

Distrust and Admiration:
The Symbolic Fox as
a Literary Tool through the Ages

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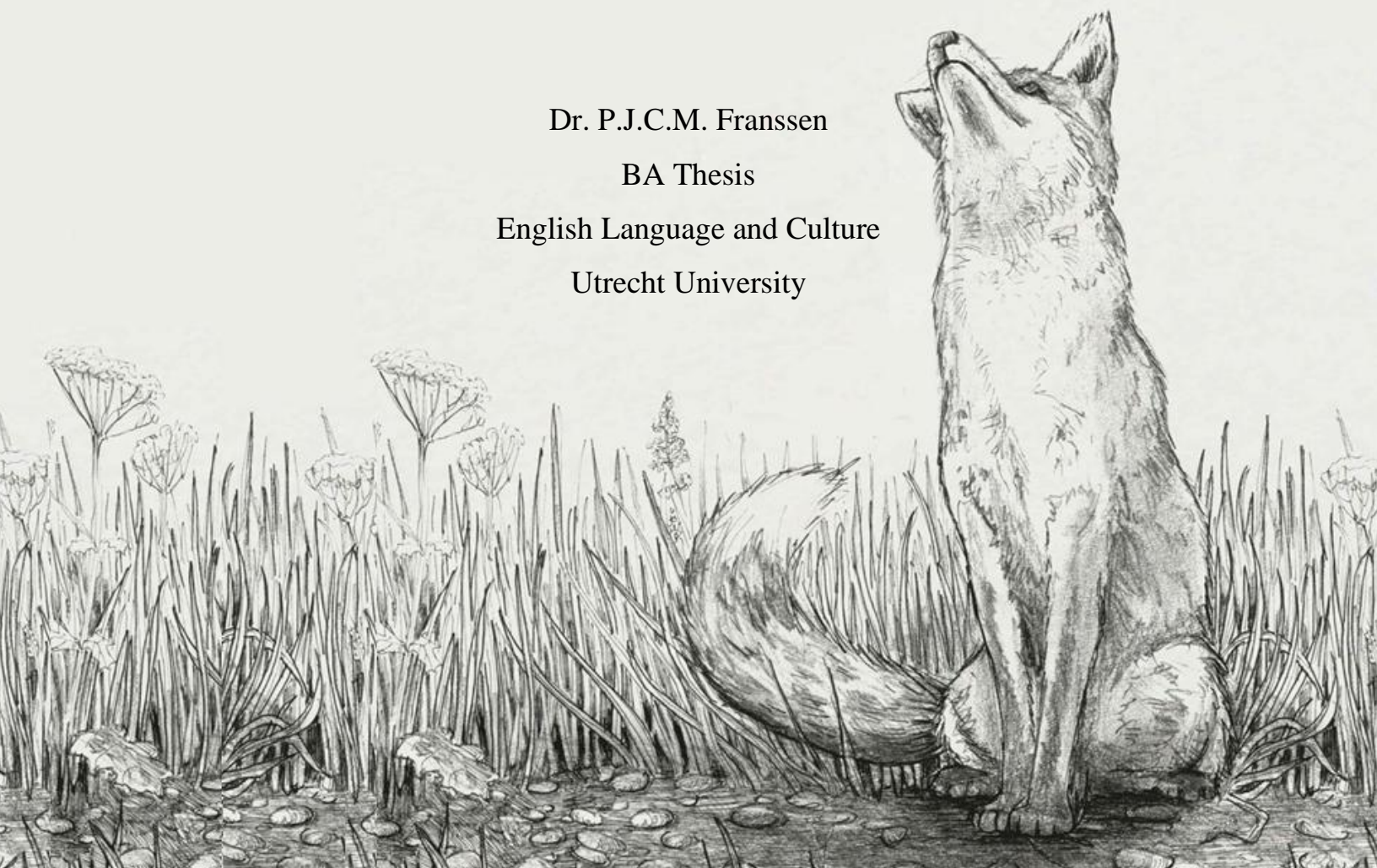
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Information

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Abstract

This study examines the use of the symbolic fox as a literary tool in several time periods in Britain. In particular, it seeks to answer the question how the fox is displayed and received and whether this has changed over time. This study aims to give a better insight on why the fox has been a positive or negative symbol and why this has changed, which, indirectly, gives a better insight on changes concerning society and morality. Literature on animal symbolism has focused almost exclusively on international animal symbolism and less on how it gives insight on changes and peoples motivation to use the symbolic fox. Using comparative analyses of literary works and images from Classic Antiquity until the Modern Period, this research explores these changes in use and conception. The findings from the research illustrate how the symbolism of the fox does not change over time. The fox stays linked to cunningness, flattery, and deceitfulness. What does change is how the fox is displayed and received. The findings suggest that the symbolic fox grew from detested and distrusted by conservative moralists into something of importance to those who wanted to break with the old morals. This study contributes to a better understanding in how analyzing the use of literary tools, such as the symbolic fox, gives a better insight in human motive and society.

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Introduction

One of the songs that grows in international popularity at the moment is *The Fox* by Ylvis. As the singers pronounce “the secret of the fox / ancient mystery”, they claim that the fox is shrouded in a haze of mystery (Ylvis). In particular, Ylvis wants to know “what does the fox say?” Although the song is meant as a skit and therefore not serious, nobody can clearly answer Ylvis’s question (CNN). The fox seems to be a bigger mystery than other animals. Most animals seem to be defined or, as is pointed out in the song, have one particular sound they make which represents them. Yet, the fox is more obscure because no one knows what it says. Does this might have to do with the connotation of the fox as a trickster, a cunning creature which uses its wits and words to get what it wants? Consequently, does the fox not use one sound, but actually use many? In addition, Ylvis also points out the fox is “like an angel in disguise” (Ylvis). By doing so, Ylvis draws a positive yet mystical image around the fox.

The definition of a trickster is a deceiver, a person who plays tricks, engaging in mischievous activities. To most cultures, these are rather negative characteristics. Yet, as it is included in the definition, tricksters are usually also conceived as culture heroes, sometimes because they rebel against authority or the higher class. Although tricksters over the world have many forms, human and animal alike, the best known in Britain is Reynard the Fox. This character typically uses his cunningness to outmanoeuvre other characters.

Over the ages, the fox has been linked to wisdom and cunningness. For instance, in beast fables these human traits are emphasized. Some of the first Western beast fables written are believed to be by the hand of Aesop in the sixth century B.C. A large number of authors, among them Mary the France, Geoffrey Chaucer, and William Caxton, wrote adaptations of Aesop’s fables. Accordingly, Aesop had a big influence on how the fox was represented after his time.

Nevertheless, also Celtic mythology and the Bible mention the fox and contributed to the image of the fox through the ages until the present day.

It is very anthropomorphic to label animals and their traits as negative or positive. Especially with fables and allegories, the human traits which are ascribed to the animal are considered positive or negative. Nevertheless, the animals are human in animal form. They “talk and act like the human types they represent” (Abrams, 8). Foxes have become a literary device to represent cunning people who outwit others to achieve their ends. Nevertheless, are these traits based on natural behaviour of the fox? Encyclopaedias, such as *Encyclopedie van het Dierenrijk*, describe the fox as intelligent and its natural behaviour as easily adaptable to different circumstances and using other animals’ homes to make its own (Conny Sykora, 78). Although nothing is said about cunningness, the fox’s behaviour’s link to cunningness might emanate from the fox using its intelligence and adaptability as tools to achieve its goal, for instance occupying a home.

Although Conny Sykora does not say anything about positive or negative connotations on foxes, other encyclopaedias on symbolism or bestiaries do tend to comprehend animal/human characteristic equivalence and sometimes add negative or positive connotations to traits. Examples are: *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art* by H.B. Werness and *Fabulous Creatures, Mythical Monsters, and Animal Power Symbols: A Handbook* by Cassandra Eason. In his analyses, Werness states that “the 18th-century pseudo-science Physiognomy linked human appearance – and by association character – with animals. For instance, a sharp nosed human profile is likened to that of a fox, implying that a human with those features is also sly and crafty” (184).

Problem Statement and the Research Question

Earlier studies have shown the extent to which animals are represented and how they function in art, literature, and folklore. Nevertheless, questions have been raised about how and why people use animal imagery in their stories and whether this mirrors society. In addition, there has been little discussion about whether the connotation of the symbolic fox in literature is applied positively or negatively so far. Comparing literary works is at the heart of our understanding of people's motivation to use an animal, for instance the fox, as symbol and as reflection of human characteristics.

This paper will focus on the question how the fox and its cunningness is displayed and perceived through time and whether this has changed. In addition, what might this say over society and changing morals?

Research sub Questions

To answer the research question, the following sub questions are kept in mind per work per period:

- What does the fox do in the story and what does it symbolise?
- Often there are human traits or characteristics involved: Which characteristics has the fox and are they unwanted or desirable?
- Is the fox successful in the end? If not, is it being punished? Or does it escape punishment through cunningness?
- Who wrote the story? For whom is the story written? What are the writer's motives?
- Are works influenced by previous works, ideas, or images? Do they take earlier opinions into consideration or do they neglect them?

