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Medieval Royal Courts and Their Critics: A New Perspective on Courtly Romances and Verse Narratives, with an Emphasis on Heinrich der Glîchezâre's *Reinhart Fuchs*

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ABSTRACT

The topic of court criticism coupled with severe warnings about the dangers of a royal dictator or tyrant was well represented in medieval and early modern literature. Despite our common assumptions about the harmony and idyllic nature of King Arthur's court and the knights of the Round Table, a closer analysis quickly reveals the horrendous problems vexing medieval society (and our own, perhaps). However, medieval poets were careful not to take off their masks when they depicted evil rulers because they normally depended on their patrons. Nevertheless, the criticism of the evil ruler, and then especially of the criminally minded royal councilor (such as in the much later case of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*) finds vivid expression in more medieval texts than we might have assumed. After a survey of dramatic cases from pre-modern literature as a basis for the subsequent analysis, this article focuses on the Middle High German version of the Old French *Roman de Renart* by Heinrich der Glîchezâre (late twelfth century) where the protagonist, the fox Reinhart, operates with astounding intellectual acumen and sophistication to deceive, betray, hurt, and even get his opponents killed without any bad conscience.

Keywords: Court criticism, tyrant, *Mauritius von Craûn,* Heinrich der Glîchezâre, *Reinhart Fuchs*

Introduction

At times, we tend to be fairly naive regarding the evaluation of medieval literature with its alleged glorification of King Arthur and his court. Similarly, medieval history is often studied through a simplistic lens, ignoring protests, rebellions, revolutions, and many other conflicts. In the modern media, we are regularly presented with an idyllic image of knighthood, tournaments, and chivalry, when in reality, and this even in fictional documents, major problems tend to brew. The medieval king, above all, was not really a figure of supreme power, and monarchy was certainly not the ideal form of government, as many voices expressed critically, without being able to offer concrete alternatives. Nevertheless, as we have discovered only recently. the Middle Ages certainly knew of a strong discourse aimed at individual freedom (Classen, 2021).

Medieval society was dominated by many different power groups that often got into conflict with each other. A close reading of significant courtly romances can easily lay bare major disagreements between the royal ruler and the major barons of his country, at least in political terms, and we also notice, beyond that conflict, further charges of the king as powerless, ignorant, naive, greedy, gluttonous, envious, or tyrannical (Schnell, 2017; Sunderland, 2017; Classen, 2022). After an overview of major literary documents addressing this issue, this article will examine the probably most vehement and acerbic example of court criticism from the pre-modern era, the Middle High German verse narrative *Reinhart Fuchs* from ca. after 1192 (for the date, see now Buschinger and Pastré, 2022, 12; an earlier date of ca. 1160 might also be possible). This version was, however, only one within a wide range of European narratives and corresponding illustrations dealing with the same theme, the evil, corrupt, and malicious courtier under a weak, unreliable, and untrustworthy king (cf. Goossens, 1998; Zumbült, 2011).

Medieval Literary Examples of Court Criticism

To do justice to this large topic, an entire book would have to be written, certainly a desideratum which previous scholarship has not yet addressed sufficiently (see, however, Uhlig, 1973, at least for late medieval England). Many times, the close reading of individual passages in various romances suddenly reveals that there is much wrong at the court, with the king having failed to live up to his expectations, such as in the case of King Mark in Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan und Isolde* (ca. 1210; cf. Schausten, 2011) or King Charlemagne in the anonymous *Huon de Bordeaux* (ca. 1240; cf. Dehoux, 2014). Similarly,

our idyllic notions of medieval knighthood would really need to be tested in light of the actual statements offered by the various poets who were more often than not rather unkind toward their protagonists and easily undermined their presumed ideal character. In fact, brute force and violence vastly overshadow the ideals normally presented through the performance of the courtly protagonists, as well illustrated by Erec in Hartmann von Aue's eponymous romance (ca. 1170–1180; cf. Hasty, 2002, p. 31-46).

