

## The Enigmatic Death of Cuwaert

*A Comparison between the Roman de Renart and the Dutch*

Van den vos Reynaerde

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The edition of *Van den vos Reynaerde* with an English translation by two outstanding scholars makes it possible to compare the Dutch medieval poem and versions in other languages. Regrettably, the editors introduce the current state of research to an international audience only briefly. A much-discussed topic is known as the Cuwaert issue: it is completely unclear what ignited the anger of the fox so much that he ended up killing the hare. By comparing the Dutch story with the French source I will propose a solution. The answer has implications for the tenor of the story and the question whether Reynaert should be considered a rascal or a villain.

L'édition de *Van den vos Reynaerde* avec une traduction par deux éminents chercheurs permet de comparer le poème médiéval néerlandais aux versions dans d'autres langues. Il est dommage que les éditeurs se contentent d'une brève introduction à l'état actuel de la recherche. Un sujet fort débattu est connu sous le nom de la question Cuwaert: il n'est pas du tout clair ce qui a tant déclenché la colère du renard qu'il est allé jusqu'à tuer le lièvre. Je proposerai une solution en comparant l'histoire néerlandaise avec sa source française. La réponse ne manquera pas d'avoir des implications pour la teneur du récit et le statut du personnage Reynaert, notamment s'il doit être considéré comme un coquin ou un véritable méchant.

The thirteenth-century medieval animal epic *Van den vos Reynaerde* is generally considered the foremost Dutch contribution to world literature. The poem was written by a Fleming, of whom no more is known than his first name Willem. It is an adaptation of the first branch of the *Roman de Renart*, *Li Plaid*. Paul Smith has devoted great attention to the often subtle relations between French and Dutch early-modern animal tales and animal lore in general. Time and again he has shown that only a meticulous study of these stories and images really can enhance our knowledge. For my contribution about a medieval animal story his scholarship set an example.

In *Van den vos Reynaerde* are mentioned several geographical names in the vicinity of Ghent, so the story was probably intended for an audience in Ghent.

Scholars dispute whether it was written for a court day held by the countess of Flanders in the city of Ghent or for the burghers of this city who were often in conflict with the comital power. However, it is certain that the primary audience had an intimate knowledge of courtly manners.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of *Van den vos Reynaerde*<sup>2</sup> is a freely expanded adaptation of the French source. The story takes place in an unspecified, but recognisable time in the past. The King of the animals, the lion Nobel, held court at Pentecost like a thirteenth-century prince would do. Just as in the French story the fox is accused of raping his wife by the wolf Isegrim, but the Dutch author added that Reynaert also broke the 'vrede' (truce, a period during which feuds were prohibited) by trying to kill the hare Cuwaert. When the corpse of a hen was brought before the King, Nobel decided to summon Reynaert to his court. Subsequently, the bear, the cat, and Grimbeert the badger, cousin of Reynaert, were sent to his castle. Grimbeert succeeded to bring him to court. There Reynaert was condemned to the gallows. In the French version he was quickly pardoned when he promised to better his life.

From the fox's conviction onward, the Dutch story no longer follows the French version. Reynaert invented a trick to acquire a pardon. During his last confession, he claimed that his enemies had conspired against the King. This military coup would have been financed by the legendary treasure of the Gothic King Ermenric. According to his tale, Reynaert prevented Bruun from becoming King by stealing the treasure from the conspirators. The treasure was supposedly hidden at Kriekeputte by the fox. The hare Cuwaert confirmed that this place really existed and the King believed Reynaert. Reynaert promised the King his treasure and vowed to depart on a pilgrimage in exchange for a pardon. Blinded by his thirst for gold, the King granted the sly fox leave to go. Nobel warned his subjects not to mistreat Reynaert and his wife. His falsely accused enemies were taken prisoner and skinned.

Reynaert left court with the chaplain Belijn the ram and the hare Cuwaert. Cuwaert was invited by the fox to comfort his wife. Inside Reynaert's den, Cuwaert was killed and devoured by the fox and his family. Thereafter, Reynaert

1 Wackers, Paul, "Reynard the Fox", in Gerritsen, W.P. – Melle, Anthony G. van (eds.), *A Dictionary of Medieval Heroes. Characters in Medieval Narrative Traditions and Their Afterlife in Literature, Theatre and the Visual Arts. Translated from the Dutch by Tanis Guest* (Woodbridge: 1998) 216. Wackers writes 'aristocratic way of life'. Bouwman and Besamusca think the implied audience is the patriciate of Ghent: Bouwman, André – Besamusca, Bart (eds.), *Of Reynaert the Fox. Text and Facing Translation of the Middle Dutch Epic Van den vos Reynaerde. Translated by Thea Summerfield. Includes a chapter on Middle Dutch by Matthias Hüning and Ulrike Vogl* (Amsterdam: 2009) 33.