Scope

Surveys such as that of Werner focus on animals and cultures all over the world. This paper will have a smaller area, viz. only the fox in literature in Europe, in particular Britain. Classical Antiquity and Biblical stories that did not originate in Britain but in the Mediterranean and Middle East are also included, because these books and stories had a big influence on later writings and the image of the fox. In addition, as antecedent culture of the British Isles' cultures the Celtic culture is also added.

The time period is wide, ranging from Classical Antiquity until the twentieth century. According to western standards it is conventionally assumed that the Classical Antiquity started in the eighth century B.C. Nevertheless, it is believed that Aesop lived in the sixth century B.C. (Aesopus, 5). Therefore, the time range will be from sixth century B.C. until Roald Dahl published his story in 1970.

Although there are more stories regarding foxes, some of the best known works from each period are chosen to keep the research within bounds. Consequently, each time period will have two to three works in which the symbolic fox is presented or discussed. Regarding Aesop's fables, there are 358 fables of which 42 concerning foxes, making it the number one most mentioned animal in Aesop's fables. Nevertheless, not all fables will be discussed in detail: foremost will be the ones in which the fox's cunningness is displayed.

Research Method

To answer the research- and sub-questions, literature and historical context need to be analysed and compared. To keep a clear overview and to see changes over the ages, I will maintain a chronological order: starting with Classical Antiquity and ending with the Modern Period. First I will choose several works per period, works in which the fox has an important role.

Respectively, I will analyse the following:

Influential works: Aesop's *fables* (Classic Antiquity), Celtic mythology (Celtic culture), and *The Holy Bible* (Christianity).

Works from the Medieval Period: Bestiaries and art, "The Nun's Priest Tale" by Geoffrey Chaucer, and *The History of Reynard the Fox* by William Caxton.

Works from the Early Modern Period: *Ill Principe* by Nicolò Machiavelli, *Emblemata* by A. Henkel and A. Schöne, and *Volpone or the Fox* by Ben Jonson.

Works from the Modern Period: *The Fox* by D.H. Lawrence and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* by Roald Dahl.

In every chapter I will keep in mind the sub questions and try to answer them. In addition, I will consult background information on social context or on the author which makes it easier to analyse motives or themes in the stories concerning the fox.

Thesis Outline

Thesis question: How is the fox displayed and perceived through time and has this changed?

I. Some works have had a big influence on later periods and works.

A. In Classic Antiquity the fox is used in didactic fables, it symbolises wisdom and cunningness, and has a positive but also a negative connotation. Didactically, people are warned for his cunning tricks.

B. In the Celtic culture the fox can be found in mythology, it symbolises cunningness, the ability to escape, and wisdom, and has a positive connotation.

C. In Christian religion the fox is mentioned in *The Holy Bible*, it symbolises demolition, and has a negative connotation.

II. The Medieval Period has been heavily influenced by its antecedent period, especially the Christian opinion of the fox can be found in medieval works.

A. Bestiaries and art present the fox as a devilish creature. The fox has a negative connotation and is used as a symbolic warning for deceit and trickery.

B. The Fox in Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest Tale" represents the flatterer and deceiver. It has a negative connotation and is used as a warning about treachery and deceit.

C. The Fox in *The History of Reynard the Fox* by William Caxton represents the sly deceiver which gets away with it. It has a rather negative connotation and is also used as a warning about flattery, deceit, and Reynard-like men in the world.

III. In the Early Modern Period a change of attitude towards the image of the fox can be seen, yet distrust can still be found.

A. Machiavelli represents the fox as a cunning creature people should learn from to achieve success. The fox has a positive connotation and is used as a model.

B. Emblems portray the fox as a cunning, smart, and cautious animal, but also as a murderer. The fox has a neutral to negative connotation and some emblems are used as warnings.

C. Ben Jonson combines new and old ideas of the fox, yet he also tends to present the fox as a deceiver who will cause his own downfall. The fox symbolises deceit, flattery, and cunningness. It has a negative connotation and is used for didactic purposes.

IV. In the Modern Period there is a full change of attitude. The fox is no longer distrusted or warned for but rather appreciated and used by two of the Modern Period writers to redefine morals.

A. D.H.Lawrence presents his fox as cunning, mysterious yet dangerous, but foremost as a symbol of natural order. The fox has a neutral to positive connotation and is used to make a statement on natural state of gender roles.

B. The fox in sayings still has an old negative connotation of distrust attached to it.

The symbolic fox is mostly used as an expressed warning.

1. Nevertheless, modern slang adds a positive connotation to the fox regarding appearance.

C. Roald Dahl presents his fox as a cunning trickster. The fox has a positive connotation as it is the hero in the children's eyes. The fox is used to redefine the moral on stealing.

Chapter 1: Classical, Celtic, and Christian Origin

If one wants to know how the image of the fox came about or what might have influenced it in a certain period, one has to go back in time. How far back, however, is not clear. For instance, although Aesop instigated a series of fables, he was probably aware of Assyrian, Egyptian, and Indian fables and is therefore not the first to present the symbolic fox (Aesopus, 5). Nevertheless, Classical Antiquity had a big influence on later periods, especially on the Renaissance, a period of the revival of classical art and ideas. Another important possible influence is the Celtic tradition and religion. When new cultures appear, they are often based on old ones. For instance, as Heather McDougall points out in her article “The Pagan roots of Easter”, “Christianity came to an accommodation with the pagan Spring festival”. The modern Easter bunny is based on the rabbit or hare attributed to the Celtic Goddess Eostre. Because the Celts were earlier inhabitants of the British Isles, their culture too influenced later inhabitants and their image of the fox. A third factor that has influenced the perception of the fox through the ages is Christianity. Even before the fall of the Roman Empire, there are traces of Christianity to be found on the British Isles. Although there are alternations between the Roman, Celtic, and Germanic pagan religions having the upper hand, since the sixth century A.D. the pagan religions diminished and Christianity grew. In this chapter the image of the fox in these precedent cultures and religions, which formed one source for the Middle Ages, the Early Modern Period, and the Modern Period, will be analysed. The Greeks, the Celts, and the Christians each received the fox differently, ranging from positive connotations to negative connotations.

Foxes in Classic Antiquity

In Aesop's collection of 358 fables, the fox plays a role in 42 of them. In most of them its wisdom comes forward, sometimes it is its cunningness that adds to the fable's message, and sometimes the combination of the two. There are three outcomes to be found for the fox in Aesop's fables: a neutral outcome, not necessarily with a bad or a good ending and not necessarily as a result of his tricks, or a positive or a negative ending for the fox due to its cunningness.

Here are three examples out of eleven positive endings for the fox. In "The Raven and the Fox" and "The Hare and the Fox", the fox tricks the two other animals into getting some food. In the first fable the fox tricks the raven into singing a song so it drops its meat. In the latter fable, the fox convinces the hare to have dinner with him in his hole and the hare, now trapped, becomes his dinner. In the third example, "The Lion, the Fox, and the Deer", the fox tricks a deer to come to the lion's lair so the lion can eat it. The first time, the deer escapes the lair, but the fox soothes it and convinces the deer to visit the lion a second time. As the lion eats its pray, the fox takes the best part of the deer, the heart, as a reward. In all three cases, the fox's cunningness is successful.

Then there are six endings in which the cunning fox does not succeed. For instance, in "The Dog, the Rooster, and the Fox" the fox tries to trick the rooster in the tree to come down so it could eat him. Nevertheless, the rooster outsmarts the fox by letting it wake the dog under the tree which then tears up the fox. The fox is thus punished for his deceiving attempt. Another example in which the fox is outsmarted can be found in "The Cricket and the Fox". Unlike the hare mentioned earlier, the cricket will not be fooled by the fox and averts being eaten. Instead, the fox eats a leaf and the cricket in the tree is safe.

Strikingly, Aesop also involves some gods in his fables. In one of them, “Zeus and the Fox”, the fox is punished for his gluttony and deprived of the throne. Nevertheless, the throne was given to him by Zeus in the first place as a reward for his cunningness and shrewdness. This shows that even Zeus admires these characteristics assigned to the fox.

Foxes in Celtic Mythology

In general, animals play a big part in Celtic tradition. According to Cassandra Eason, animals were of importance to clans and tribes: They were associated with deities (5) and used to emblemize heroes or tribes in war (95). Moreover, according to Lars Noodén, some animals symbolise “birth, rebirth, and fertility”, yet others are death omens. An animal that is occasionally mentioned in Celtic myths is the fox, which is nearly always seen as a sly animal, usually with a positive connotation. An example can be found in a myth on Dia Griene, the daughter of the sun in Scottish mythology. Dia Griene, held against her will in the underworld, was permitted to return to the mortal world as a fox. Edain McCoy points out that the deity returning as a fox “serves as a metaphor for reincarnation” (199). In addition, the fox, “associated with sunstones and shrewd intellect”, concurs with the deity (McCoy, 199).

Like Dia Griene, other mythical figures had the ability of shape changing into animals as well (Eason, 5). Druids and bards, in Celtic tradition known to be people with magical talents, also turn into foxes. In the “The Song of My Origins”, Taliesin pen Beird¹ sings to his patron Elffin son of Gwyddno Garanhir. The song is about his escape and his transformations into animals, among them the shape of a “satirizing fox” (John Matthews, 281). As D.J. Conway suggests, the satirizing fox is a reference “to the cunning, slyness, and ability of the fox to make

¹ From Welsh: Taliesin, Chief of Bards

fools out of those who chase it” (153). Moreover, wisdom and the use of cunning words were important and even admired in the Celtic culture. As Matthews comments “the range of Wisdom and the cunning use of words is considerable” (138-139). He continues: “since poets were well treated ... and greatly honoured” these skills, which were essential for Bards, seem to be good qualities (Matthews, 139).