The most dramatic example of the complete collapse of courtly culture is given by the anonymous verse narrative (*mære*), *Mauritius von Craûn* (ca. 1220; ed. Reinitzer, 2000). Even though the poet does not address the king or the royal court, his story certainly targets the failure of courtly society at large to uphold its own values. Not only has the husband of the female protagonist, Count Beaumunt, not been able to maintain traditional knightly values – he has never organized a tournament and he acts utterly wrongly in his own attempt to participate in a joust when he accidentally kills his opponent – the male protagonist Mauritius knows no bounds, overdoes everything in his effort to win his lady's love (pure sexual desire), and ultimately demonstrates hypocrisy, arrogance, and utter selfishness. In that light, it does not come as a surprise that at the end he forces his way into the marital bedroom, frightens the husband out of his wits, and lies down in the bed next to his lady. What happens next is not clearly detailed, but the entire circumstances indicate that Mauritius gains his sexual satisfaction by means of rape, which thus destroys all remaining hope for courtly love altogether (Classen, 2013, p. 53-82). After the forceful sexual copulation, Mauritius rejects his lady as untrustworthy, departs, and never returns, which causes her to feel great sorrow. However, this does not hide the protagonist's major mistakes and transgressions, while the countess is certainly also to be blamed for her own egregious shortcomings. The end result can thus only be called a fiasco of courtly society and knighthood since its own paragon undermines all the traditional values and exposes, involuntarily, the hypocrisy of the entire system (Fischer, 2006). The poet did not challenge the social system at large and has nothing to say about the king and his court in specific terms, but the entire framework suggests a precipitous decline at court altogether, if not of humanity at large, considering the various allusions to the apocalypse (Polhill, 2019) and the emphasis in the prologue on Emperor Nero as the iconic figure representing the downfall and end of courtly, chivalric values and ideals, as represented by the utter failure of knighthood to survive the bad times within a rotten political system.

Even though courtly culture and its literary manifestations continued to exert considerable influence over the following centuries, many indicators confirm that it had

by then turned almost into a farce, a pretense, and an artificial presumption, a ludic manifestation of glorious past times that might never have existed. The rise of the Old French *fabliaux* or the Middle High German *mæren*, along with the Italian *novelle* and the English *tales* underscores that an entire world had vanished, having been crushed by the hollowness of its own pretenses (Grubmüller, 2006, esp. p. 193-201; for the *fabliaux*, see the intro. by Bloch, 2013).

Knightly values and the respect for the king did not simply disappear, but the literary focus fundamentally turned away from the court to the world of the urban burghers, the merchant. However, Arthurian scholarship has not readily acknowledged this fundamental transformation and does not seem to pay significant attention to the often rather painful characterization of King Arthur and the knights of his Round Table (see, for instance, the contributions to Fulton, ed., 2009). We would look in vain for relevant entries on court criticism in the major reference works, such as the *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (nothing under 'Hofkritik') or the *Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. Even popular online dictionaries such as *Wikipedia* seem to fail us in that regard, perhaps because there might be a certain hesitation even among recent scholars to bring to light the dark side of medieval kingship, knighthood, or even chivalry.

While there is no shortage of new studies on racism in the Middle Ages, for instance (Kaplan, 2019; Classen, 2023), the analysis of the literary challenge to the courtly system still awaits full examination (for a review of some relevant titles, see Rosenthal, 1985). The danger, however, of destroying the modern interest in medieval literature and culture looms large on the horizon, which might explain the continuous hesitation to examine the canonical and also the marginalized texts through such a negative lens. Serious scholarship, however, cannot be driven by political, economic, or social concerns; instead, the focus has always to rest on critical analysis irrespective of any personal hence subjective preferences.

The key components of the discourse on the downfall of the court can be traced to much earlier sources, as numerous literary examples from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries indicate (Purdon and Vitto, ed., 1994, for a variety of perspectives pertinent to the entire Middle Ages). And the institution of a monarchy was also not predicated on an iron-clad foundation, as numerous political theorists expressed already throughout the entire pre-modern world (see, e.g., Marsilius of Padua, part I, ch. ix, 76–90). Medieval and early modern history is extensively characterized by political conflicts,

uprisings, overthrows, competitions, and hence also military confrontations between the various contenders for the royal throne. As the case of Rudolf von Ems's *Der guote Gêrhart* (ca. 1220) signals, internecine strife could easily break out when the royal throne was vacated (England) and the various barons fought over the privilege to assume the power for their own dynasty (Rudolf von Ems, 2016, vv. 5515ff.).

