair the sempill corne
Than ony iasp, may till ane fule be peir,
Quhilk at science makis bot ane moik and scorne,
And na gude can; als lytill will he leir —
His hart wammillis wyse argumentis to heir,
As dois ane sow to quhome men for the nanis
In hir draf troich wald saw the precious stanis. (ll. 141–47)

It should also be noted that Henryson sets precise terms of reference for his comparison between the cock and a fool. The cock is not said to be like a fool in every respect, but, in preferring corn to the jasp, he is compared to a fool who scorns learning, yet 'na gude can' (l. 144). In the narrative, Henryson has exposed the delusion of the cock in thinking he knows what is good for him and has shown him misapplying his reason by using it to defend his sensual appetite. It is thus appropriate that such a creature should, in the *moralitas*, be compared to a fool who ignorantly believes he has no use for *science*. As far as the interpretation of the

[19]See Fox, *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, p. 199, note to l. 130.

cock is concerned, there is consequently no evident disjunction between tale and moral; rather, the two parts of the fable co-exist in the manner of a similitude.

Critics have had difficulty in relating tale and moral in *The Cock and the Jasp* because they have failed both to understand the nature of the connexion between Henryson's cock and the fool who scorns learning and to recognize that Henryson is employing more than one figurative mode. Whereas the jasp is treated as an interpretative symbol in the *moralitas* and its significance is determined by criteria extraneous to the story, the cock is treated as a descriptive symbol. Through the cock, who serves as a vehicle for viewing the bestial side of man's nature, we are provided with an illustration of man's blindness in allowing his appetite to override his reason. The *moralitas*, in which the jasp is figuratively equated with 'wisdom' and the cock likened to a fool, calls attention to such an error and appeals to those in the audience who will to 'Ga seik the iasp' (l. 161) themselves, that is to say, replace earthly values with spiritual ones. Not only, therefore, has Henryson introduced into his fable material which enables him to avoid the disjunction between tale and moral that is found in Walter's fable, but he has also extended the function of Walter's fable by turning it into an *exemplum* which both illustrates and exhorts.