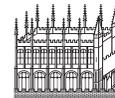


REYNARD *the* FOX

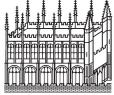


REYNARD *the* FOX

RETOLD BY  
*Anne Louise Avery*



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Cologne, 1609. Wikimedia Commons

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*For my beloved Inigo*

Among foxis be foxissh of nature.

JOHN LYDATE, *The Proverbes of Lydgate*, 1510

The most successful modern princes have been  
those who knew best how to play the fox.

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *Il Principe*, 1532

The cunning of the fox is as murderous  
as the violence of the wolf.

THOMAS PAINE, *The American Crisis*, 1776

A small village square and a few streets,  
A statue of Christ at the crossroads,  
The grey Schelde and then the tower  
Which mirrors itself in the ill-tempered water.

ÉMILE VERHAEREN, *Mon Village*, 1904

INTRODUCTION

A FOX FOR  
ALL SEASONS

In the exceptionally wet autumn of 1792 the writer and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe found himself swept up in the brutality and chaos of war, accompanying his patron Karl August, Duke of Saxe-Weimar, on the disastrous Prussian campaign against French Revolutionary forces. Splattered with battlefield mud, deafened by cannonade, feeling like ‘an outcast in a chaotic, filthy world’, Goethe sought solace in reading, finding unexpected comfort and relevance, and much-needed merriment, in a retelling of the old medieval beast epic *Reineke der Fuchs* or Reynard the Fox.

For Goethe, the corrupt courtly world of Reynard and his fellow animals, ruled over by the capricious and egotistical King Noble the Lion, formed a mirror image of his own tumultuous times, of the rapacity and self-indulgence of the *Ancien Régime*. The Fox’s encounters with greedy Bruin the Bear, pompous Tybert the Cat, gullible Cuwaert the Hare and malevolent Isengrim the Wolf were shaped by the same hypocrisy, the same violence and grotesque comedy of errors that he saw unfolding in real time all about him in his own

society, not least in the shambolic Battle of Valmy of September 1792 and its aftermath.

Within this dissolute, disorderly world, the charismatic trickster figure of Reynard flared bright as saltpetre. Possessed of a self-reliance rooted in quick intelligence and humour and oratorical brilliance, underpinned by a sincere devotion to home and family, the Fox, despite his obvious flaws, was a character with whom Goethe could closely sympathise. A Fox of the Enlightenment, *avant la lettre*, conscience unshackled by king or church, caught in the rough amber of the old medieval texts. Inspired, describing the stories as a 'profane secular Bible', Goethe set to writing his own epic verse interpretation of Reynard's adventures, working first in the baroque calm of his home in Weimar, in the lull between battles, then back in the cannon-thunder and sludge, this time at the Siege of Mainz.

Whilst Goethe's poem largely preserves the medieval story and its satirical bite, his Reynard is equally a champion for what he called, after the retreat from Valmy, 'a new era in the history of the world'. An anti-hero for a post-Revolutionary Europe, acting only according to his own nature, without a shred of the self-deception or hypocrisy of his peers, Reynard fights for his life using neither morals, money nor position, but simply his sharp wits and vulpine cunning, defeating his enemies by employing their own stupidity or sophistry or greed against them. A foxish Becky Sharp turning all to his advantage.

From the very beginning of his literary career, Reynard the Fox has charmed his audiences, just as he captivated Goethe. He elegantly tricks us into liking him and rooting for

him, just as he hoodwinks his fellow animals into traps and elaborate falsehoods. Continually in trouble with the King and his barons, a whisker away from being executed for his many crimes, Reynard nevertheless manages to squeeze out of every tight corner and triumph over his enemies. Entirely through his wiles and his ability to spin a compelling tale out of nothing, the establishment is mocked and bettered again and again, hierarchies are upended and the rich and foolish and overprivileged are exposed and thoroughly punished for their sins.