Foxes in Christianity

The fox is mentioned 5 times in *The Holy Bible*. To start with the Old Testament, the fox is first mentioned in Judges. Judges focuses on the Lord’s five major judges, one of them is Samson. Samson is favoured with powers as “the Spirit of the Lord came upon him” (Judg. 14.19), so he could “humble the Philistines” (Judg., 353). Nevertheless, the Philistines wrong Samson and Samson acts on this: “So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyard and olive groves” (Judg. 15.4-5). In the excerpt, the foxes are used as tools to accomplish Samson’s revenge. Nevertheless, the foxes might be received both negatively and positively. On the one hand, the foxes bring destruction and burn down the grain, vineyards and olive groves. Furthermore, as is mentioned in Exodus “if a fire breaks out and spread into thornbushes so that it burns shocks of grain or standing grain or the whole field, the one who started the fire must make restitution”(Exod. 22.7). The foxes start the fire and can be labelled wrongdoers as a result. On the other hand, the foxes might have positive or neutral connotations as well: they assist Samson and Samson is favoured by God. By doing Samson’s will, they also

attend to God's purpose of humbling the Philistines.

The second time foxes are mentioned is in Nehemia. Nehemia receives a message from God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem which lay in ruins. However, his efforts are mocked by some opponents, who say: "what they are building – if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!"(Neh. 4.3). In the excerpt, the fox is negatively represented. It would bring down the walls God ordered to be rebuilt and is therefore an enemy of God and his people.

The third mentioning of foxes is in Song of Songs. The song is about love, fertility, and marital life and there are several references to plants and animals, among them foxes: "Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom" (Song of Sol. 2.16). The vineyard is alternately a literal vineyard and a figurative symbol of physical appearance. There are several references to spring preceding the excerpt: "Flowers appear on the earth... The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance" and so, literally interpreted, the foxes destroy vineyards, as they did in Judges (Song of Sol. 2.11-13). This would mean they destroy something beautiful and positive and are consequently a negative element in the song. From a figurative point of view, the excerpt stands for the "desire that the lovers be kept safe from whatever ('foxes') might mar their mutual attractiveness" (Song of Sol, 1023-1024). Likewise, the foxes might destroy something that should not be destroyed and are therefore negative factors.

In the New Testament, in both Matthew and Luke, the fox is mentioned in a more neutral sense: "And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'" (Matt 8.20; Luke 9.58). It seems that the foxes are not

portrayed as particular good or evil. The emphasis is on the son of man and the hardship of following Jesus.

In summary, the fox is often an example of wisdom and slyness in fables of Classical Antiquity. The animal is more often rewarded than punished for his cunningness and wisdom and even Zeus admires these characteristics. Nevertheless, Aesop's fables have a didactic purpose and so the fox is also used as a warning about trickery. The fox is presented both positively and negatively. Also in Celtic mythology the fox is connected to cunningness. Both examples given show that turning into a fox to escape is beneficial for deities and bards. In addition, the characteristic of slyness helps Taliesin escape. Furthermore, wisdom and the ability to cunningly use words are admired in society. The cunning fox seems to be a positive animal in Celtic tradition. By contrast, foxes seem to have a negative image in the bible. Although they are neutrally presented in the New Testament, in the Old Testament all the foxes destroy something. Only in Judges the foxes might be seen as tools to aid in God's name, but there they are also symbols of demolition. Nevertheless, nothing in the bible mentions any fox characteristics concerning wisdom or cunningness. Because they are associated with destruction, they are often negatively received by followers of Christianity.

Chapter 2: Beast Fables and Medieval Foxes

In the twelfth century A.D. bestiaries became very popular in England. Although a Physiologus, “a compendium of knowledge about animals and birds, some real some imaginary”, already existed in 500 B.C., this was branded heretical (Varty, 171). As Kenneth Varty points out, the Bestiary, on the contrary, followed “basic Christian truths”, and as series of pictures were added to the descriptions it became accessible to both high and low classes in society (171). Although beast fables were quite popular on mainland Europe, they only became popular on the British Isles in the late Middle Ages. People were used to fables in sermons, but only four comic beast epics are known in British literature that survive till this day which originated in the Middle Ages. Two of these are by Geoffrey Chaucer and William Caxton (Caxton, 34-35). These beast fables include references to earlier fox stories, including the foxes in Aesop’s fables and the Bible. Although the Bible’s negative connotation of the fox stays the same in the Middle Ages, the rather victorious image of the fox in Aesop’s fables is used for satirical purposes in *The History of Reynard*. Chaucer presents the fox as treacherous and warns his audience to beware of flatterers. Also Caxton warns his audience. Although Reynard is a successful trickster, his success and ambition warns the reader for people like him who try to climb high in society. Overall, the fox image is that of a devilish trickster and flatterer who should not be trusted.

Bestiary, Physiologus, and Art

In the descriptions of Bestiaries and Physiologus, the fox and its cunningness are depicted as devilish. For instance, according to Kenneth Varty the fox is considered crafty in the

physiologus. To amplify this: the fox is lying on the ground and acts like it is dead. When carrion birds fly down to eat from the corpse, the fox grasps and eats them. Varty continues: “so also is the Devil very crafty in his ways. Versions of this Bestiary account of the fox-devil lying in wait to trick and capture the unwary must have been told again and again in churches and by the clergy” (172). A similar account can be found in beast fables, such as *The History of Reynard the Fox*, and in several carvings and paintings in churches. Fox motives in churches often depict “brother fox duping the unwary” and have a didactic purpose in warning people (Varty, 281).

Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” (c. 1396-1400)

In the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” the fox has a negative connotation. This becomes clear as the teller of the tale uses several references to significant historical persons to magnify a negative image of his fox. The “col-fox², ful of sly iniquitee”(Chaucer, 3215) is compared to Judas Iscariot, Ganelon, and Greek Synon³ (Chaucer, 3227-3229). Like these mythical figures, the fox is a deceiver: a “false dissymulour” (Chaucer, 3228). Furthermore, when the fox soothes the protagonist Chauntecleer the rooster to not be afraid and to sing, tricking Chauntecleer to let his guard down, he says: “Now, certes, I were worse than a feend⁴, If I to yow wolde harm or vileynye!” (Chaucer, 3286-3287). Nevertheless, the fox attacks Chauntecleer which makes him a liar and devil. In addition, the fox does not succeed in eating Chauntecleer, Chauntecleer escapes by outsmarting the fox and as the fox tries to trick the rooster another time, Chauntecleer will not be fooled twice.

On the other hand, Chauntecleer is the protagonist and, therefore, emphasis is laid on the

² Fox with black-tipped feet, ears, and tail

³ Iscariot betrayed Christ, Ganelon betrayed Roland, and Greek Synon betrayed the city of Troy

⁴ A devil; a person or thing that causes mischief or annoyance

tragedy of the fox catching him. First of all, God is on Chauntecleer's side as He gives him a premonition of the tragedy of what is going to happen. After Chauntecleer had this disturbing dream, he gives an extended monologue of dream premonitions as omens of death or tragedies. Chauntecleer even quotes names, such as Macrobius⁵ who wrote that dreams are "Warnynge of thynges that men after seen" and several others to amplify the importance of receiving such a blessed warning by God (Chaucer, 3126).

In addition, the narrator of the tale, the nun's priest named John, is in favour of the rooster and makes a big tragedy out of what is happening. John deplors Chauntecleer's foolishness for not listening to the omen in his dream and for not recognizing the treachery in the fox's flattery (Chaucer, 258-259). Moreover, John compares the tragedy of Chauntecleer being caught to other harrowing tragedies. He wants to write a lament like Geoffrey of Vinsauf's lament on the death of King Richard I (Chaucer, 260). Additionally, all the crying hens are compared to the crying senators' wives whose husbands were slain by Nero (Chaucer, 260). The peaceful setting turns into one of chaos as John describes a war scene. There is disarray, animals and birds are panicking and racketing, and the alarmed humans arm themselves and yell while pursuing the fox.

Furthermore, the nun's priest John gives moral lessons from the bible to emphasize his message and warnings against treacherousness. He says:

many a losengeour⁶,

That plesen yow wel moore, by my feith,

Than he that soothfastnesse unto yow seith.

⁵ Author of a commentary on the *Dream of Scipio* (Chaucer, 257)

⁶ Flatterer (Chaucer, 259)

Redeth Ecclesiaste of flaterye;

Beth war, ye lordes, of hir trecherye - (Chaucer, 3326-3330)

At the end of his story, John adds that his story is not just for entertainment. People should learn the moral of the story: God will punish those who are reckless and listen to flatterers (Chaucer, 261). Consequently, Chaucer uses the cunning fox as a symbol of treacherousness and hereby warns his audience to be careful with flatterers.