The treatise by John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* (ca. 1158) did not only outline the ethical and moral standards relevant for a king, it also addressed the dangers of a tyrannical king who could be executed in extreme cases of abuse of royal power (Nederman, trans., 1990, 191; cf. also Bollerman and Nederman, 2016/2022). While addressing specifically kings as potential tyrants, John also warned, "among private men there are a host of tyrants, since the power which they have, they turn to some forbidden object" (Book VIII, 17, p. 336; trans. Dickenson). Not mincing his words, John stated unequivocally: "nothing is worse than tyranny. For tyranny is abuse of power entrusted by God to man" (Book, VIII, 18, p. 351). And as a corollary, he emphasized finally that tyrannicide would be warranted under certain circumstances, as a biblical reference supported him (p. 369).

After all, as we read in chapter 21: "all tyrants come to a bad end" (p. 375). Reflecting on the lessons from Christian history, he noted, "among every nation and people the harmfulness of tyrants is manifested and their punishment is evident" (p. 377). Although he operated with great care not to attack a contemporary ruler, such as his personal enemy, King Henry II, but by means of references to ancient and biblical tyrants he succeeded in exposing the threat of tyranny to the well-being of the public and the common good: "[The tyrants] malice is indeed notable, their infamy famous, and their unhappy endings a thing whereof the present age cannot be ignorant . . . . [You] will see more clearly than the light of the day that all tyrants are miserable" (p. 393).

John's radical charge against irresponsible and abusive rulers triggered a whole wave of related essays and literary treatments, such as by Peter of Blois (*De palpone et assentatore*, ca. 1175, and *Architrenius*, ca. 1185) and Nigel de Longchamps, also known as Nigellus Witeker (*Tractatus contra curiales et officiales clericos*, prior to 1193). Parallel to those Latin-writing authors, vernacular poets such as Der arme Hartmann (ca. 1140–1160), Heinrich von Melk (late twelfth century), Wernher von Elmendorf (ca. 1175), Thomasin von Zirklaere (ca. 1185–ca. 1235), and Hugo von Trimberg (ca. 1230–ca. 1314) widened the perspective and challenged much of courtly life as decadent, decrepit, and morally debased (Jaeger, 1982; Bumke, 1986, vol. 2, p. 583–90). The late Middle Ages and

the early modern period witnessed an ever-growing concern with the downfall of the courtly ideals, but this is not the topic of the present study (Kiesel, 1979; Classen, 1990; Schneider, 1994).

Some of the most outspoken criticism of the court as a failed social institution where the traditional values are no longer observed and where robber knights have taken over the rule can be found in Wernher der Gardenære's *Helmbrecht* (ca. 1260–1270) where the young protagonist, a wealthy farmer's son, turns his back to his entire family, joins a band of robbers, and thus gives into a life of crime and violence. However, he and his companions are ultimately caught by the officers of the legal court and put to trial, leading to their execution and other punishments (Helmbrecht loses his right arm, left leg, and his eyes, which makes it impossible for him ever to climb onto a horse and to wield a sword and hence to continue with his criminal and violent behavior). Undoubtedly, this didactic verse narrative leaves a bitter taste in our mouth as to the hypocrisy of the courtly system altogether (Ziegeler, ed., 1995; for recent studies, see Nolte and Schneider, ed., 2001), which becomes even more acerbated through the realization that the condition in the countryside are not truly much better since Helmbrecht's entire family has contributed to the son's extreme ambitions and his destructive career at court (Classen, "Crime and Violence," 2012).

The criticism of the ruler might be, of course, simply a trope in world literature, especially in the case of those texts that do not intend to be affirmative and do not offer fluff entertainment. Whenever we encounter a major contribution to literature in which social, economic, and political issues come to the fore, then we can normally perceive critical voices directed against the corruption of the power structure or the political authorities. Disagreement with ethical violations and opposition to moral malaise belong to the core concerns of any good literary analysis, whether we think of the *Carmina Burana* (Classen, 2010), Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Alain Chartier, Sebastian Brant, John Skelton, or Thomas More (Uhlig, 1973). Nevertheless, this does not imply that there was no historical reality behind those tropes, as the poems by Walther von der Vogelweide or the critical comments by Christine de Pizan in her *Cité des dames* indicate. Medieval literature was certainly not composed in a social vacuum, though we have also to keep in mind that most poets depended on patronage and thus would have naturally refrained from criticizing them more than it was politically wise to do (McDonald, 1973; still the most comprehensive study addressing this issue despite later criticism by Bumke, 1979).