While his roots stretch back to Ancient Greek fables, notably Aesop's story of the sick lion tricked by a fox, Reynard's first named appearance in medieval literature was in the *Ysengrimus* (c. 1149), a long Latin poem about the titular wolf Isengrim, probably composed by an ambitious monk of Sint-Pieters Abbey in Gent, in one manuscript named 'Nivard'. From Flanders, Reynard then travels to France, emerging as the wicked brush-twirling lead in Pierre de Saint-Cloud's Old French *Roman de Renart* (c. 1175). Pierre left the enmity unresolved between Reynard and the wolf, ever his principal adversary, which laid the way open for a rich blossoming of thirty further episodes or 'branches' by later writers, the character becoming so wildly popular in France that the word for fox eventually changed permanently from the old *goupil* to *renard*.

In the 1180s Reynard lopes into Middle High German with the *Reinhart Fuchs*, written by the enigmatic Alsatian poet Heinrich, known by his soubriquet *der Glîchezære*, 'the Trickster' or 'Hypocrite'. Based on the French branches and continuing the 'great, grim war' between wolf and fox,

*Reinhart Fuchs* also adds new characters and devices, ruthlessly parodying the nobility and the church and reflecting contemporary events. The unprecedented introduction of an Elephant of Bohemia, for example, stands in for the contemporaneous Soběslav II, Duke of Bohemia, who was mired in various political intrigues at the German court of the time, whilst a Leopard with a Plumed Helmet masks for Richard the Lionheart, whose emblem was of the same design.

But it was back in the Low Countries, in Eastern Flanders, in the following century that Reynard would swagger into his influential and long-lasting celebrity, across Western Europe and beyond, as the archetypal cunning and subversive Flemish trickster, whose anthropomorphised traits have barely altered over the centuries. This Reynard remains our Reynard today: the direct ancestor of Beatrix Potter's dastardly Mr Tod, the charming Fantastic Mr Fox and Disney's devastatingly charismatic Robin Hood, the drawings for which were recycled from an earlier Reynard animation, scrapped because the fox was deemed too dangerously anarchic and morally irredeemable to ever dream of passing the Hays Code, the strict set of guidelines governing American cinema.

In around 1250, *Van den vos Reinaerde (Of Reynard the Fox)* was written in Middle Dutch by an author who proudly presents himself in the poem's opening lines as Willem, *die Madocke makede*, the author 'who made *Madoc*', referring to a now lost Dutch version of the story of the legendary Welsh seafaring prince Madoc—Madoc ab Owain Gwynedd—who was thought to have reached America in his nautical explorations.

Apart from this intriguing lost work of Celtic-Flemish storytelling, we know very little about Willem, although

various theories for his identity have been suggested over the years. Toponyms and linguistic idiosyncrasies point to a close familiarity with the country between Gent and Hulst, and, based on his knowledge of Latin and of Old French beast epics, the Reynardists Maurice Nonneman and Rik Van Daele, among others, have proposed that he may have been a Cistercian lay brother named Willem van Boudelo or Corthals (d. July 1261) from the important Abbey of Boudelo, close to the modern-day Dutch border at Klein-Sinaai, which is mentioned in the text.

This Willem was an influential and clever cleric of Margaret II, Countess of Flanders (called rather dramatically *la Noire* due to her highly scandalous life and cruel nature) and managed a number of her extensive properties across the Low Countries. Based on his intimate experience of the intrigues and political tides of both monastic and courtly worlds, it is feasible to attempt to match the cast of *Van den vos Reinaerde* with prominent figures from the Flemish court of the early thirteenth century. Reynard the Fox may have been based on Zeger III, Châtelain of the Count's castle in Gent, King Noble the Lion on Philip the Noble, Count of Namur and Regent of Flanders, who unjustly removed Zeger from his post in 1210, and the principal supporting animal courtiers, a thinly disguised group of malcontented barons who unsuccessfully plotted against Philip in the same period.

In England, whilst the fox was a common subject in medieval sculptures, wood carving, stained glass and manuscript marginalia—iconography which may, due to its often didactic nature, have been based on the European fox tales—Reynard enters the written literary realm explicitly only in 1250, in the

form of a short poem entitled ‘Of the Vox and of the Wolf’, inspired by the fourth branch of the Old French *Roman de Renart*, the story of Reynard tricking Isengrim into the dank bottom of a monastery well (the manuscript of this text is held in the Bodleian Library: MS. Digby 86). Our fox then goes to ground for a century, reappearing in around 1390 with a flourish under the name of Daun Russell (‘Daun’ meaning Sir or Master) in Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, again drawn from another section of the *Roman de Renart*, in which Reynard and Chaunticleer the Cockerel engage in a farmyard tussle of wits.