William Caxton's *The History of Reynard the Fox* (1481)

In *The History of Reynard the Fox*, the fox is portrayed in a rather complicated fashion. Both a positive and a negative image can be conceived as the effects of Reynard's cunning deeds in his story do not agree with the author's message on cunningness at the end. Several elements make the cunning fox Reynard a less villainous protagonist in the story. First of all, although most animals complain about him in detail, there are a few which are on Reynard's side, for instance Grimbert the Dasse and Rukenaw the she-Ape. In addition, words or phrases like 'all they that loved him' are mentioned several times. A small phrase like this suggests there are also some that love Reynard and do not complain about his mischief. In fact, some animals are not even victimized by him.

Secondly, some of Aesop's fables contribute to the image of a victorious deceiver.

Ancient fables were a big inspiration for beast fables. Especially in *The History of Reynard the Fox*, many references can be found. Not only the fables with a positive ending for the fox are

used, but also “The Fox and the Bloated Stomach”⁷, a fable which ends rather badly, is changed to favour Reynard. Instead of getting himself trapped in the tree, Reynard tricks the wolf Isengrim and traps him into the tree with food. Nevertheless, most emphasis is laid on the fables in which the fox outsmarts and successfully tricks the other animals.

Lastly, Reynard's mischievous actions, such as murder, thieving, and deceiving, stay unpunished. Consequently, Isengrim the Wolf challenges him to a duel to prove who is honest by winning, a last resort on Isengrim's account to punish Reynard and let justice win. Nevertheless, Reynard wins the duel by foul play, restoring and even improving his position in the king's favour. Like some of the foxes in Aesop's fables, Reynard is not punished for his actions. The victimized animals want to punish his cunning crimes, yet, every time, Reynard uses his sly words to talk the king out of his penalties. He even skilfully raises his position at court to that of sovereign⁸. Nevertheless, the difference is that in Aesop's fables Zeus admires cunningness as a skill, whereas King Noble the lion likes Reynard's wisdom but not his cunning mischief (Caxton, 185).

On the other hand, several elements contribute to the devilish fox image which makes the sly Reynard a villain and points out disapproval of his cunningness. First, his cunningness is self-centred. If profit can be found for Reynard or his kin, then he will use his cunningness to gain it. There is no higher purpose or a virtuous cause for Reynard in doing so. In addition, the audience is told all his negative nicknames, complainers, and evil deeds. Even Reynard himself knows he is a devilish liar and trickster. Reynard has several nicknames that contribute to the image of a negative character. Throughout the story, Caxton presents Reynard's nicknames: “the nephew

⁷ A fable in which a fox gets stuck in a tree because it had eaten the stock that was clogged in the tree

⁸ As in the title: “XLIII. How the King Forgave the Fox All Things and Made Him Sovereign and Greatest Over All His Lands” (*The History of Reynard the Fox*, 182)

with deceit” (58), “false thief Reynard” (63), “red⁹ Reynard” (57), but also adjectives: “he is so wily and false” (81), “My eme¹⁰ were twice so bad and shrewish” (69), and verb clauses: “he haunts¹¹ his false and shrewd rule” (108) which refer to Reynard’s bad nature. Not only Reynard’s opponents say this about him, but also Grimbert the Dasse, who loves him, says this. Furthermore, the audience also knows Reynard is a sinner, a wrongdoer, and a liar as he confesses his sins and “knew himself guilty” (Caxton, 98). The combination of truth followed by lies to save himself, make it clear for the audience that Reynard uses his slyness for self preservation and to escape punishment. This strengthens the image of the crafty devil linked to the crafty fox.

Thirdly, Reynard tells the king about deceivers and sly nobles harming the king with evil cunning: “false liars and flatterers nowadays in the lords’ courts be most heard and believed. The shrews and false deceivers be borne up for to do to good men all the harm and scathe they may” (Caxton, 77). Reynard admits he “must flatter and lie also” (Caxton, 119). Therefore, he confesses to harm with lies and deceit, but again convinces others that his way is not the evil way he preached against: “Men may well lie when it is need and after amend it by counsel¹². For all trespasses there is mercy” (Caxton, 121). Nevertheless, Reynard is a hypocrite as he admits it is in his nature: “[foxes] play all griming and where they hate they look friendly and merrily. For thereby they bring them under their feet and bite the throat asunder. This is the nature of the fox” (Caxton, 115).

Lastly, another aspect that adds to a negative image of cunningness is the fact that Reynard receives the death penalty not only for his crimes, but also for deceiving the king whose

⁹False (“annotations”, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, 203)

¹⁰ Uncle (“glossary”, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, 218)

¹¹ Practices (108)

¹² Afterwards rectify it through shrewdness (“annotations”, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, 211)

pride is aggrieved. As King Noble the lion says: “I think well that you shall this day for your works be hanged by your neck. ...Your falseness and your false inventions shall without long tarrying make you to die” (Caxton, 123). The conviction results from Noble’s discontent with Reynard’s cunningness. If one adds to this Noble’s expressed hopes at the end on changing Reynard’s cunningness into something more sound and good, it becomes clear the king does not prefer Reynard to be cunning. Although Reynard is not punished and does not die in the end, it becomes clear that the animals want a wise Reynard who might help them instead of a cunning Reynard who tricks them.

By taking into consideration the social context and the narrator’s opinion, the perception of the cunning fox tilts to an even more negative connotation. To start with, *The History of Reynard the Fox* is a satire of medieval society. As Anne Lair points out in her article “The History of Reynard the Fox: How Medieval Literature Reflects Culture”: “As a parody it mocks and ridicules epic and chivalric literature, illustrates politics and the daily life of the time, as well as the all pervasive obsession with food among common people”. An example can be found in the King and Queen, who do not represent just rulers, but are mocked as they instantly forget to judge justly when Reynard talks about treasures and precious stones. They represent the greedy nobility. In addition, Reynard represents the people who flatter, lie, and deceive to gain something though victimizing others. Like an unjust king who is greedy, also ‘Reynardian’ people are not preferred. In other words, *The History of Reynard the Fox* represents an unwanted immoral Christian society, not something that should be real. Reynard and his cunningness are therefore not praised.

Moreover, the narrator’s vision and disapproval of cunning men weighs heavily in this argument. He claims that fox-like-men take over the reign all over the world and that “The

righteous people be all lost. Truth and righteousness be exiled and fordriven ... [as others] climb high with lies, with flattering, with simony, with money, or with strength and force” (Caxton, 185). The storyteller even warns his audience that the clergy also learns “Reynard’s craft” yet believes that “God will take vengeance and punish” them (Caxton, 185). Lastly, the narrator dissociates himself from Reynard: “And if anything be said or written herein that may grieve or displease any man, blame me not, but the fox. For they be his words and not mine” (Caxton, 188)

In conclusion, at the end of the Middle Ages, stories on the vices of Reynard the Fox were widespread all over Western Europe. Although Reynard’s image as victor over the dumb animals was satirical, the overall image of the cunning fox in society is that of a devilish trickster, a flatterer who should not be trusted. The Christian religion with its Bible had a big influence in this period, because many stories have religious morals, stories like that of Chauntecleer which warn people about fox-like flatterers. In addition, the narrator in *The History of Reynard the Fox* warns his audience that more and more people learn the false Reynard’s craft to aid themselves in their social position while victimizing others. All in all, the cunning fox has a devilish image, a negative connotation of slyness, and is used as a warning to the audience, in particular good Christians.

Chapter 3: Foxes and Politics in the Early Modern

Period

After the Middle Ages, several movements like Renaissance and Humanism came up with pre-medieval but also new ideas. Standards shifted: God, spirituality, and afterlife were no longer the most important things in life. People rather focussed on the individual, self awareness and earthly matters. These kind of ideas and movements spread all around Europe. The origins of some of these movements, like the Renaissance and Humanism, can be found in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy. At the start of the 16th century, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote his political treatise *Il Principe*, sharing his ideas of a successful ruler and giving practical advice. In one of his chapters he points out that princes should not only be human, but that they also should embody the animal. He gives the example of the properties of the lion and the fox and the combination of the two making the perfect ruler. However, although some received his ideas and advice positively, others detested his works and considered them immoral and a-religious. Nevertheless, Machiavelli had a big influence and his ideas, well or badly received, were known to many. An English play that shows traces of Machiavellism and treats the fox's property of cunningness, yet satirizes it, is the play *Volpone or the Fox* by Ben Jonson. Unlike Reynard, a fox given human traits, Jonson uses the fox as a metaphor for people and human qualities as a didactic tool to let the people reflect upon themselves. *Volpone or The Fox* is a comedy in which the protagonists, Volpone and Mosca, deceive greedy Venetians and are punished in the end for their actions. These two works show the cunning fox in two different lights. Machiavelli sees the fox's cunningness as a positive and a necessary skill, but makes it an unwanted skill for others who

believe his ideas to be immoral. What follows are responses in treatises like that of Thomas Hobbes and plays like that of Ben Jonson who emphasize the unwanted fox-like skills like cunningness and deceit and the belief that evil deceit is self-defeating. Consequently, Early Modern England was not in favour of the cunning fox in society.