2 I used the edition of Bouwman and Besamusca: Bouwman – Besamusca, *Of Reynaert the Fox, op. cit.* All citations and translations are from this edition unless stated otherwise. For the orthography I follow the Reynaert journal *Tiecelijn*.

asked Belijn to bring a letter to the King stowed away in the pilgrim's bag. The letter was in fact nothing less than Cuwaert's head. When the head was taken out of the bag, King Nobel realised that he had been duped. Reynaert had brought him in a feud with his best barons. The leopard Firapeel came up with a solution and made peace. The wolf and the bear were entitled to harm and kill Reynaert and his family and they were also allowed to hunt Belijn and his relatives, the sheep, for ever.

This version of the story of Reynaert the fox became widely known in Europe through an extended version, *Reynaerts historie*, which was translated shortly before 1500 into Low German and by Caxton into English. The first part of *Reynaerd the fox* and the first part of *Reynke de Vos* are almost literal translations of *Van den vos Reynaerde*.<sup>3</sup>

## 1 The English Edition of *Van den vos Reynaerde*

In 1991 André Bouwman obtained his doctorate with distinction on a comparison between the French and Dutch versions of the story. He concluded that, compared to the French example, the Dutch version features animals with a heightened legal awareness, the tricks are more intensified and there are more conflicts in the story.<sup>4</sup>

Bouwman and his internationally renowned colleague Bart Besamusca are extremely well placed to make an edition of *Van den vos Reynaerde*. Their English translation of the Middle Dutch poem *Van den vos Reynaerde* published in 2009 has been highly welcomed, as an important link in the European tradition of stories about the cunning fox has been made available for an international audience, thereby facilitating a comparative approach of the fox stories for all scholars of medieval literature. They also briefly introduce the reader to the current debates about the interpretation of the poem.<sup>5</sup>

At the moment the most important subject of debate is the fox's character. The Ghent scholar Jo Reynaert has criticised reading the *Reynaert* along moral

3 Wäckers, "Reynard the Fox", 211–219. Varty, Kenneth (ed.), *Reynard the Fox. Social Engagement and Cultural Metamorphosis in the Beast Epic from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York – Oxford: 2000).

4 Bouwman, A.Th., *Reinaert en Renart. Het dierenepos Van den vos Reinaerde vergeleken met de Oudfranse Roman de Renart* (Amsterdam: 1991) 391–413. Bouwman has communicated his findings to an international audience in: Bouwman, A.Th., "Van den vos Reynaerde and Branch I of the Roman de Renaert. Tradition and originality in a Middle Dutch Epic", *Neophilologus* 76 (1992) 482–501.

5 Bouwman – Besamusca (eds.), *Of Reynaert the Fox*.

lines. In his view the fox is a comical rather than an evil character.<sup>6</sup> Bouwman and Besamusca have responded to this critique by admitting that the medieval public ‘must certainly have admired the ingenuity of Reynaert’s tricks’, but their admiration did not prevent ‘them from arriving at a moral judgement of the fox’s behaviour’.<sup>7</sup> This is a theoretically unsatisfying answer, because the sympathy of the public normally lies with whomever makes them laugh.<sup>8</sup>

From Bouwman and Besamusca’s point of view that the fox is an evil character it is quite understandable that they do not discuss a new interpretation of the ending of the story, which Frits van Oostrom has introduced in his history of Dutch literature until 1300, *Stemmen op Schrift*,<sup>9</sup> and which has since then also been discussed by Jef Janssens in his survey of the state of the Reynaert research. Janssens, as well as Van Oostrom, conclude that the current view that the court of King Nobel ceases to exist as an orderly society is untenable.<sup>10</sup> In the Middle Ages the end of *Van den vos Reynaerde* was not interpreted as the collapse of the kingdom of the animals, brought about by the evil fox. In *Reynaerts historie*, the early fifteenth-century adaptation and extension of the story, the court day of King Nobel was simply prolonged after Firapeel restored peace. Bouwman and Besamusca consider the end of the story as a reversal of the Messianic peace described in the book of Isaiah, where the lamb lies with the wolf and the leopard with the kid.<sup>11</sup> This seems a bit farfetched. A leopard does play a role at the end of the story, but there is no kid and the chaplain

6 Reynaert, Jo, “Botsaerts verbijstering. Over de interpretatie van *Van den vos Reynaerde*”, in Dijk, Hans van – Wackers, Paul (eds.), *Pade crom ende menichfoude. Het Reynaert-onderzoek in de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw* (Hilversum: 1999) 267–280; Janssens, Jozef, “Reinaerts felheid. Nog maar eens over de interpretatie van Van den vos Reynaerde”, in *Tiecelijn* 14 (2001) 125–133; Oostrom, Frits van, *Stemmen op schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300* (Amsterdam: 2006) 488–491; Wackers, P., “Reynaert the Fox: Evil, Comic, or Both?”, in Tudor, A.P. – Hindley, A. (eds.), *Grant Risee? The Medieval Comic Presence. Essays in Memory of Brian J. Levy* (Turnhout: 2006) 305–318.

7 Bouwman – Besamusca (eds.), *Of Reynaert the Fox* 27 (quotation) and 276. Compare Bouwman, A.Th., *Reinaert en Renart* 414.