It was at the end of the fifteenth century, however, with William Caxton’s bestselling printed edition of 1481, that Reynard the Fox would triumphantly become a principal figure within Albion’s imagination, as culturally potent and entrenched as Puck or Robin Hood or King Arthur—not only fortifying the old folk perception of the fox as the cunning trickster of the countryside, but also bearing eternal trans-generational relevance through his capacity as a character to provoke and critique power, hierarchy and the status quo. As Goethe realised only too well, under his revolutionary bombardment, Reynard embodies the corrective against structured, oppressive forms of society, the vent through which the steam of a bubbling pot can escape.

Caxton, a successful mercer (trader in fine textiles) before he became England’s first printer, was born in the Weald of Kent between 1415 and 1424. After a youthful apprenticeship with the important London merchant and Lord Mayor Robert Large, he spent three profitable decades in the Low Countries, where the international cloth trade was based, rising to the prestigious position of governor of the English Nation in

Bruges, the organisation in charge of promoting English commercial and diplomatic interests. In the course of this mix of political and mercantile occupation, he learnt to speak and write Dutch fluently, a proficiency quite unremarkable at the time. In the busy cosmopolitan city of Bruges, and later when he moved to Gent, Caxton began to encounter the new technologies revolutionising the spread of ideas and literature across Europe, and, learning of Gutenberg’s inventions, was intrigued and quickly grasped the vast economic and creative possibilities. In 1471, he travelled east to Cologne where he first learned the technique of printing with moveable type, and he was able to put this knowledge into practice back in the Low Countries, where he printed the first English book around 1474. When he returned to London in 1476, he established the first printing press in England in Westminster. He would eventually publish over a hundred editions. From Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, all were well judged by Caxton to appeal to an audience traumatised and exhausted by the turbulence of endless civil war, eager for distraction, instruction, comfort and, perhaps most importantly of all, light relief and comic entertainment.

In the summer of 1481, having become familiar with the stories and landscapes of Reynard in Flanders, Caxton decided to publish his own translation of the Reynard story, based on the Middle Dutch prose version of Willem’s earlier poem which Gerard Leeu had printed just a few years earlier. (Gerard Leeu’s two editions of Reynard, one in prose and one in verse, are the main conduits for the best-known later Reynard retellings; whilst Caxton translated the prose, a Low German edition based on the verse formed the indirect

source for Goethe's great epic.) Entitled *The hystorye of Reynard the foxe, done into English out of Dutch*, Caxton's translation is wonderfully readable, uneven, funny, slapdash—its hero shameless, immoral, outrageously untruthful and immensely likeable. This is no pedantic, scholarly translation, but one which races pell-mell through Reynard's increasingly shocking shenanigans; a version which begs to be read aloud, to be laughed at companionably en masse.

As he had hoped, Caxton's Reynard was an immediate best-seller, with twenty-three editions printed before 1700 alone, including his own second edition in 1489. After Caxton's death in 1491, his printing assistant Wynkyn de Worde took over his business, issuing an illustrated edition in 1495, peppered with a series of linear woodcuts based on prints from Leeu's 1487 verse version of *Reynaerts historie*. These illustrations, originally by an artist we know now only as the Haarlem Master, would influence the visuality of Reynard for centuries to come, and indelibly link the use of mass-produced graphic imagery with the fox's tales, an association which can be traced directly to modern animations, such as Władysław Starewicz's 1930s' adaption of the French branches, *Le Roman de Renard* or Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox* from 2009.

Over the following centuries, this process of revision, modification and addition to Caxton's narrative continued. In the spirit of the fox's mercurial oratory, his story adapted to appeal to each new generation, some periods requiring a little more shapeshifting than others. From the sixteenth century, Reynard's blasphemous disguises of clerical robes and devil-may-care amorality even secured him a regular spot on the notorious list of banned books (*Index librorum*

*prohibitorum*) deemed heretical by the Catholic Church. One way around these vulpine shortcomings was for publishers to include earnest moral expositions next to each episode in the text, producing a Reynard 'purged from all the grosenesses both in Phrase and Matter', as London printer Edward Alde put it in his heavily annotated 1620 edition. Others added new stories—Edward Brewster, for example, at the end of the seventeenth century, embroidering both a sequel to Reynard's career and a further tale of his son Reynardine's exploits, neither of which quite matches the old-established Flemish canon in their narrative power. Cheap chapbook editions were also produced, often for the rural market outside London, and heavily edited children's versions shorn of the nastier, more violent elements of the original Caxton text.