The Poetic Voice Against Political Abuse

After all, poetry and literature at large serve significantly the purpose of evaluating the human conditions on the ground and to give vent to concerns that affect all people. The poet is (or ought to be) a social critic almost by default and would not have to be a socialist or communist as Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) in order to achieve high literary qualities. We also would not have to go so far and require from all poets to assume a critical perspective toward the political, economic, or military reality. Purely aesthetic expressions also serve their purpose. Nevertheless, criticism of the medieval court almost goes hand in hand with courtly literature, whether we consider the *lais* by Marie de France ("Lanval") or the late medieval Middle English alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1370). Heinrich von dem Türlin's *Diu Crône* (late thirteenth century) or Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseide* (ca. 1385) speak a very specific language as to the entailed criticism of the conditions at court. We could also consult any of the many Old Norse *sagas* to come across very pertinent examples where the Norwegian king is at times harshly condemned as a dictator who forces some of the best Vikings into exile, if he does not have them killed.

The Worst Decline of the Royal Court: *Reinhart Fuchs*

While I have been collecting so far a variety of specific comments about the decline of the court or about the failures of a king in a wide range of medieval sources from the early to the late Middle Ages, one text, or rather, a whole family of texts all dealing with the malicious figure of *Reinecke Fuchs*, or *Reinhart Fuchs*, will serve our purpose particularly well because hardly any other literary examples in the Middle Ages was so explicit in its condemnation of a failed king and his pathetic court. We are dealing here with a pan-European phenomenon, but I will limit myself to the German tradition. The origin, however, can be traced to the late twelfth-century French *Renart* tradition, the *Roman de Renart*, with several branches and many allusions to the political situation in France, and to the eleventh-century Latin tradition of the *Ecbasis Captivi* and the *Isengrimus* (ca. 1148–1149, perhaps by Nivardus; cf. Büttner, 2020; Darilek, 2020).

Important versions were composed by Rutebeuf and Jakemart Giélées. Following this, the Alsatian poet Heinrich der Glîchezære composed his *Reinhart Fuchs* around 1185 or a few uears later, whereas the Flemish poet Willem created his *Reinaert de Voss* around 1250. With the invention of the printing press, various versions of this animal lore narrative

with strong political implications appeared as well (Antwerp, 1487/1490; Lübeck, 1498, London, 1481 by William Caxton, etc.; cf. J.-C. Mühlethaler, 1995). We can, in fact, identify an ongoing reception process of this famous verse narrative until the nineteenth and even twentieth century, to wit, above all, famous Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs* (in hexameters) from 1794 or Gustav Schwab's *Reinecke Fuchs* from 1817 (Grosse and Rautenberg, 1989, 68–80).

Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the question what historical events the poet might have alluded to (Buschinger and Pastré, trans., 2022, p. 17–29). Although those efforts are certainly worth their while, the poetic message contained in Heinrich's poem comes through loud and clear as a severe warning about the downfall of society at large. Subsequently, I will examine some of the key statements as to the fox's performance, words, and deeds, and identify the poet's concrete warning concerning the general decline in morality, ethics, and hence also intelligence, honor, and dignity (Schwob, 1984; Pastré, 1993).

The Middle High German poet Heinrich immediately identifies the key issue of his poem, and hence of the entire corpus of related texts, the problem with "trigen vnd an cvndikeit" (6; lying and deception; ed. Göttert, 1976). Despite the best efforts by the Christian Church throughout the Middle Ages to instill high values and ideals in people, the fox, who might as well represent the common thief and criminal, has nothing but evilness in his mind to satisfy his own desires, his greed, and lust for power. Reinhart, a perhaps even worse villain than his French model, at first tries his luck with smaller animals whom he all dupes and then tries to kill, but he mostly fails simply due to his misfortune, but certainly not because he would not have tried hard enough. Subsequently, the action turns to the king's court where Reinhard's evilness displays its full potency, basically getting rid of all his opponents, having them executed and exiled, and making the king to an utter fool, who ignores all the fox's maliciousness and violence against the other courtiers because he thinks only of his own well-being.