8 Reynaert, “Botsaerts verbijstering” 273. Groebner, Valentin, *Defaced: The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: 2004) 81–82 and Putter, Jan de, “Firapeel helpt”, *Tiecelijn* 19 (2006) 215–217.

9 Oostrom, Frits van, *Stemmen op schrift* 474–478.

10 Janssens, Jozef, “Dolen door het land van Reynaert. Het Reynaertonderzoek in het voorbije decennium: een hoogst persoonlijke kijk”, *Tiecelijn* 21, *Jaarboek 1 van het Reynaertgenootschap* (2008) 84–86.

11 Bouwman – Besamusca (eds.), *Of Reynaert the Fox* 242–243.

Belijn is not a lamb but a ram. A ram is an aggressive animal, that would forcibly defend its flock if need be. Belijn did not defend the faith with his life, so one may call him an unworthy priest, who just like Reynaert was rightfully dispelled from court.<sup>12</sup>

From my perspective, the feud between the King and his barons Bruun and Isegrim was indeed reconciled by the leopard Firapeel at the end of the story. A judicial reconciliation or ‘peace’ (pays) was made by which the King granted two great privileges to the bear and the wolf. They are allowed to hunt the unworthy priest Belijn and his relatives and Reynaert and his family as well, until doomsday, which simply means for ever.<sup>13</sup> Interpreted in this way, the Dutch adaptation does not alter the ending of the French story fundamentally. Just like in the French version, the story is cyclic. It ends in the same way as it begins.

## 2 The Cuwaert Issue

One of the objections that have been made against this new interpretation of the ending as a real reconciliation is that the head of the dead hare is a sign of discord, of ‘un-peace’ in the realm of the animals.<sup>14</sup> The word ‘pays’ in the last line (vs 3469) is generally interpreted as an ironic statement. This is quite an unhistorical view of the meaning of the word ‘pays’ (peace) in medieval times. A medieval king did not have a monopoly of violence; his task was to settle feuds by making peace between enemies.<sup>15</sup> Jo Reynaert has already pointed out that the common view that all animals in Nobel’s realm lived in harmony is wrong. For example, there was an argument between the cat and the dog about a sausage.<sup>16</sup>

In his dissertation Bouwman has devoted a lot of attention to what scholars call the Cuwaert issue, the enigmatic death of the hare. First, he concludes

12 Putter, Jan de, “De val van een onwaardige priester. Belijn en het slot van Van den vos Reynaerde”, *Tiecelijn* 22. *Jaarboek 2 van het Reynaertgenootschap* (2009) 294–296.

13 Putter, Jan de, “Vrede en pays in Van den vos Reynaerde. Een lezing van het slot tegen de achtergrond van de hoofse opvattingen”, *Millennium. Tijdschrift voor Middeleeuwse Studies* 14 (2000) 86–103.

14 Maesschalck, Yvan de, “Reynaerts proteïsche gestalte. Een kanttekening bij Jozef Janssens en Rik van Daele, *Reinaerts streken* (Davidsfonds, 2001)”, *Tiecelijn* 14 (2001) 176. De Maesschalck uses the modern Dutch word ‘onvrede’. Same opinion: Janssens, “Dolen door het land van Reynaert” 85.

15 Mazel, Florian, *Féodalités 888–1180. Histoire de France* (Paris: 2010) 678. Florian Mazel illustrates this with examples taken from the *Roman de Renart*.

16 Reynaert, “Botsaerts verbijstering” 275.

that the structures of the French and Dutch stories correspond considerably. In contrast to the French version, the Flemish author puts far more emphasis on Reynaert's deceitful words ('scone tale'). The ambivalence of the scene in which Cuwaert was killed lies in the fact that there is a discrepancy between the feudal animal world, where the animals live according to law, and the beastly animal world, where the law of the jungle rules. Reynaert represents the beastly world, but the den was situated in King Nobel's feudal world and that explains why the words of the fox to his wife are partly fact, partly fiction.<sup>17</sup>

In the edition Bouwman made with Besamusca, this view is repeated: 'Reynaert's cryptic account results in dramatic irony: the audience knows more than Hermeline does. This is amusing and accentuates the perversion of Reynaert's deeds.'<sup>18</sup> Bouwman and Besamusca even maintain the suggestion which was hesitantly put forward in Bouwman's dissertation that the comfort given to Reynaert and his family by eating the hare is an intertextual allusion to the Last Supper, which would make the hare the equal of Jesus Christ!<sup>19</sup> According to Bouwman the senseless killing of Cuwaert emphasises Reynaert's wickedness.<sup>20</sup>

Bouwman interprets the Cuwaert passage within the theoretical framework of a spatial opposition between the beastly world of the predators and the feudal court of King Nobel, which adds another layer of meaning to the story. He also emphasises the untruthful nature of the fox's language, which leaves room for quite a lot of speculation about the real meaning of these words. The complex reasoning that Bouwman has developed in his dissertation and repeats in the edition is hard to follow.