By the early Victorian period, interest in the increasingly diluted and altered Caxton editions had waned, but following the popular wave for all things Germanic, influenced by Prince Albert, Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs* came thundering into fashion, with multiple English translations being produced. One particularly influential version was printed in 1851 to accompany an exhibit of Reynardian taxidermy at the Great Exhibition, a re-creation of the vivid, anthropomorphic illustrations designed by Wilhelm von Kaulbach for an influential publication of Goethe from 1846. A series of vignettes using fox cubs and various props, the exhibit was created by a celebrated master of the taxidermic arts from Stuttgart, Hermann Ploucquet. It swiftly became one of the most visited highlights of the Crystal Palace, with even Queen Victoria remarking on its fascinating and amusing properties. In his 1852 essay in *Fraser's Magazine*, the historian and editor Professor James Anthony

Froude mused that, before the Great Exhibition, ‘it was rare to find a person who had read the Fox Epic ... but now the charming figures of Reineke himself, and the Lion King, and Isengrim, and Bruin ... and Grimbart, had set all the world asking who and what they were, and the story began to get itself known. The old editions, which had long slept unbound in reams upon the shelves, began to descend and clothe themselves in green and crimson. Mr. Dickens sent a summary of it around the households of England. Everybody began to talk of Reineke.’

But after the Great Exhibition was dismantled, and the years passed, and fashions ebbed and flowed, Reynard went back to ground, and whilst he emerges in the twentieth century in filmic disguise from time to time, or in young children’s picture books, or heavily annotated scholarly translations, relatively few today have read his tales or even know the names of the characters so close-woven within our historical collective imagination that many of them, such as Tybert or Tabby or Tibby the Cat, for example, became bywords for the animals themselves. The principal aim of this book, then, is to reclothe Reynard once more, shake the earth from his brush, and return our vulpine friend to the exuberant and provocative position he once occupied within our storytelling traditions.

My interpretation has a number of layers in its construction. Its core or skeleton is essentially my own close translation of Caxton; the story broadly following his narrative, episode by episode, as it moves from the humdrum (stealing sausages) to the wondrous (magical flying wooden horses) to the dramatic (fights and blindings and near executions). However, whilst

a few passages are kept almost exactly the same, I have also extensively fleshed out and feathered and furred each section, adding new and detailed descriptions of landscapes, castles, cities, rivers and villages, and expositions of characters’ backgrounds, families, motivations and occupations. Both Bruin the Bear and Tybert the Cat’s pivotal journeys, for example, consist of only a couple of lines in Caxton; here we follow them step by step from Gent to Reynard’s fortress home of Maleperduys and back again. Equally, whilst female figures such as Queen Gente the Lioness and Hermeline the Vixen, Reynard’s wife, have long been present in the tales, their roles have been supportive or subservient to the male characters. Without diverting from the canonical plot and structure too far, I have developed their stories, giving Lady Erswynde the She-Wolf, Isengrim’s wife, in particular, a more powerful and self-determined trajectory. Occasionally, I have created new characters, such as Bruin the Bear’s much-admired uncle, Baron Adalbern, or given nameless animals names, christening a disgruntled courtier goat ‘Chiever’, for example, borrowed from Caxton’s *Vitas Patrum*, printed posthumously by Wynkyn de Worde in 1495: ‘The paas & way of the wylde bestes, as chieuers, beres & other.’ Chanticleer the Cockerel’s pet dogs Saphyrus, Mopsus, Melissa and Mopsulus are taken from the correspondence of the Brabant-born humanist Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), whose love of dogs and gardens, he claimed, was only exceeded by that of books, even lecturing with his hounds by his side at the University of Leuven.