But Reinhart has no mercy, demonstrates no respect for anyone, and harbors no love for the king whom he poisons at the end, which allows him to emerge as the victorious evil incarnate, triumphing over all the other animals. In a way, we might say that Heinrich der Glîchezâre's *Reinhart Fuchs* was the medieval forerunner of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), though the latter pursues a much more direct political agenda. Although scholars have tried to correlate the most sarcastic and bitter comments by the narrator to

some historical aspects and ruling figures, especially to the representatives of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, in essence, Heinrich targets the monarchy and aristocracy first of all, and lays bare, whether rightly or not, the egregious shortcomings of the ruling regime at his, if not all, time. Tragically, as evil as Reinhart proves to be, his social environment simply becomes his victim particularly because all the other animals are ignorant, vile, selfish, and greedy (Bumke, 1990, 73). While the fox takes brutal advantage of his contemporaries' moral and ethical shortcomings, the overall intention of this text (and so that of its many iterations) consists of criticizing the court, the king, and the aristocracy in their failure to uphold their own ideals and values.

As Max Wehrlich insightfully commented: "Nicht nur, daß der Hofstaat des Löwen an sich in seiner Dummheit und Korruptheit entlarvt and zum erstenmal der Herrscher selbst . . . lächerlich erscheint, der triumphierende Fuchs liquidiert am Schluß nicht nur den Wolf, sondern läßt auch die meisten anderen Tiere schinden oder verstümmeln" (Wehrli, 1980/1997, 212; Not only do we observe that the lion's court is being exposed in its stupidity and corruption and that the ruler, for the first time, appears as ridiculous. We also notice that the triumphant fox liquidates not only the wolf at the end but has also the other animals flayed or dismembered). While it might not be possible, or necessary, to correlate the literary statements with the social and historical conditions (Bumke, 1990, 73), we can be certain that the poet Heinrich created one of the most powerful literary satires in which evilness gains the complete upper hand, with no hope remaining at the end that any kind of reform or social betterment might be possible while the fox is alive. Maybe that would explain why there are only three manuscript copies of the text available (https://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/155) because, as we might suspect, the contemporaries were probably turned off by the harshness of the poem's tone and points of attack (Baufeld, 1990; see also the other contributions in this volume addressing related texts).

The history of reception, however, confirms that the basic intention of this poem to expose evilness and violence at court, hence the grave danger of corruption and many other crimes, struck a raw nerve and continued to be highly influential far beyond the thirteenth century. The Middle English poem *The Owl and the Nightingale* (ca. 1190–1216) mirrored this deep impact from very early on, and so did the Middle Dutch *Van den Vox Reynaerde* by Willem (thirteenth century), the fifteenth-century printed prose version *Historie van reynaert die vos* (1479, reprinted in 1485), the Dutch verse version from 1487 and 1490, the late Middle English print by William Caxton (1478, *The History of Reynard the Fox*), the Middle Low German printed version of *Reynke de vos* (1498), and then Johann

Christoph Gottsched's nearly identical edition of Heinrich's poem in only slightly modernized form (1752), to mention just the most important witnesses, without tracing the reception of this genre until the very present (for an excellent overview, see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reineke_Fuchs).

The Evil Fox: The Corruption of the Courts

Although Reinhart the fox at first cannot achieve his goals of capturing and killing the various smaller animals as his food because they luckily slip out of his claws or get away in other ways, he demonstrates his "liste" (105; trickery, wit, intelligence, or sophistication) in deceiving his targeted victim. However, his success is not only the result of his evilness and ruthlessness, but also the result of his victims' ignorance, arrogance, and gullibility, which would almost cost them their own lives. As much as the fox pretends to be a good friend and relative, in reality, he only wants to make the other animals inattentive so that his own "schalkeit" (207; evilness) can achieve the desired goal. In his exchange with the raven, whom he wants to rob of the cheese – a very old fable motif, of course, which goes back to Aesop – the fox directly appeals to the bird's vanity and can thus convince him to sing for all to hear. However, in that case, Reinhart's own greed ruins this opportunity to eat the cheese because he also tries to kill the raven when a hunter appears with his dogs that would have almost caught the fox. But as soon as he finds himself in safety again, he displays his next evil character feature, his "vntreuwe" (325; lack of loyalty).