Reading the story in this way obscures the reason why the fox wanted to kill the hare. To a modern audience the death of the hare seems meaningless, a sign of the ill-nature of the fox. However, in medieval literature there is no pointless violence. Violence was used as a means to acquire honour and bring shame upon opponents.<sup>21</sup> Not everything Reynaert said was necessarily untrue, especially what he said to his wife. I will argue for a more literal reading of *Van den vos Reynaerde*, which is in accordance with its French source. That may lead to a better understanding of the reason why Reynaert killed the hare.

17 Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart* 331–339, esp. 331, 332 and 339.

18 Bouwman – Besamusca (eds.), *Of Reynaert the Fox* 224–227, quote: 225.

19 Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart* 340. Bouwman – Besamusca (eds.), *Of Reynaert the Fox* 226.

20 Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart* 339: 'De zinloosheid van de moord op Cuwaert onderstreept mijn inziens Reinaerts boosaardigheid'.

21 Bijsterveld, Aarnoud-Jan A., *Do ut des. Gift Giving, Memoria, and Conflict Management in the Medieval Low Countries* (Hilversum: 2007) 223–224.

### 3 Analysing the Conundrum

In the French model of *Van den vos Reynaerde*, *Li Plaid*, Branche 1 of the *Roman de Renart*, it is quite clear why Renart wants to take revenge on the hare. Couart appeared for the first time in the *Roman the Renart* after the dead hen had been buried. He laid himself on the grave and was cured miraculously of the fever caused by his cowardice. He even dared to throw a stone at the fox when he was brought to the gallows. After Renart had been pardoned and left the court as a pilgrim, Couart hid in the bushes. When the fox saw the hare, he took revenge. First Renart threatened the hare with ambiguous words, and then seized the hare to take him with him, across the valley up a hill. At the very hill top Renart mocked the King for acting in a cowardly way towards the Saracens. This gave the hare an opportunity to escape and return to court, covered with shame by Renart ('Coart cui il fet honte'). On his arrival all the animals started chasing Renart. In the continuation of this branche, they laid siege to Reynaert's castle Maupertuis.<sup>22</sup> The fox managed to escape but was not in safety.

This ending recalls several stories in Branche 11 of the *Roman de Renart* and especially those about Chantecler and Renart and the one about Renart and the titmouse. When the cock was seized by the fox, he provoked Renart to answering the insults by the prosecuting farmers. The fox then opened his muzzle so the cock could escape. Something similar happens in the story of the titmouse. There the fox, who was full of tricks ('qui molt sot de bole') was duped by the little bird several times.<sup>23</sup> So the theme of the trickster being tricked is a recurring theme in these stories. Or to be more precise, although the fox is cunning, he cannot contain his vindictiveness. In the end, the fox is the animal that is mocked.

All the Cuwaert passages in the Dutch version differ considerably from the French model. Cuwaert is mentioned early on in the Dutch version. The beaver accused Reynaert of trying to kill the hare. Reynaert promised Cuwaert to teach him the creed so he could become a chaplain. In a famous miniature reproduced on the cover of the Bouwman and Besamusca edition, Reynaert

22 Dufournet, Jean – Méline, Andrée (eds.), *Le Roman de Renart* vol. 1 (Paris: 1985) 64–65, 110–113 and 116–125 (Branche 1, verses 450–455, 1327–1330, 1361–1370 and 1463–1620). Citation 118 verse 1496. According to Bouwman the author of *Van den vos Reynaerde* made use of a manuscript following the  $\beta$ -tradition (version Roques) and a second manuscript following the  $\alpha$ -tradition (version Martin). Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart* 42.

23 Dufournet – Méline, *Le Roman de Renart* 228–237 Branche 11, verses 402–463 (Chantecler) and verses 469–563 (Titmouse). Citation 234 verse 537.

holds the hare between his legs to teach him the creed. Most scholars interpret this scene as an allusion to homosexuality, although Paul Wackers doubts it has anything to do with sex.<sup>24</sup>

The scene is more likely to be an allusion to heterosexual lust as learning the creed is used as a metaphor for sex between a cleric and a woman.<sup>25</sup> In a scene with a double meaning, we should not only take the metaphorical meaning seriously but also its literal meaning. It is quite apparent that the hare was pretty anxious to be educated in order to become a cleric. Later in the story, we are informed that before the king's truce was declared, a hound near Kriekeputte had promised the hare to pay his school fee, 'past' in Middle Dutch (vs 2674). Kriekeputte was actually an existing peat reclamation, situated on the border of present-day Belgium and the Netherlands.

Clerics and hares are well known in medieval literature for their sexual lust. In marginal illustrations, it is not uncommon to see a hare depicted as a cleric of lower ordination. Sometimes he is even accompanied by a ram who acts as a priest.<sup>26</sup> So it seems reasonable to assume that Cuwaert wanted to become a cleric because he would like to be in a position to seduce women. His first intended victim might well have been Reynaert's wife but the hare did not stand a chance because he was duly killed by the fox. The events leading up to his death already started at the court of the King.