I worked from a number of early editions of Caxton held in the Bodleian Library, including the stylish 1494 printing by Richard Pynson, one of the early Fleet Street publishers,

and a wildly romantic 1629 Edward Alldee edition from the library of Robert Burton (1577–1640), the Oxonian author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, his elegant, ghostly initials and marginalia marking the title page and certain plum comedic passages. For the first section, particularly in terms of Flemish topographical content, I also drew elements directly from Willem’s *Van den vos Reynaerde*, via the excellent 2009 critical edition produced by André Bouwman and Bart Besamusca, translated into English by Thea Summerfield.

Caxton’s text offers a number of challenges to the modern interpreter, of course, not least that his language floats halfway across the North Sea, not quite Dutch, but not entirely English either. His narrative is liberally scattered with ‘Dutchisms’, unconscious drifts from his easy bilingualism, which a slightly bewildered William Morris, in his lavish 1892 Kelmscott edition of the work (also in the Bodleian), would place in a special appendix, a listing of what he describes as ‘Some Strange Words’. Many of these words—such as ‘grate’ (fish bone), ‘slonked’ (devoured) and ‘glat’ (polished)—I have retained in my retelling, as this is a story of both the Low Countries and England; it straddles two worlds and the language needs to reflect that dynamic liminality. I have also kept, and indeed added, other fine old medieval words and phrases (drightfare, beupere, drumbledore, for example), some further Flemish terms (*schuyt*, *waterzooi*, *begijnhof*), and, in the spirit of Caxton, I have tossed a few of my own onomatopoeic neologisms into the stew.

As the introductory note to the Glossary at the end of this book explains, this is not simply a fable of courtly intrigues long ago, but of a complex alternative world ruled

and inhabited predominantly by beasts, by foxes and badgers and pine martens and leopards and lions and bears and otters. Humans only exist at the very edges of this zoocracy, and, apart from a few notable exceptions such as the Abbot of Baudeloo or Master Abrion, Reynard’s scholarly friend from Trier, they are shadowy and vicious figures, signifying danger and persecution for the animals, who occasionally ignore that peril for a tasty side of bacon or a string of sausages. Thus, whilst Reynard’s Flemish fiefdom may adeptly satirise and mock aspects of our own troubled hierarchies, it nevertheless should also be appreciated and treated as what J.R.R. Tolkien termed a ‘secondary world’, discrete and functional on its own terms. As such, it is logical that their language is also not quite of the human world; it intersects, but has its own patterns and lexicon. When reading this book, it is possible either to let that lyrical foxish dialect wash over you, as unfamiliar words will generally be entirely comprehensible within their contexts, or to look up precise meanings and etymologies in the Glossary.

The idea of place is as central as linguistic identity within Reynard’s adventures, which play out principally in the old medieval County of Flanders (in Dutch, *het graafschap Vlaanderen*), ruled over with a capricious paw by King Noble the Lion from his imposing seat in Gent, the towering Gravensteen or Castle of the Counts, which can still be visited today. Whilst Caxton’s account carries a strong flavour of the Flemish landscape, there are only a few specific toponyms included in his translation, such as the famous tavern halfway between Gent and Hijfte, mentioned in *Reynaerts historie* and *Van den vos Reinaerde*, where one dark night Reynard’s father and a group of barons plot wickedly against King Noble.

The fox's exploits reach far beyond Noble's fiefdom, however, further than one might imagine, and in my remaking I've cast the net wider still. East of Flanders lie the County of Hainaut (graafschap Henegouwen) and the Duchy of Brabant (hertogdom Brabant), to the North the County of Zeeland (graafschap Zeeland) and the County of Holland (graafschap Holland), to the South Artois (graafschap Artesië), and to the West the North Sea (Noordzee), stern-grey and white-capped and rolling, a great heaving busyness of ships crossing to and fro to England, and up and down the coast to the whale-waters of the Arctic and the wind-blown tip of Spain and yonder, in a complicated weave of trade routes and passages, billowing the margins of our tale.