Subsequently, Reinhart joins the company with the wolf Ysengrin, to whom he pretends that he wants to be his friend and family member, but he really intends to rape his wife, Hersant, which at first fails. Yet, later, once he has caught her in a too narrow burrow, he achieves this goal while her husband has to witness it from the distance without being able to prevent this crime (1170–83). Altogether, without going into further details, Reinhart demonstrates that he is an extremely evil figure who always thinks only of himself and abuses everyone who belongs to his social environment. Of course, the narrator does not paint a positive picture of his victims either since they are all too naive and ignorant to see through the deceptions and secret strategies by the fox. Moreover, the latter is so successful because he recognizes easily the others' personal weaknesses and abuses them for to his own advantage. In short, the criticism voiced here is directed both at the horrific protagonist and also at the other animals since they all reveal major character flaws and are, as in the case of the wolf, identified as plainly dumb ("unwis," 744). The poet, however, does not hesitate also to include a swipe at the monks

in a monastery who try to kill the wolf once they have pulled him out of the well and yet then believe that he had previously turned into a monk himself because Reinhart had hurt him so badly that he seems to have applied a tonsure as a preparation for joining a convent (1007–23).

This expression of anticlericalism proves to be a very early forerunner of the real eruption of this social commentary in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Dykema and Oberman, ed., 1993). However, considering the collection of Latin and Middle High German macaronic poetry in the *Carmina Burana* (ca. 1210–1220), where the criticism of the Church also found already vivid examples (Classen, 2010), we realize the extent to which social unrest and discomfort with the deceptive claims on religious authority by the clergy had found its way into the literary discourse already in the high Middle Ages. At the same time, the poet Heinrich did not hesitate to ridicule the peasants, foolish men's bragging and slandering of women, medical doctors, lawyers, and others. Undoubtedly, *Reinhart Fuchs* represents one of the most dramatic literary forums of social criticism targeting virtually everyone at all class levels, with the fox being the mastermind behind all the evil actions harming the innocent and uninvolved bystanders. Whereas the fifteenth-century humanists Sebastian Brant in his *Narrenschiff* (1494) and Erasmus of Rotterdam in his *Stultitiae Laus* (1509) formulated their condemnation of people's shortcomings and foolishness by means of sarcastic comments, Heinrich der Glîchezâre approached his task in a rather brutal manner, only thinly veiling his charges against humankind behind the literary material drawn from the fable tradition.

The Evil and Ignorant King

The narrative then switches to the court and hence to the lion as its king, which forewarns us immediately about the dire situation there, that is, dire in ethical and moral terms, but now at the highest social level insofar as the fox quickly manages to manipulate everyone, high and low, to his advantage and to get the best of them because the king believes that he needs the fox in his medical predicament.

This King Vrevil (for the complex etymology of this name, either in a positive or in a very negative sense, see Göttert, ed. and trans., 1976, n. 49, p. 161–62) had imposed a general peace, a *treuga dei*, or a *Landfrieden* (see, e.g., Gergen, 2004), and yet, despite this rule pertaining to the entire kingdom, Reinhart is charged by many animals for having broken that law, that is, for having committed many acts of crime. Of course, the fox

would not have a chance at court if he actually attended the political and legal assembly as demanded by the king, and the second part of the narrative highlights the countless tricks and maneuvers which Reinhart employs not only to extricate himself from the many accusations, but to destroy all of his enemies at court.

The real problem, however, quickly proves to be not the sly and unethical fox, as evil as he constantly proves to be, but the king himself who had imposed his rule over all animals with force and thus could be identified as a dictator, if not a tyrant, as John of Salisbury had described such a figure. As the narrator underscores, no other animal had enough strength to resist the lion who had violently established his supreme power (1243–46). However, he had then called for the court assembly because he himself suddenly feared for his life since the lord of the ants had attacked him in his sleep by crawling into his brain via the ear. The lion had foolishly attacked the anthill before to affirm his control also over that recalcitrant group of his subjects and destroyed it because the ants had refused to submit under his rule. When the king of that tiny people learned the entire story, he courageously decided to avenge this evil deed and found a devious strategy which no one understands to combat except for Reinhart the fox.