Machiavelli and *Il Principe* (1532)

Nicolò Machiavelli believes the cunningness of the fox to be a good skill. He tries to convince his reader that if one wants to be a good ruler, one has to make use of cunningness to keep power and control. Machiavelli elaborates on this by giving the example of the lion and the fox, their skills, and how these skills are combined in a perfect leader: “A prince, therefore, being compelled knowingly to adopt the beast, ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves” (*The Prince*, 125). The lion stands for strength and powerful force, someone who could defeat his enemies (the wolves). The fox stands for a smart and cunning ruler who manages to deceive others to succeed. Machiavelli exemplifies why having fox-like skills could come in handy:

Those who rely simply on the lion do not understand what they are about. Therefore a wise lord cannot, nor ought he to, keep faith when such observance may be turned against him, and when the reasons that cause him to pledge it exist no longer. If men were entirely good this precept would not hold, but because they are bad, and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them. (*The Prince*, 125)

Machiavelli concludes with: “he who has known best how to employ the fox has succeeded best” (*The Prince*, 125-126). He admits it is unnecessary to have all mentioned skills, these “good qualities”, nevertheless, “it is very necessary to appear to have them” in the eyes of opponents and subjects (*The Prince*, 127).

Machiavelli’s treatise is permeated with thoughts and advice that were considered immoral and a-religious. He believes that evil is in human nature and that social morals should not hold people back while achieving something (*The Prince*, 112-113). In addition, “it is necessary for [the ruler] to have a mind ready to turn itself accordingly as the winds and variations of fortune force it, yet, ... not to diverge from the good if he can avoid doing so, but, if compelled, then to know how to set about it” (*The Prince*, 127). Like in Celtic culture, fox-like skills are admired by Machiavelli.

According to Frans van Dooren the political situation in Machiavelli’s Europe is characterized by the emergence of large sovereign states and the quest for national unity (12). Therefore, Machiavelli’s treatise on the perfect and successful ruler was relevant. In addition, Machiavelli’s ideas connect to those of the Humanist movement, especially the idea of men who are not dependent on God anymore, as the individual can create his own course (Dooren, 31). Nevertheless, although his views and issues were current at that time, his ideas and pieces of advice were not embraced by everyone.

Machiavelli’s treatise was received positively by some people in the 17th and 18th centuries as they believed it assisted the people. They believed that by writing *Il Principe* Machiavelli actually intended to expose the cunning and violence of those in power and, by doing so, tried to attend the people instead of the rulers. Machiavelli’s advice to rulers indirectly

made clear to the people what unscrupulous means rulers practice (Dooren,48). For instance, at the start of the 17th century Traiano Boccalini praises Machiavelli in his critical political work as the revealer of the cruelties of princes (Dooren, 49).

Nevertheless, many received *Il Principe* negatively as it was found immoral and a-religious. Especially the religious community disapproved. Frans van Dooren gives an example: the English cardinal Reginald Pole accused Machiavelli of impiety in his work *Apologia ad Carolum V* as the latter wanted to make religion subservient to the state interest. As a result, Machiavelli's works were placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1559. The anti-Machiavellians saw Machiavelli as a scavenger of faith and morals, one who bothered himself with neither God nor commandments (Dooren, 44). Furthermore, there is the English expression of 'the Old Nick' which refers to the devil. Its etymology is a bit obscure, yet one of the theories takes into consideration a connection or derivation from the name Niccolò. Anatoly Liberman discusses the Machiavelli and 'the Old Nick' theory. He gives an example of Samuel Butler who contributes to this etymological theory in his *Hudibras*: "Nick Machiavel had ne'er a trick, / Though he gave his name to our Old Nick" (Butler, III,1, 1313-1315).

The English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who wrote his own political treatise *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (1651), agrees on several issues with Machiavelli, yet not on the elaboration of power by rulers. For instance, Hobbes agrees with the idea of the negative inborn nature of men and the need for a ruler. "In the state of nature, before the foundation of some sovereign power to keep them all in awe, everyone is continually at war with everyone else and life ... is solitary, poor nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1594-1595). On the other hand, Hobbes is critical of the use of wit and deceit, or in Machiavelli's words, the skills of the fox. He claims it to be unwanted to have

cunning and deceitful men and they should be cast out of society: “He which declares he thinks it reason to deceive those that help him can in reason expect no other means of safety than what can be had from his own single power. He therefore that breaketh his covenant, and consequently declareth that he thinks he may with reason do so, cannot be received into any society” (Hobbes, 1602). As Machiavelli believes deceitfulness is a necessary skill for a ruler, as all people are bad and everyone wants to deceive each other anyway, Hobbes disagrees and portrays the deceiver as undesirable. This might be explained by the more moral approach of Hobbes.

Emblems

Arthur Henkel and Albrecht Schöne examined symbolic art of the 16th and 17th century in their work *Emblemata: Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI-XVII Jahrhunderts* (1967). The fox is one of the many animals they explore in emblems. Most emblems are inspired by Aesop’s fables, showing the cunningness, smartness, and cautiousness of the fox. Like Aesop’s life lessons and warnings embedded in some of his fables, some emblems also suggest a warning concerning the fox. For instance, the emblem of “Fuchs in einem abgeholzten Wald” symbolises a fox which cannot hide as the forest has been cut down. Cornered it will hide in its hole. The warning lies in the reference to the fox which is called murderer: “Der Mörder ist entdeckt” (Henkel, 458). The second warning cautions people not to be easily convinced of victory based on the withdrawal of the fox in its hole. “Du g’winst dem Feindt nichts an / hast auch vor [i]hm kein rhu / Wo er behelt sein Nest darinn er sich verhehlet” (Henkel, 458). Concealed in its nest, the fox still poses a threat as it could scheme again.

Ben Jonson's *Volpone or the Fox* (1606)

In Ben Jonson's satirical play *Volpone or the Fox*, the cunning deceit by Volpone and Mosca is illustrated as a negative skill in society. Jonson uses Aesop's fables and the emblems to enforce a warning and a didactic message. Although Jonson agrees with Machiavelli on the fact that fox-like skills make men successful as Volpone is successful due to his cunningness, Jonson elaborates that the deceivers can also be deceived and that eventually evil cunning will defeat itself in the long run. Furthermore, the characters and their punishments for their cunning crimes also serve a didactic purpose.

The symbolic meaning of the cunning fox as something negative, something to distrust, can be found in the Aesop fables and emblems as they warn people for deceitfulness and cunningness, which is represented in the fox figure. The antithesis of the symbolic fox as a warning and something to distrust can be found in Machiavelli, who regards the cunning fox as useful. Rulers should see the fox as their example as cunning and deceit can make them great and powerful. Both the positively (Machiavelli) and the negatively (Aesop and emblems) illustrated deceitful fox comes together in *Volpone or the Fox*.

References to fables and emblems contribute to the fox as a negative cunning symbol which tricks others. Many Renaissance writers looked back to the classics. It is, therefore, not a surprise to find Aesop's fables in Jonson's work *Volpone*. Jonson makes use of these fables in combination with emblems. Reference to the fox and the carrion birds can be found twice in the play. First of all in the plot: Volpone, a Venetian gentleman whose name means fox, acts to be on his death bed and the Venetians Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, whose names mean vulture, raven, and crow and represent carrion birds, symbolically swoop down to feast on the fox's legacy by becoming his heir. In addition, as Voltore comes by to visit Volpone on his deathbed,

Volpone says:

VOLPONE Now, now, my clients
 Begin their visitation! Vulture, kite,
 Raven, and gorcrow¹³, all my birds of prey
 That think me turning carcass, now they come.
 I am not for 'em yet. (Jonson, 1.2.89-92)

Then there are several references to the fable “The Fox and the Crow”. The first can be found when Mosca talks about a gold platter, a present by Voltore:

MOSCA Huge, massy, and antique, with your name inscribed
 and [coat of] arms engraven
 VOLPONE Good! And not a fox
 Stretched on the earth, with fine delusive sleights¹⁴
 Mocking a gaping crow? Ha, Mosca?
 MOSCA [*laughing*] Sharp sir. (Jonson, 1.2.94-97)

Although it is only Volpone’s name engraved on the golden platter, there might as well be a deceiving fox engraved. The emblem which Volpone is describing describes his own character. A second reference on the crow and Fox fable can be found after Volpone announces his own death:

¹³ Carrion crow

¹⁴ Deceptive tricks

VOLPONE I shall have instantly my vulture, crow,

Raven come flying hither on the news¹⁵

To peck for carrion, my she-wolf and all,

Greedy and full of expectation –

MOSCA And then to have it ravished from their mouths?

VOLPONE 'Tis true. I will ha' thee put on a gown

And take upon thee as thou wert mine heir; (Jonson, 5.2.64-70)

The 'it' Mosca is referring to is symbolically the cheese¹⁶ in the crow's beak and refers to Volpone's legacy Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino think have in their possession. A third reference can be found as Volpone points out that Corvino has been tricked: a witty merchant, the fine bird Corvino / ... Should not have sung your shame and dropped your cheese, / To let the fox laugh at your emptiness" (Jonson, 5.8.11-14). Lastly, "The Fox and the Crow" motive can be found in the bigger plot. Mosca the parasite, who is first a student of his master Volpone, eventually becomes like his master, a successful deceiver. Ironically, Volpone thinks he is the deceitful fox, yet Mosca outwits him with his own deceit. In the plot, Volpone signs a will that says Mosca is his inheritor as he wants to play an extra scurvy trick on the carrion birds. Nevertheless, Mosca deceives his master as he keeps Volpone's legacy. The cheese of the Aesop fable symbolises Volpone's legacy. Consequently, Mosca is like the fox in the fable who receives and eats the cheese; Volpone is now the crow who has let go of his cheese. In case of Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, the carrion birds; they all thought they had the cheese in their

¹⁵ The news the servants Castrone and Nano have to spread on the death of Volpone

¹⁶ Sometimes the crow in the fable holds cheese, sometimes meat. Jonson uses cheese in his adaptation.

grasp, but lost it sort to speak, as Mosca received the cheese from Volpone.