When Nobel pardoned Reynaert, the King gave the fox a safe-conduct. This was the standard procedure during the Middle Ages. The judiciary guaranteed the safety of a convicted criminal who went on a pilgrimage, because it was not unthinkable that he might be attacked by their enemies.<sup>27</sup> The safe-conduct of the King explicitly protected Reynaert and his family. Whoever would injure one of them would put his life at risk.

24 Wackers, Paul, "[review of] J.D. Janssens e.a., *Van den Vos Reynaerde. Het Comburgse handschrift*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1991", *Tiecelijn* 5 (1992) 79–80. Rijns, Hans, "Of hi den credo niet en wel las", *Tiecelijn* 12 (1999) 163–176. Meuwese, Martine, "The Secret History of the Fox and the Hare", in Claassens, Geert H.M. – Verbeke, Werner (eds.), *Medieval Manuscripts in Transition. Tradition and Creative Recycling* (Leuven: 2006) 181–185.

25 Rijns, Hans, "Of hi den credo niet en wel las" 165.

26 Randall, Lilian M.C., *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley – Los Angeles: 1966) fig. 226 and fig. 569–571.

27 Herwaarden, Jan van, *Opgelegde bedevaarten. Een studie over de praktijk van opleggen van bedevaarten (met name in de stedelijke rechtspraak) in de Nederlanden gedurende de late middeleeuwen (ca 1300–ca 1550)* (Assen – Amsterdam: 1978) 15. Compare: Frederiks, K.J., *Het oud-Nederlandsche strafrecht*, Deel 1 (Haarlem: 1918) 133 and 157–160.

[...] ende ghebiede hu allen bi huwen live  
 dat ghi Reynaerde ende zinen wive  
 ende zinen kindren eere doet.

vs 2780–2782<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the King would dismiss all complaints about the fox.

In wille meer gheen claghe  
 van Reynaerts dinghen horen.

vs 2785–2786<sup>29</sup>

The King assumed that Reynaert had bettered his life and would do penance by going on a pilgrimage. In this way all animals were reconciled with the fox. Any further accusation of Reynaert would be prompted by vindictiveness of the plaintiff and would obstruct the fox's voyage. The king thought he had handled Reynaert's case well.

It was not uncommon for criminals to be ridiculed when they were sentenced to make a pilgrimage.<sup>30</sup> The author hints at this when he says that everybody in the German empire, between Schouwen in the present-day Netherlands and Poland, would roar with laughter when they saw the fox. The Flemish in the French Kingdom were certainly more courteous.<sup>31</sup> The King prohibited not only the harm to Reynaert but also his wife and children. On the part of the medieval audience this raised the expectation that one of them might be maltreated or even defiled.

When Reynaert left court he was accompanied by the two most peaceful animals who eat only grass, the chaplain Belijn and the would-be chaplain Cuwaert. They were willing to accompany the fox up to Maupertuus where the fox would take leave of his wife Hermeline and their offspring. It is a topos in crusader chronicles that the relatives of a leaving crusader are inconsolable. When Louis VII left on crusade his mother and wife were shedding tears, grieving and wailing.<sup>32</sup> According to the *Reynaert*, it was usage that a cleric payed a

28 '[...] and I order all of you, at the peril of your lives, to honour Reynaert and his wife and his children.'

29 'I do not wish to hear any more complaints about Reynaert's actions.'

30 Webb, Diana, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (London – New York: 2001) 51.

31 I disagree here with Jo Reynaert and Paul Wackers, who think that the audience would laugh about how Reynaert was dressed. Reynaert, "Botsaerts verbijstering" 273. Wackers, P., "Reynaert the Fox: Evil, Comic, or Both?" 310–311. By the way, this is an indication that the conflict between the countess of Flanders and the count of Holland about Zeeland territories south of the Oosterschelde was thematised in the poem.

32 Housley, Norman, *Fighting for the Cross. Crusading to the Holy Land* (New Haven – New York: 2008) 77–79.

visit to the wife left behind. Belijn, however, was too large to enter Reynaert's den. Reynaert requested the priest to ask Cuwaert if he wanted to comfort ('troeste' (vs 3080)) Hermeline and the cubs. After Belijn had asked Cuwaert to comfort Hermeline, Reynaert cajoled the hare into entering the fox's den. A wheedling fox is always up to tempting his victim to act in an immoral and illegal way. It seems likely that the lecherous hare interpreted 'comforting' rather broadly, meaning he might also try to sexually comfort Reynaert's wife.<sup>33</sup> For Reynaert 'comforting' probably meant offering the hare to Hermeline as a reward for taking care of his children. He had already promised that before going to court to defend his case (vs 1421).

When the fox entered the den, Hermeline asked Reynaert how he had managed to escape. The fox answered that he had become a pilgrim, while Bruun and Isegrim had become hostages ('ghisele') for him. The words Reynaert spoke are as much directed to Cuwaert as to Hermeline. This is a reworking of the scene in the *Roman de Renart* where Renart spoke to Couart, who was hiding himself in the bushes.<sup>34</sup> The Dutch words make unambiguous that the hare, who is still free, could not escape. The bear and the wolf were taken prisoner after Reynaert had falsely accused them of conspiring against the King.