Again, the fox is the only one who observes from his hiding place the events evolving in front of his eyes, with the ant king crawling into the lion's ear, and uses this knowledge later to play out his own strategy to overcome all his enemies. The poet Heinrich thus projected a particularly dangerous setting in which the devious protagonist combines extraordinary smartness with a criminal mind and can thus undermine all ethical ideals and legal principles. All the other animals are either asleep or inattentive, or simply do not comprehend what is going on behind the stage, whereas Reinhart knows how to pull many registers, easily adapts to changing conditions, and has the uncanny knack of being at the right place at the right time.

The audience is, of course, invited to laugh about the foolish wolf and his wife, the greedy bear, and the other animals, all representing, closely following the ancient fable tradition, human follies and shortcomings, if not the Seven Deadly Sins played out here by the individual animals (Newhauser, ed., 2012). In fact, no one truly profits from the Fox's dealings and maneuvers as much as he promises them whatever they would like to hear; instead, most suffer badly or even lose their lives because Reinhard argues in such a devious fashion with the king that he can manipulate him completely to his own advantage so that Vrevril orders the killing of his most trusted advisors.

Several times, King Vrevil sends his representatives to the fox to subpoena him to appear at court to defend himself against the various charges, but each time the messenger arrives, Reinhart convinces him first to get something good to eat, which causes the poor victim bad harm, almost his life. The fault rests, of course, with the fox, but the messengers allow their own greed and lust to rule for which they are then badly punished. The chaplain Brun, the bear, for instance, is seduced with the promise of honey hidden in a tree trunk which the farmers have cut down and opened partly with a wedge. In his haste to get to the honey, the bear does not realize the trap set up by the fox, is then stuck within the trunk once the fox has pulled out the wedge, and barely manages to get away with his life when the farmers appear.

Not by accident has the poet identified Brun as a chaplain because this allowed him to intensify his criticism of the Church, targeting the clerics in their greed and stupidity, whereas the fox knows so exceedingly well how to utilize the bear's weaknesses for his own advantage. He even mocks the poor bear for having lost the skin on his head, blaming him for having sold his chaplain's hat for wine (1601), implying that the clergy would be excessively prone to enjoying alcohol instead of observing their ideals of asceticism, frugality, and self-constraint.

Although everyone would like to see Reinhart condemned to death for his many evil deeds, the elephant intervenes, just as the camel had done before, insisting that according to the law an accused would have to be summoned to the legal court at least three times in conformity with the law (1635–44). We may assume that the poet thus intended to criticize the laws of his days that would work more to the advantage of the criminals than to the innocent victims, especially because each messenger fails to coerce the fox to submit to the subpoena to appear at the king's court and becomes ensnared in the trap set by the other, especially in the case of the badger Diebreht. When the latter returns to the king, with the sling still around his neck with which a priest had to tried to catch Reinhart, he bitterly complains about the evil fox: "mir wolte Reinhart den dot / frumen in iwir botescaft, / do beschirnde mih div gotis craft" (1738–40; Reinhart intended to get me killed while I served as your messenger; but God's power protected me then).

The situation, however, then gets even worse because the fox then puts on a pilgrim's garb and pretends to be an emissary of the famous medical doctor Pendin in Salerno, south of Naples, who would bring the necessary medical cure for the king. But at first, the fox ridicules the king for his unruly court where all the animals shriek at the top of their

lungs about Reinhart's evil deeds and thus cause an uncivilized raucous cacophony. The king immediately feels humiliated and orders everyone to be quiet, which thus involuntarily sets the stage for the fox's final masterpiece of showmanship. But this time, he takes a mighty swing at the other animals, victimizes them because they have to give their lives for the king's health, which is all a sarcastic pretense, and yet another brilliant strategy by the poet who hereby formulates a powerful satire of the entire profession of medical doctors, a theme that was to grow in weight throughout the later Middle Ages (for late medieval and early modern cases, see Classen, "Die Figur," 2012; Tomiček, 2022; Hrbek, 2022).