The exact location of Maleperduys, Reynard's secluded fortress, is not mentioned by Caxton or Willem, but, after travelling extensively around Flanders, I decided to site it to the north-east, around thirty miles from King Noble's castle, near the waterfront mill-town of Rupelmonde. This lies within the enigmatic Waasland or Land of Waas, a flat, marshy waterlogged domain stretching from Gent to Antwerp along the left bank of the River Schelde. The name of Waasland is somewhat etymologically mysterious, but probably derives from *waas*, meaning mud, mire or sludge, with a further sense of a haze or mist. An obscurity. For these were flooded lands, masked lands, edge lands—just the place for a renegade fox to hide. Indeed, Waaslanders have always closely identified with the plucky outsider, the wily outlaw, the anti-authoritarian rebel. The figure of Reynard thus came to typify its wild, autonomous character, and is still inextricably associated with the region today, commemorated in town and village with

plaques and statues and murals and memorial trails. The master bakers of the principal town of Sint-Niklaas—bakery De Cock, bakery De Visscher, patisserie Stefan and patisserie Thierens—even developed a special Reynard cake in the early 1970s to celebrate their beloved fox, a heady mixture of almonds, pineapple, marzipan and Grand Marnier.

The most important rivers within Reynard's world are the Schelde and the Leie. The Schelde flows from its source at Gouy in northern France, through Cambrai and Valenciennes, entering Flanders near Tournai. At Gent, where it mingles with the Leie, close to Grimbart the Badger's house and Noble's castle, it turns east, then, just past Dendermonde, north towards Antwerp and the sea. It is this serpentine section of the river, bordering the Waasland, which the animals are continually following, by foot or by boat, back and forth and back and forth to Maleperduys. At Antwerp, the Schelde curves west, widening into a lonely estuary of oystercatchers and mud flats and salt marshes haunted by the old ones—the submerged altars of the goddess Nehellania at its mouth and the stooped and grey-haired god Scaldis at its turn, beading an eye over the fortunes washed up or lost with the brackish tides.

As the River Schelde ebbs and flows, so too do the temporal tides of the pastoral Flemish year, measured by the old agricultural cycles and the holy saints' days and the great church festivals. Within this perpetual calendar, Reynard the Fox's story is essentially one of early summer, of a flowering, burgeoning countryside, a tale of bright Whitsuntide, tempered by only a few icy remembrances of the deep snow drifts and black frozen dykes of winters past.

Opening with a *reverdie* or re-greening, an invocation of the arrival of spring and summer popular in medieval lyric poetry—birds and bees and blossom and the open roads—the narrative unfolds and resolves over a single month, from Whit Sunday or Pentecost itself, the seventh Sunday after Easter—here, falling on 6 June to 7 July, and the Feast day of Thomas à Becket, a very Reynardian saint, being a continual thorn in the side of regal authority.

Whilst canonically a time to commemorate the Holy Spirit ethereally descending on the disciples, Whitsun actually heralded a season of very earthy dancing and singing, processions and fairs and games and weddings, a highly sociable time of communal eating and drinking and carousing. In romances contemporaneous with Reynard, it was particularly associated with the grand feasts of kings, complete with tilts and tournaments and a full court, or *cour plénière*, drawn from across the land. In *Le Morte d'Arthur* of Sir Thomas Malory, which had its first printing with Caxton in 1485, after pulling the sword from the stone on Whit Sunday, Arthur commands 'a great feast that it should be holden at Pentecost after the incoronation of him at the city of Carlion', thus establishing the festival from the very beginning of his kingship as an occasion of great symbolic weight. As his reign progresses, it becomes the day on which his knights pledge their Round Table oaths, and when all adventures and otherworldly happenings commence, including the Grail quest itself: 'So ever the king had a custom that at the feast of Pentecost in especial, afore other feasts in the year, he would not go that day to meat until he had heard or seen of a great marvel. And for that custom all

manner of strange adventures came before Arthur as at that feast before all other feasts.'

The opening scenes of Reynard humorously echo that Arthurian model, with the narcissistic King Noble the Lion holding court at Whitsun, having ordered his subjects to convene from across Flanders. All attend, except for Baron Reynard the Fox, an absence which sparks outrage amongst his fellow courtiers and plunges us straight into a fury of accusations and shocking accounts of the missing fox's wicked behaviour.

By the close of the book, whether or not we view Reynard as an amoral and irreformable Machiavellian villain, as Goethe's flaming revolutionary fighting a corrupt aristocracy from within, or, as the quintessential fox simply acting according to the laws of his own fixed vulpine nature, striving to protect himself and his family from starvation and mortal threat, is something each reader has to decide for themselves. Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza suggested in the seventeenth century, at the height of Reynard's early modern popularity, that all creatures naturally seek their own advantage, to preserve their own being and increase their power and that it is not only right for them do so, but that rational self-interest carries a very pure form of moral virtue. It is that benign interpretation of his character, I feel, that Reynard himself would claim, if pressed.