Heere Brune ende here Ysengrijn  
Sijn worden ghisele over mi.

vs 3103–3104<sup>35</sup>

Although Bouwman and Besamusca judge that that they offered themselves as hostages for Reynaert is false information, the text does not make the point that they offered themselves voluntarily: it does say they were taken prisoner.<sup>36</sup>

Hostages were a way in which peace was guaranteed in the violent society of the Middle Ages. The *Keur van Zeeland* (Privilege of Zeeland) of 1256 opens with the provision that when the count of Holland is in Zeeland hostages have to be handed over.<sup>37</sup> Whenever a violent act was committed, the count could take revenge on the hostages. In the same way, the bear and the wolf served as

33 The *Middle Dutch Dictionary* (MNW) is known for its prudency. However, the *Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (WNT) gives the meaning 'to give sexual comfort'. WNT s.v. troosten 6. The WNT cites two 16th century examples.

34 Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart* 334.

35 'Lord Bruun and Lord Isegrim have become hostages for me.'

36 Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart* 335–336. Bouwman – Besamusca (eds), *Of Reynaert the Fox* 224.

37 Kruisheer, J.G. (ed.), *Het ontstaan van de dertiende-eeuwse Zeeuwse landkeuren. Met een teksteditie van de keur van Floris de Voogd (1256) en van de keur van graaf Floris V (1290)*, (Hilversum: 1998) 90.

a guarantee that neither Reynaert nor his wife would be attacked by someone else. The King had even proclaimed that no one must complain about the fox. Thus, Cuwaert might not expect help when he would be attacked by the fox. Reynaert was protected by the King himself.

Cuwaert the hare entered Maupertuus as a free animal, but he was in the hands of Reynaert and his wife. They could do to him whatever they pleased as a lawful retribution for his misdeed.

Die coninc hevet, danc hebbe hi,  
Cuaerde ghegheven in rechter zoene  
Al onsen wille mede te doene.

vs. 3105–3107

Bouwman and Besamusca translate the fox's words to his wife as: 'The King has – thanks be to him – presented Cuwaert as a lawful retribution, to do with him what we like.' This translation suggests that Cuwaert had been given as a present to Reynaert at court, and that Reynaert is lying. This makes no sense. However, when the words of the fox are interpreted as an ominous remark meant also for Cuwaert, they fit the context.

The participle 'ghegheven' emphasises that the hare is now completely at the hands of the receiver.<sup>38</sup> In the context of Cuwaert still being free, this means that 'The King *shall certainly* give Cuwaert as a lawful retribution'.<sup>39</sup> 'Danc hebbe hi' is a subjunctive that fits the preceding sentence, 'May we thank him'. It articulates a wish. Reynaert and his wife are indebted to the King for his gift.

These words are the consequence of King Nobel's prior command to honour Reynaert and his wife and children at the peril of the lives of trespassers. So they reveal that the hare was at the hands of the fox as a retribution for the crime he had committed against Reynaert and his family. They took the law into their own hands, which was allowed, although with restrictions, in the feuding medieval society.

Reynaert justified his deed by saying:

Die coninc die lyede das  
Dat Cuaert die eerste was,  
Die ons verriet jeghen hem.

vs. 3108–3110

38 Horst, J.M. van der, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse syntaxis*, Deel I (Leuven: 2008) 409–410.  
39 Same construction in verse 3404. See about this verse De Putter, "Vrede en pays" 90.

The translation of this passage is highly problematic. Already in the thirteenth-century Latin adaptation of the Dutch poem, *Reynardus vulpes*, the translator rendered this verse as ‘the King said that he (Cuwaert) was the first animal to complain about Reynaert and accused the fox before the King’.<sup>40</sup> Following this reading, scholars like Bouwman<sup>41</sup> suspect that Cuwaert unintentionally disclosed that there was no treasure at Kriekeputte but only counterfeiters. This interpretation is unlikely for several reasons. Firstly, the relation between Cuwaert’s death and this story is not made clear anywhere. Reynaert did not have to eliminate Cuwaert for exposing the story of the counterfeiters. Soon the King will know that there is no treasure at all. Secondly, how could Cuwaert have been the first to incriminate the fox? Many animals had already complained already before Cuwaert spoke about Kriekeputte at court. Thirdly and most importantly, Cuwaert has done something (‘verriet’) against Reynaert and his *wife*. The text has the personal pronoun ‘ons’ (us).

The Middle Dutch verb ‘verraden’ had a broader meaning than its modern Dutch equivalent. There is no doubt that further on in the poem line 3420 ‘dat hi Cuaerde verriet’ means that Belijn was unfaithful to Cuwaert by returning to court without him. So line 3110 ‘dat Cuwaert die eerste was die ons verriet’ can also be translated as ‘Cuwaert was the first to be disloyal towards us’.<sup>42</sup> These very words refer back to King Nobel’s command to honour Reynaert and his family and not to the disclosure of the counterfeiters at Kriekeputte. ‘Jeghen’ is the Middle Dutch equivalent of the Latin ‘contra’ and can mean: ‘in contradiction to’...; ‘jeghen hem’ can be interpreted as ‘against the King’s order’. This is supported by an attestation in the Middle Dutch Dictionary: the editor translates ‘ieghen de raet’ as ‘against the decision of het council’.<sup>43</sup> The King had not acknowledged this yet.