On the other hand, Jonson also goes into Machiavelli's idea on the fox's usefulness and success of cunningness. He illustrates Volpone as a successful man who accomplished his success by cunning and deceit. Nevertheless, he still depicts the cunningness as something negative as cunningness has its limits and destroys those who know no limits. In the beginning of the play, Jonson points out earlier successes of Volpone the fox. Volpone compares his shining treasure with the sun and admires it. Nevertheless, he continues saying: "I glory / More in the cunning purchase of my wealth / than in the glad possession" (Jonson, 1.1.30-32). Volpone does not try to gain wealth for his own sake and although, at one point, he uses his trickery to satisfy his lust for Celia, most importantly he uses his trickery for his own entertainment. The success of cunningness can also be found when the truth almost comes to light or when things do not go as planned. Although the schemers have to improvise, they seem to find a way to avert the tides into their favour. For instance, Volpone sees he is in trouble: "I'm caught / I' mine own noose" and has to reverse his proclaimed death (Jonson, 5.10.13). He tells Voltore to act like he was possessed. As one of the avocatore says "if he were/ Possessed, as it appears, [Voltore's written statement] is nothing", Volpone gets a grip on the situation again (Jonson, 5.12.37).

Although Machiavelli believes in the survival of the most cunning, Jonson believes that deceit is self-defeating in the long run. Volpone gets the chance to stop when he has successfully made fools of the carrion birds. As Mosca tells him: "We must here be fixed; / Here we must rest. This is our masterpiece. / We cannot think to go beyond this" (Jonson, 5.2.12-13). Nevertheless, Volpone does not know his limits and wants to go the extra mile to take joy in the others' dejection. In addition, he will not believe Mosca to be the next master deceiver, the one to deceive him. As Volpone tells everyone he is alive, he trusts Mosca will back him up: "the

advocate / Had betrayed all; but now it is recovered. / All's o'the hinge¹⁷ again. Say I am living” (Jonson, 5.12.53-54). Nonetheless, Mosca tells the avocatore that his master is dead and Volpone sees that Mosca is trying to cheat him out of everything. Mosca will not be bribed and Volpone is going to lose all that he has. The two characters are greedy, stubborn, and want to come out as sole winners, consequently defeating each other. Mosca is not content with half of Volpone's wealth and Volpone does not want to be the only loser in his own game. As a result, Volpone reveals the whole plot:

VOLPONE The fox shall here uncase¹⁸ *He puts off his disguise.*

MOSCA (*aside*) Patron!

VOLPONE Nay, now

My ruins shall not come alone. Your match

I'll hinder sure; my substance shall not glue you

Nor screw you into a family.

MOSCA (*aside*) Why, patron!

VOLOPONE I am Volpone, and [*pointing to MOSCA*] this is my knave. (Jonson, 5.12.84-89)

Consequently, the innocent go free and the deceivers, including the carrion birds Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino, are punished equivalent to their crime.

Furthermore, Jonson puts emphasis on the characters being examples. Accordingly, they serve as didactic tools. For instance, whereas Reynard the fox gets away with his sly deeds,

¹⁷ Running smoothly

¹⁸ Reveal himself

Volpone the Fox and the others do not. Greed, marital infraction, corruptness, and cunning deceit were unwanted in society and so Voltore, Corbaccio, Corvino, Mosca, and Volpone, who are guilty of these sinful deeds, are punished. One of the avocatore indicates their didactic purpose by saying “the impostor, he is a thing created / T’ exceed example!¹⁹” (Jonson, 4.5.8) and at the end of the play Volpone²⁰ says “the fox [has been] punished by the laws” (Jonson, 5.12.153).

In Conclusion, although Machiavelli portrays fox skills as positive and necessary, English political treatises and plays articulated the resistance against his immoral ideas. In particular, writers resisted against his encouragement to use fox-like skills such as deceit to be successful in life. *Volpone* is the site where two competing discourses of cunning and deceitfulness clash: the traditional moralistic one, of Aesop and the emblems, and the more admiring one of Machiavelli. Jonson involved both of them, yet rather tends to the moralistic side. Although Volpone has been successful and turns misfortune to fortune with his cunningness, eventually Volpone and Mosca’s cunningness are punished to set an example for the audience. The symbolic fox is therefore something to distrust and should be excluded from society.

¹⁹ The Norton Anthology adds to “example” the meaning ‘precedent’, emphasizing the didactic purpose of the nefarious deeds done by Volpone and the others.

²⁰ As speaker of the epilogue

Chapter 4: Foxes and Morals in the Modern Period

Strikingly, there is a theme that repeats itself through the ages: the stealing cunning fox outsmarting others. Also in the Modern Period, this pattern appears in literature. An example of this can be found in D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox*. Lawrence portrays one of his characters like a fox, not only by skills but also in appearance. He uses the fox in his advantage to make a statement on gender roles, a common issue in his time during the 1910's and 20's. Also sayings and expressions, originated in earlier ages, are still daily used. Sayings and slang have different meanings for the symbolic fox, ranging from positive and admirable to negative and distrustful. An element added which has not yet been discussed is the fox in children's literature. Adults know the world is not black and white; things cannot always be morally justified. Nevertheless, children often see black and white, good and bad, hero and villain. Still, Roald Dahl goes into this kind of issue in his *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. The cunning fox steals from the farmers, yet Dahl presents the fox as a hero. Writers have a great influence on children and what children read might have an influence on their worldview. Dahl presents the fox as a positive character, not something bad or something to beware of, which is unlike the message in earlier periods. In addition, he redefines the moral on stealing which could be picked up by adult readers. All in all, it is clear the Modern Period has been influenced by earlier ages; themes and distrust can still be found, for instance in sayings and idioms. Nevertheless, the symbolic fox people are warned about has changed. The fox is rather used with a positive connotation. In addition, also in children's literature, the fox is not something to be afraid of or something to distrust. Consequently, the fox and its image of a cunning animal are rather positive in the Modern

Period.

D.H. Lawrence *The Fox* (1923)

In D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox*, the fox is used as a symbol in the love and hate triangle of the protagonists Jill Banford, Nellie March, and Henry. The story is about two women living together running a farm. They are tormented by a fox which is killing their chickens. Then one day, a soldier comes by changing the lives of both women. There are several opinions of the fox in the story. It is feared, yet also received as something mysteriously interesting; it is loved, but also hated, and all dependent on the different protagonists in the story. There is a real fox and a symbolic fox. The real fox is like an omen, a vicious threat to Banford, but something mysteriously interesting to March. In addition, it stirs things up in the henhouse. The symbolic fox is Henry, the young soldier who disrupts Banford and March's life on the farm. As the story unfolds Henry the fox is positive in March's eyes, yet a monster in Banford's eyes. Furthermore, Lawrence uses the cunning fox Henry to make a statement on the natural state of gender roles.

There are several references to Henry being a fox, starting with fox-like features in his outer appearance. When March first meets him, she concludes: "whether it was the thrusting forward of the head, or the glisten of fine whitish hairs on the ruddy cheek-bones, or the bright, keen eyes, that can never be said: but the boy was to her the fox, and she could not see him otherwise" (Lawrence, 14). Throughout the story, more of the same observations are given, for instance when March remembers Henry's face with "the straight snout of a nose, and the two eyes staring above" (Lawrence, 57). Lawrence also displays character traits comparable to those of the fox: Henry creeps around "stealthily" (36), "keenly and cautiously" (48), it is "in his nature to be a listener" (47) thus making him very observant, and he is "half-hidden, watching

[March]”, like a fox watches his prey (23). The symbolism continues in the two women being the chickens, in particular March being the fox’s prey. Banford and March bicker over little things like hens in a henhouse. In addition, “Banford turtled up like a little fighting cock, facing March and the boy” as she wants to protect March from the fox Henry (Lawrence, 51). Moreover, a reference to Chaucer’s fable of Chauntecleer can be found. First of all, the symbolic reference of the fox in the hencoop, Henry being the fox who catches March by persuasion. Secondly, like Chauntecleer, March has a dream of impending doom as she dreams about Banford’s death. In the dream, Banford lies in a wooden coffin “in which the bits of chopped wood were kept” (Lawrence, 40). She is covered by the pelt of a fox. This is an indication of what will happen later on in the story. Banford is like dead wood, something in the way, like the tree that is cut down by March and Henry. The fox pelt is a reference to Henry, who kills Banford by cutting the tree down. Normally, such a dream would warn people, but it does not warn March nor makes her cautious towards ‘the fox’. In addition, she does not act on it, something that can be interpreted as March’s intuition that knows this omen should happen as this will restore balance. Nevertheless, she sometimes thinks about the dream resulting in a bad feeling, which can be seen as up flaring rebellion against her intuition.