Scaring the king by warning him that his immediate death would be certain if he would not resort to the medical advice from the famous Salerno doctor, Reinhart gains complete control over the king and can thus manipulate him so badly that he agrees without any hesitation to flay the fox's worst animals and to wrap himself in their skin. Although the bear warns Vrevil that this con-artist of a pretend physician had already killed more people than to return them to health (1915–17), the king does not care and has his two courtiers killed for his own physical recovery, as unproven as Reinhart's medical advice would be. The narrator characterizes the fox's strategy through which he can eliminate all his opponents as a thunderstorm of a devastating force ("ir aller hagel," 1970). According to Reinhart, the doctor in Salerno does not ask for any salary, except for a beaver's skin, which thus kills yet another enemy because the king willingly follows this demand (1984–86).

At the sight of this execution, the entire court assembly flees because they know that they are no longer safe in their own existence since the master criminal, the fox, has taken over the rule at court. Granted, he then succeeds in luring the king of the ants out of the lion's head, but the former must submit himself under the fox's rule and hand over the control of his entire kingdom of anthills in the forest (2060–68). Blackmail and murder thus join the long list of crimes committed by the fox, but since the king Vrevil is so weak and ignorant, so submissive and selfish, always prepared to follow Reinhart's advice without thinking for himself about the catastrophic consequences, the true fault rests with the king, whereas the fox 'only' takes the profit of his cunning, deception, lying, and pretenses.

Finally, when Vrevil already believes to have regained his health, Reinhart poisons him and departs from the court before the king succumbs to his death. Vrevil utters one more

comment, lamenting that he had never done anything wrong to the fox and yet was betrayed by the latter (2234–35), which reveals, once again, the king's complete ignorance and foolishness, having trusted his own worst enemy and having ordered the death of his own courtiers. The outcome of this poem could not be worse, since it depicts the end of the monarchy, of the court, and concludes with the king's death. Until his last moment, he still believes in the magical skills of this doctor, although Reinhart operates only as a representative of the physician in Salerno. The king's foolishness and stupidity could not be more excessive, and the poet holds nothing back in his serious attacks against this tyrant and ignoramus at the same time.

Moreover, the entire courtly authority is also exposed as corrupt, vicious, willing to commit backstabbing, and jealous. Further, Heinrich ridicules the clergy and the medical profession and also laughs about the farmers. He has nothing to say about knighthood, and the world of the urban class is not yet present on his intellectual horizon. The king can only lament that he entrusted himself to the care of a disloyal individual (2238), but his insight comes too late since death is already knocking on his door.

Conclusion

The Middle High German poet relied, just as his Old French predecessor, on the framework of the fable narrative, which helped him to cut off some of the most direct attacks against historical figures and to transform his poem into a global literary alert about the dangers of a dictatorial or tyrannical ruler for society at large. However, the focus on the fox's working both privately and publicly underscored also Heinrich's deep concern with the existence of purely evil people in this world who are driven by nothing but their personal greed and hunger for power. Reinhart appears as the ultimate manifestation of evil incarnate since he never displays any concerns when he hurts or harms his neighbors, friends, and even relatives.

While we are invited, in a way, and this certainly to our deep discomfort, to feel some respect for the fox's many tricks and his extraordinary cunning, which lead to serious injuries if not death of the other animals, the outcome is nothing less but sheer horror about what a ruthless person without any moral or ethical qualms can achieve in destroying the political structure, the traditional authorities, and the value system. Reinhart proves to be stunningly sophisticated, but not for the good of society, only for himself.

At the same time, the poet also expressed strong criticism of the other animals who grant him their trust over and over again and never seem to learn to comprehend the fox's true nature. Worst of all, the king emerges as a strongman with no care for his subjects, and yet he is also highly malleable in Reinhart's hands. With his royal power, he commands and orders the other animals around, but as soon as the fox has assumed the authority of a medical expert, Vevril loses himself and submits himself completely under Reinhart's commands because his own health rules supreme to the disadvantage and danger for all others. Those, however, apart from the fox, display stunning absentmindedness, greed, foolishness, and plain ignorance, as the narrator comments in the episode with the wolf having been almost slain to death by the monks:

> . . . wa was sin gedanc,
> daz er sich so dicke trigen lie?
> die werlt stent noch alsvs hie,
> daz manic man mit valscheit
> vberwant sin arbeit
> baz danne einer, der der trewen pflac. (990–95)
>
> . . . where was his mind
> that he allowed it that he was deceived so many times?
> The world continues to be that way
> that many people, filled with deception,
> achieve their goals better
> than the one who operate by loyalty.

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