40 Huygens, R.B.C., “Reynardus Vulpes. Baudouin le Jeune et sa traduction latine de la branche flamande du Roman de Renart”, in *Serta mediaevalia: Textus varii saeculorum X–XIII. Poetica. Indices* Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis 171A (Turnhout: 2000) 877: ‘meque gravasse refert illum questumque fuisse, rex pro me primum’ (vs 1573–1574). For an edition with a translation in Dutch: Huygens, R.B.C., *Reynardus Vulpes. De latijnse Reinaert-vertaling van Balduinus Juvenis* (Zwolle: 1968) 150.

41 Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart* 337. Bouwman – Besamusca, *Of Reynaert the Fox* 225. His line of reasoning goes back to the beginning of the scholarly research of the text. Logeman, H., “Aanteekening op R.V. vs. 1311, R.I. vs. 2674”, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde* 4 (1884) 185–188.

42 The *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* (Middle Dutch Dictionary) (*MNW*) gives as explanation for this verse: Cuwaert discredits Reynaert before the King, *MNW* s.v. verraden 2. I choose *MNW* s.v. verraden 7: to treat someone disloyally. The historical Dutch dictionaries are consultable via: <<http://gtb.inl.nl>>.

43 *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* (*MNW*) s.v. jegen I, 4d.

The finite verb 'lyede' in the preceding main clause 'die coninc lyede das' can also be a subjunctive preterite instead of an indicative preterite.<sup>44</sup> The full sentence can be paraphrased as 'the King *would* acknowledge that Cuwaert was disloyal towards us against the King's orders'. Afterwards, the King *would* have approved the killing of the hare. Reynaert having caught Cuwaert red-handed, is legally entitled to act without a prior judgement by the court.<sup>45</sup>

In the following verses Reynaert concluded that he had to kill the hare because of the loyalty that he owed his wife 'Vrauwe Hermeline'. From these verses it is clear that Cuwaert had defiled the honour of Reynaert's wife.

Ende bi der trauwen die ic bem  
 Sculdich hu, vrouwe Hermeline:  
 Cuaerde naket eene groete pine.  
 Ik bem up hem met rechte gram!

vs 3111–3115

Bouwman and Besamusca translate this as, 'And by the loyalty that I owe you, Lady Hermeline: Cuwaert awaits grievous punishment. I have every reason to be angry with him!' However, the last verse could also be translated 'I have the right to be angry with him', which emphasises that Reynaert thought he acted lawfully.

Reading the passage in this way, the lines 3102–3115 closely relate to one another. Each line is a logical step in the fox's reasoning why he was entitled to kill the hare. First, Reynaert said that he was under the protection of the King: no one would dare to take revenge since the bear and the wolf had been taken hostage for the fox's family. Subsequently, he said that the King would condemn the hare. Lastly, he concluded that he had to take revenge on the hare to save the honour of his wife. Cuwaert must have wronged Hermeline after leaving court with Belijn and Reynaert. So what had Cuwaert done wrong?

A medieval woman had to give consent for someone to enter her room. This becomes clear from a passage in the *Nibelungenlied*. When Siegfried was sent to Worms as a messenger by the King, he was welcomed by the King's brothers. He asked them permission to see the Queen-mother and her daughter Kriemhilde. One of the brothers went to the ladies to inquire whether she

44 For an explanation of the subjunctive: Hüning, Matthias – Vogl, Ulrike, "Middle Dutch – A short introduction", in Bouwman – Besamusca (eds.), *Of Reynaert the Fox* 268. Horst, J.M. van der, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse syntaxis* 407–408.

45 Caenegem, R.C. van, *Geschiedenis van het strafrecht in Vlaanderen van de XI<sup>e</sup> tot de XIV<sup>e</sup> eeuw* (Brussels: 1954) 74–79.

was prepared to see Siegfried. They quickly put their welcome clothes on and greeted Siegfried in a friendly manner.<sup>46</sup>

Also, according to courtly rules, one should not enter a house unannounced. The manuscript that presents *Van den vos Reynaerde* also includes *Van zeden* (*On Good Manners*), a poem on courtly behaviour. According to this text, it was even considered a crime to enter a house hastily, without a preceding announcement.