Henry as calculating fox carefully breaks the bond between the two women, making March more interested in him and Banford hate him. Secondly, like a fox he awaits his opportunity to strike, making him successful in killing his enemy Banford and marrying March. From the beginning Henry is calculative: “he was a huntsman in spirit ... He wanted to bring down March as his quarry, to make her his wife. He was not quite sure how he would go on. And March was suspicious” (Lawrence, 24). He slowly captures March’s interest and love. First March felt safe with Banford, but uncomfortable with Henry, yet slowly things turn around and

March admits “she felt strangely safe and peaceful in [Henry’s] presence ... She felt afraid of Jill [Banford]” (Lawrence, 56). Henry and March make plans to marry. As a result, Henry makes Banford, who actually welcomed him with open arms, his enemy as he corkscrews himself between the two girlfriends. Banford has a big influence on March and tries to convince her not to marry Henry. “Oh Nellie, he’ll despise you, he’ll despise you like the awful little beast he is, if you give way to him”, but March trusts Henry “I don’t think he’s as bad as all that”, to which Banford replies “no, because he’s been playing up to you” (Lawrence, 37-38). When Henry is away, Banford succeeds to convince March not to wed Henry. Consequently, Henry is angry, but will not let violent animal traits take over. Instead, he stays like the fox, calm and calculative, ready to scheme: “in his mind [Henry] was lurking and scheming towards an issue, he would have committed some insane act. Deep in himself he felt like roaring and howling and gnashing his teeth and breaking things. But he was too intelligent. He knew society was on top of him, and he must scheme” (Lawrence, 58). His scheme ensures that Banford dies, so nothing remains for March to stay. As he is going to cut the tree down he warns Banford to move to another place. He knows how to make the tree fall on top of her, but still tells her to move. He does this as he knows she will not move as he asks her to, just to oppose him. In addition, by telling her to step away Henry takes away suspicion of him killing her on purpose as he has warned her beforehand. “He watched with intense bright eyes, as he would watch a wild goose he had shot. Was it winged, or dead? Dead!” (Lawrence, 65). Overall, Henry is successful as he uses the tricks of the fox, making March love him and eliminating Banford.

What is more, Lawrence uses the cunning fox to make a statement concerning gender roles. That is, Henry the fox dominates the masculine March, turning her back to her natural feminine being. In the early twentieth century, the change of gender roles was a loaded issue. As

Charles Hatten agrees: “the confluence of intense gender anxiety, a rethinking of sexual life that broke with Victorian sexual norms, and a rebellion against bourgeois society were indeed crucial elements of the modernist moment that affected a great many figures of the period”. A considerable amount of literature has been published on the gender role issue in D.H.Lawrence’s works. These studies go into theories on feminism, heterosexuality, queer theory, and postmodernism. For this research, the importance of Lawrence using the cunning fox Henry as a tool to dominate and bring women back to a more Victorian gender role matters. To place the story in its social context, women had to deviate from their traditional Victorian gender role due to the First World War. As the men were at war, the women had to take over their labour, not only industrially, but also at home. Lawrence represents this in his character March who undertakes all of the male chores on the farm. Banford represents the independent woman who does not need men in her life. Banford is therefore very mad when March is going to marry Henry. She says: “that’s what [Henry] wants: to come and be master here. Yes, imagine it! That’s what we’ve got the place together for, is it, to be bossed and bullied by a hateful red-faced boy” (Lawrence, 37). Due to Henry’s presence around the farm, March changes from being masculine to being more and more feminine. For instance in appearance, described by Henry: “She was a strange character to him. Her figure, like a graceful young man’s, piqued him” (Lawrence, 23). Later Henry sees a change in March who has put on a dress instead of her land-girl’s uniform:

To his amazement March was dressed in a dress of dull, green silk crape. His mouth came open in surprise. ... No she was another being. She was something quite different. Seeing her always in the hard-cloth breeches, wide on the hips, buttoned on the knee,

strong as armour, and in the brown puttees and thick boots, it had never occurred to him that she had a woman's legs and feet. Now it came upon him. She had a woman's soft, skirted legs, and she was accessible. (Lawrence, 47-48)

Both March and Henry have a uniform, Henry the soldiers uniform and March her land-girls uniform. As she is not wearing her uniform but something that better fits her gender, Henry is pleased.

Not only a change in appearance but also a change towards March's subservience to male dominance can be seen. Charles Hatten observes there is an "insistent glorification of the phallic power of men over women" in Lawrence's work. Several times, sentences concerning non-physical masculinity overpowering the female can be found in the story. When Henry speaks to March for instance: "[Henry's] voice had such a curious power over her; ...She struggled somewhere for her own power" (Lawrence, 25). Also in her actions the change can be found. For days, March had been busy cutting down a tree. When Henry returns to the farm and the women, March is on the verge of striking the final blow. Nevertheless, when Henry offers to finish this chore she willingly gives in to his request, symbolising the woman giving the male chore back to the man. Nevertheless, March tries to resist this natural male dominance and Henry tries to quench this flame of resistance. "[Henry] wanted her to commit herself to him, and to put her independent spirit to sleep. ... He wanted to make her submit, yield, blindly pass away out of all her strenuous consciousness. He wanted to take away her consciousness, and make her just his woman. Just his woman" (Lawrence, 69-70). If she were to fully yield to him, all would be natural: "no more of this awful straining. She would not be a man anymore, an independent woman with a man's responsibility" (Lawrence, 70). Henry quenches most of her resistance

when he kills Banford. He thinks March is all his now, her will broken and ready to turn back to a more natural female state, but still March tries to hang on: “and [March] was so tired, so tired, like a child that wants to go to sleep, but which fights against sleep as if sleep were death. ... She *would* be an independent woman to the last. – But she was so tired, so tired of everything. And sleep seemed near. And there was such rest in the boy” (Lawrence, 70).

Nevertheless, Lawrence ends with an open ending. Whether March fully yields is not clear, but the symbolic purpose of the fox in Henry is clear. The fox, standing for the natural order, comes to the farm to change the unnatural order back to the natural order, in which females are females and males are males. It is made clear that the farm run by two women is a failure, suggesting that two women cannot have a ‘fertile’ relationship. For that a man is needed. In addition, it seems D.H. Lawrence redefines the moral ‘thou shall not kill’ into something in which things are allowed for the greater good, in this case bringing women back to their natural roots. This gives Henry some justification for what he does, including killing Banford. It is in the fox’s nature to steal chickens as it is in men’s nature to take a woman. Consequently, Henry is acting according to his instincts, trying to snap March out of her unnatural life style and chopping the ‘dead wood’, Banford, out of her life. All in all, Lawrence uses the symbolic fox to show that society should take the natural world as an example. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether the fox fully succeeds in returning women to their natural gender role, probably mirroring the writer’s anxiety over the future of changing gender roles in his time.

Modern Sayings and Slang

There are several sayings in the modern language that refer to the fox. When it comes to the cunningness of the fox, there is still a sense of warning or distrust attached. For instance, *as sly*

as a fox; which means to be smart and clever²¹. This could be both positive and negative, depending on the context in which it is said; it could express admiration, but it could also be disapproval. Another example is *set the fox to guard the henhouse*; meaning putting somebody in charge of a job, when they have a conflict of interest²². This expression is often used to refer to industry self-regulation, foremost, expressing distrust. A third saying is *as crazy as a fox*; used when someone appears to be ‘crazy’, but is acting with a hidden motive, in a cunning way²³. Again this expresses a sense of distrust towards the fox, the person, as he or she does not show his or her real face. Nevertheless, there is also a saying, or rather slang, which is positive towards the fox: *a foxy lady*; referring to a sexy, sensually attractive woman²⁴.

Roald Dahl’s *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970)

Fantastic Mr. Fox is a children’s novel by Roald Dahl. In the children’s eyes, Mr. Fox, the protagonist, is the hero, the three farmers Boggis, Bunce, and Bean are the villains. Although Mr. Fox immorally steals from the farmers, the story is rather on the murderous Boggis, Bunce, and Bean and how Mr. Fox outwits them. Moreover, Mr. Fox comes out victorious whereas the farmers are made fun of. Mr. Fox is therefore a positively displayed fox.

Mr. Fox’s victims, or the ones he steals from, are the three farmers. Their description makes them typical villains in Dahl’s stories. Jonathon Cully comments: “by using vivid descriptions of villains and melding their physical characteristics with their personalities, Dahl forges an association of one with the other” (61). There is a song on the three farmers sang by the local human children:

²¹ According to The Free Dictionary

²² According to Urban Dictionary

²³ According to Urban Dictionary

²⁴ According to Oxford Dictionaries

Boggis and Bunce and Bean
 One fat, one short, one lean.
 These horrible crooks
 So different in looks
 Were nonetheless, equally mean. (Dahl, 5)

Moreover, Quentin Blake as the illustrator of the novel illustrated these characters as mean looking, dumb, and ugly figures. They are constantly looking angry without showing any other emotion like sadness for being robbed and outsmarted by the fox. Moreover, the only thing on their minds is killing the fox, making them scary villains: “The [excavators] were both black. They were murderous, brutal-looking monsters. ‘Here we go, then!’ shouted Bean. ‘Death to the fox!’ shouted Bunce” (Dahl, 22). Consequently, the children will not quickly sympathize with these characters. Furthermore, Dahl makes fools out of the farmers. First of all, by showing the reader that other characters laugh at the farmers:

‘hey there, Boggis! What’s going on?’
 ‘We’re after a fox!’
 ‘You must be mad!’