Comstu voer yemens duere staen,  
Dune sult haestelic niet in gaen,  
Sonder te teekenne: het ware mesdaet.  
Clopt, hoest of spreect, dats mijn raet.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to Siegfried in the *Nibelungenlied*, the visit of Cuwaert to Hermeline was never announced. Earlier in the poem, the visiting Tibeert greeted Reynaert (vs 1067–1068) and Grimbeert greeted Reynaert and his wife (vs 1365). Cuwaert did not greet Hermeline, when he entered as a guest. In courtly society, a greeting had a judicial meaning: it served as a sign of peace.<sup>48</sup> Common courtesy was not observed when Cuwaert entered the den of the foxes. The poet stresses that the hare and the fox came *together* (vs 3091). Perhaps the hare should have waited on the threshold or in an antechamber. There is some contextual evidence that Cuwaert was not allowed to enter the room of Hermeline unannounced. Arguably, the interpretation could be that Cuwaert did not care much about the honour of the lady of the house. That would be a valid reason for the fox to kill the hare. He even suspected the would-be chaplain of being horny. This explanation is in line with the way Reynaert duped the other animals, promising them honey or mice, which made them too greedy.

When Cuwaert was seized by Reynaert, he cried out in fear of death: ‘Help me, Belijn [...], this pilgrim is biting me to death’ (vs 3122–3123). To prove that Reynaert did the King a favour, Reynaert sent the hare’s head to the King. In the Middle Ages, it was quite customary for the head of a slain enemy to be

46 Gross, Siegfried (ed.), *Das Nibelungenlied. Mittelhochdeutsch/Neuhochdeutsch* (Stuttgart: 2007) 168–171 (Str. 546–552).

47 ‘When you are on the doorstep, you may not enter the house hastily, without a sign: it would be a crime. Cough, knock or speak, that’s my advice’. ‘Van Zeden’, in Brinkman, Herman – Schenkel, Janny (eds.), *Het Comburgse handschrift. Hs. Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cod. poet. et phil. 2022* (Hilversum: 1997) 1156 (verses 517–520). Interpunction and translation are mine.

48 Bümke, Joachim, *Höfische Kultur. Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter* (Munich: 1986) 299.

presented to the King. For instance, in 1212 the English King John received six heads of decapitated Welshmen.<sup>49</sup> Reynaert did the King a service by killing someone who did not obey him. There is, however, ambiguity. We may assume that sending the hare's head as a message was considered a serious insult, comparable to the tennis balls sent to King Henry v by the French dauphin in Shakespeare's history play *Henry v*.<sup>50</sup> When King Nobel saw the hare's head, he realised that he had been duped by a false pilgrim. Reynaert broke the conditions of his pardon. Medieval reconciliations were made with the reservation 'sonder argelist', without tricks.<sup>51</sup> The prisoners Bruun and Isegrim were freed and all those present at court would chase the fox.

#### 4 Conclusion

We can laugh at the violence in the cartoon *Tom and Jerry*, but cultural limits are imposed on the depiction of violence which prohibit us to laugh at the death of Cuwaert. Modern readers see the death of Cuwaert as the ultimate proof of Reynaert's wickedness, but one may doubt if this was so in the Middle Ages. Medieval man revelled in cruel entertainment, especially when they thought the victim deserved punishment, as in Cuwaert's case. However, religious rules also regulated violence in the Middle Ages. A pilgrim was not allowed to behave violently towards fellow Christians. From a Christian point of view, Reynaert is an evil creature, but animals do not follow Christian morals, since they follow the laws of nature. To kill a hare is quite natural for a fox. A certain ambiguity is therefore inevitable depending on whether we look from a human or an animal perspective.

In my opinion, the medieval audience laughed at Cuwaert and sympathised with Reynaert. After all, like a fox they were hunters too. Only at the end of the story they realised that Reynaert's vindictiveness will lead to the fall of the Nobel's kingdom. Their sympathy went out towards an animal that showed up at the last moment and saved the King's reputation. The leopard Firapeel outwitted Reynaert and in doing so restored peace between the King and his barons.

49 Prestwich, Michael, *Armies and warfare in the Middle Ages. The English Experience* (New Haven – London: 1996) 219.

50 Shakespeare, William, *Henry v* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994) 35–37 (act 1, scene 2).

51 *MNW* s.v. argelist.

When we look at the differences between the *Roman de Renart* and *Van den vos Reynaerde*, we can only corroborate Bouwman's conclusions. In the Dutch version, legal aspects are more stressed, a trick of Reynaert is added and the conflict between the hare and the fox is exacerbated. However, on a meta-level there is no fundamental difference between the French and the Dutch versions. In both versions it is told that the fox took revenge on the hare for a cowardly crime: throwing stones in the French version, intending to defile Reynaert's wife during his absence in the Dutch one. In both versions the hare was attacked by a false pilgrim. In both versions the hare returned to court, although in the Dutch version it was only his head, and in both cases the return of Cuwaert triggered the chase of the fox. On a micro-level the Dutch poet expanded the threatening words of Renart, but the fox's words are not ambiguous at all in his version.

The key issue in the study of *Van den vos Reynaerde* is whether the fox is a sympathetic or an evil character. His character is ambivalent. On the one hand, we may assume that the audience grinned when the fox caught a lascivious hare, but on the other hand, Reynaert violated sacred rules by murdering Cuwaert. There is a tension between honour and virtue, 'eer' and 'deugd', in the poem. Perhaps that is the reason why the story is open-ended just like its French model. In medieval society Reynaert could always survive because he is streetwise, but he still had to fear for his life because he was uncourtly.

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