The people jeered and laughed. But this only made the three farmers more furious and obstinate and more determined than ever not to give up until they had caught the fox.
 (Dahl, 28)

Secondly, at the end Dahl makes their defeat definite as he ends with: “[The three farmers] sat

there by the hole, waiting for the fox to come out. And so far as I know, they are still waiting” (81).

On the other hand, as the title already implies, Mr. Fox is a positive character. This is further explained in the novel when Mrs. Fox tells her cubs: “if it wasn’t for your father we should all be dead by now. Your father is a fantastic fox” (Dahl, 19). Fantastic refers to the skills Mr. Fox has to use to keep his family alive, which is cunningness and smartness. In addition, children could sympathize with Mr. and Mrs. Fox and their cubs when they are attacked by the farmers. The foxes show vulnerability: they are anxious and crying, something children could relate to when they are scared. Blake emphasizes the charm of the foxes with his illustrations; the foxes with smiles and big eyes are appealing to children.

Nevertheless, as a children’s writer, Dahl knew he had a responsibility towards children: “I do have power ... Children are vulnerable because they don’t know they are being propagandised” (Cully, 61). Some parents and teachers are worried that Dahl’s cunning fox has a bad influence on their impressionable children. Although Mr. Fox is the protagonist, he does steal. Jonathon Cully explains how Mr. Fox can still be received as the hero in the story by children. He introduces Joy F. Moss’s findings in classroom:

Joy Moss’s class enjoyed a lengthy discussion of the “moral questions generated” by *Fantastic Mr Fox*. Here the children fully appreciated the moral ambiguity: “So far ... characters are either good or bad. But Mr. Fox is both! He is a good character that steals, and that’s bad.” They perceive the mitigating circumstances of the animals’ starvation and the farmers’ meanness. By “purifying” the characters into archetypes, Dahl enables the child to focus more clearly on the dilemmas involved. (qtd. in Cully, 63)

Dahl draws away the attention from stealing towards the three farmers' attempts on killing the foxes, making Mr. Fox and his family rather victims instead of bad guys. Metaphorically, their hands are forced: as the foxes are attacked, they have no choice but to steal from the farmers to prevent starvation. "It was lovely to realize that while the fat farmer was sitting up there on the hill waiting for them to starve, he was also giving them their dinner without knowing it" (Dahl, 44). In addition, not only the Fox family is starving, also other diggers are victims of the three farmers. As Badger says to Mr. Fox: "We're all starving to death! [...] All us diggers. That's me and Mole and Rabbit and all our wives and children. Even Weasel, [...] with Mrs. Weasel and six kids" (Dahl, 47). Mr. Fox admits it is his fault that the farmers are attacking as a response to Mr. Fox's earlier looting on the farmers' stock and he makes it up to the other animals with a feast, taking responsibility for and care of the others. Nevertheless, Badger who helps Mr. Fox with stealing the food from the three farmers has doubts:

'Doesn't this worry you just a tiny bit, Foxy?'

'Worry me?' Said Mr. Fox. 'What?'

'All this... this *stealing*.'

[Mr. Fox] said, 'do you know anyone in the *whole world* who wouldn't swipe a few chickens if his children were starving to death?' (Dahl, 59)

Badger is not easily convinced, but Mr. Fox further rectifies their actions:

'We shall simply take a little food here and there to keep us and our families alive.

Right?'

‘I suppose we’ll have to,’ said Badger.

‘If *they* want to be horrible, let them,’ said Mr. Fox. ‘We down here are decent peace-loving people.’

Badger laid his head on one side and smiled at Mr. Fox. ‘Foxy,’ he said, ‘I love you’.

(Dahl, 59-60)

At the dining table, every animal forgives Mr. Fox for getting them into trouble. Badger presents a toast: “I want you all to stand and drink a toast to our dear friend who has saved our lives this day – Mr. Fox!” (Dahl, 76). The novel ends with Mr. Fox proposing an underground village, safe from hunters aboveground and with plenty of food at their disposal, to which all animals cheer.

Although *Fantastic Mr. Fox* is a children’s novel, it is also an appealing novel for adults. In a sense, the novel is a fable about the rights of the poor. Like the folk hero Robin Hood, Mr. Fox steals from the rich and gives to the poor. “The owners of these farms had done well. They were rich men” (Dahl, 1). For the starving animals the farmers’ wealth can be found in their food and beverage: “‘It’s my turn,’ said Badger, taking the jar and tilting his head well back. The cider gurgled and bubbled down his throat. ‘It’s ... it’s like melted gold!’ he gasped. ‘Oh, Foxy, it’s ... like drinking sunbeams and rainbows!’” (Dahl, 65). Dahl redefines morality: by deviating from the idea of ‘thou shall not steal’, arguably favouring the rich, Dahl takes sides with the poor. Dahl uses the fox to outwit the rich and help the starving animals, and, therefore, encourages this redefined moral. Sometimes, something that is defined as morally bad, like stealing, is not considered bad in everyone’s eyes. In *Fantastic Mr. Fox*’s example, when the rich are bulging in food and the poor are starving due to the rich, the poor are allowed to take their food as compensation. All in all, Mr. Fox outsmarts the villains of the story, bringing a better life to the

other animals. Although he stole from the villains, Dahl presents this as a must for survival rather than a scheme.

In conclusion, it seems that in this period, people are less shied away from foxes. They know foxes are cunning and they know people can be like foxes. In expressions, this distrust can still be found, as it has its roots in earlier ages in which the fox was more distrusted. Yet, the fox in this period is not always negatively received or used. On the contrary, its skill could help Lawrence make a statement and express hopes on gender roles. The fox represents roots to nature and its skill is used by Henry to let his woman return to her more natural female state in a changing society. Moreover, Lawrence also uses the symbolic fox to justify Henry killing Banford. Furthermore, Dahl shows that foxes are not always the bad guys because they are cunning and steal food. In the children's eyes Mr. Fox does it to save his family and the other animals; presenting the fox as a hero rather than a stealing villain. In addition, sometimes outsmarting others should be permitted when poor are duped by the rich. All in all, the fox is rather positively received in the Modern Period and used by both writers to redefine traditional morals.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine how the fox has been displayed as a literary device in different time periods and whether this has changed over the ages. Periods are often influenced by the previous ones and therefore it is not a surprise that warnings applied in one period usually are taken into account in the subsequent period. This also counts for warnings against the fox; every period warns the reader or audience to beware of the fox and his tricks and deceit.

The symbolism of the fox does not change much over time. Usually the animal is linked to cunningness, flattery, and deceitfulness with sometimes extra traits such as cautiousness and wisdom. What does change is how the fox is displayed and received. In ancient times, the conception of the fox differs per culture and the connotation ranges from admirable to detestable. Christianity had a big influence on the two following periods, the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. The devilish fox that fools and tricks everyone was unwanted in their Christian moral society and images and literary works expressed warnings about deceit. In the Early Modern Period new ideas came about which enounced admiration for the cunning fox rather than distrust, giving the fox's traits an important place among human behaviour. Nevertheless, these ideas were not embraced nor supported by everybody and the distrust and negative connotations stayed attached to the fox. Only in the Modern Period, writers started to openly break with old connotations and ideas in their literature. Although sayings still indicate distrust towards the fox, writers saw the usefulness of the sly fox and made use of its symbolism. Distrust changed into admiration and appreciation. D.H. Lawrence expressed that the fox and his cunningness are not bad, it is natural behaviour and therefore amoral. Consequently, people who act like foxes act according to nature. In addition, the fox is also used to break old moralities: outsmarting others is

not always by everybody received as bad behaviour. Overall, the fox symbolism remains the same throughout the centuries, but how the fox is received and for which intentions it is used changes. Although the fox started out as a rather negative image, today the fox is more positively received. This is because societies and morals change. For instance, commoners were attracted to both Caxton and Dahl's works, as they were not particular written for the higher class, and both successful foxes were admired and appreciated by the lower class. Figurative, the fox presents the underdog and people like to see that the underdog outsmarts the more fortunate in an unequal world. Therefore, the fox seems to be a symbol for the commoner. Yet, the Middle Ages was still a conservative moralistic period in which people condemned the immoral fox. Nevertheless, the Modern Period society is less conservative and changes in morality can be detected by both literary works mentioned. The symbolic fox has grown in appreciation due to a changing society, especially as the modern period commoner appreciates the cunningness to expose hypocrisy of conservative morals.

Several limitations of this study need to be stressed. First of all, there was a restraint on information access. Several sources were not available or not available to students from Utrecht University and therefore a secondary source could not always be pursued or consulted directly. Secondly, due to word and time limitations this paper could not analyse more period specific works on fox symbolism. Further research might explore more of such works and give additional examples per period. Moreover, other art form analyses could add to a wider perspective on fox symbolism and comprehension. For instance, in regard to the Modern Period, film is an art form that has not yet been examined. A film that could be of interest is Disney's *Robin Hood*, because it presents the medieval British folk hero as a fox. Last, the time period examined has a broad scope. Consequently this study has become a rough outline to see if the symbolic fox has

changed in image and in usage over the ages. Further research concentrated on one period and more detail could make out differences in a shorter time period.

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