At the end of Caxton's translation, he addresses us directly, writing that amidst the humour, the 'japes and bourdes', 'many a good wisdom and learnings' might still be found, even leading us to new virtue and honour. For Reynard's faults, his escapades, outrageous schemes and tangled duplicities,

only reflect the dense moral complexity of this fallen world of ours. No one is perfect, no one is without their faults or sins, so perhaps the best we can do is to follow his example and, eschewing all masks and hypocrisy, pursue our own inherent foxishness and hope for the best. As Froude put it in 1852, ‘Lying, treacherous, cunning scoundrel as he is, there is a wholesome absence of humbug about him.’

‘If anything be said or written herein’, Caxton finally concludes, ‘that may grieve or displease any man, blame not me, but the fox, for they be his words and not mine.’ Reynard is so persuasive, so in charge of his own narrative, that even Caxton himself cannot assert authority over his own text. And neither, I’m afraid, can I. So, without further distraction or exposition, let Reynard, a fox for all seasons, beguile and entertain you with his many adventures.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### *Dramatis Personae*

The old tales of Sir Reynard the Fox are crowded with animals with full, busy lives and complicated relationships. For the ease of the Reader, therefore, a list of the principal characters follows, to avoid any unnecessary confusion.

*King Noble  
the Lion* Ruler of all Flanders. His castle is situated in the middle of Gent, known today as the Gravensteen or the Castle of the Counts. Privileged, arrogant, impatient, fond of a drink and a joust. Father to the overprotected Leontius and Lenaert. Husband to Queen Gente.

*Queen Gente  
the Lioness* Skilful in quietly retaining her not inconsiderable power. Extremely fond of fishing. Highly sympathetic to Reynard. Misses her ancestral home in Aquitaine and the company of her older brothers.

*Sir Reynard  
the Fox* Our charming and occasionally violent anti-hero. A subversive, dashing, witty, philosophical, silver-tongued fox from Rupelmonde in the watery Waasland of Eastern Flanders. His notorious castle-fortress, Maleperduys, lies deep in woods between a wide heath and the River Schelde. Proud father to three cubs: Reynardine, Rossel and Reynkin.

*Lady Hermeline  
the Vixen* Reynard’s adored wife, a superb philologist and scribe, and a fox of great charity and goodness.

<i>Lord Reynardius the Fox</i>	Reynard's charismatic and dangerous father.
<i>Sir Grimbart the Badger</i>	Reynard's best friend and faithful supporter. Temperate, moral, kindly. An old sailor, he still keeps a boat in Brugge. A little grey around the whiskers.
<i>Sir Isengrim the Wolf</i>	Cruel, sociopathic, immoral. Reynard's sworn and eternal enemy, and a thoroughly nasty piece of work.
<i>Lady Erswynde the Wolf</i>	A sad, flint-mottled wolf with a delicate constitution and a slight limp in her front paw. Possessed of considerable skill in physic-craft and the preparation of potent medicines, but much taunted and abused by her wicked husband Isengrim.
<i>Sir Bruin the Bear</i>	Bumbling, vain and greedy. Lives in grace-and-favour rooms in Noble's castle. Only really interested in food.
<i>Baron Adalbern the Bear</i>	Bruin the Bear's uncle. Witty, erudite and much loved. Expert in both Ovid and Roman numismatics (with a leaning towards provincial coinage under Hadrian).
<i>Sir Brichemer the Stag</i>	Quiet and pious and dour, with many elderly relations to care for. Envis Reynard his <i>joie de vivre</i> and his freedom.
<i>Sir Firapeel the Leopard</i>	An aristocrat and a snob, with unpalatable beliefs.
<i>Dame Rukenawe the Ape</i>	One of the cleverest legal minds in Reynard's world, a powerful friend to the Fox and his family. Fond of extravagant rings and brooches and preens.
<i>Sir Mertyn the Ape</i>	A theologian, advisor to the Bishop of Cambrai, and great friend to Reynard and his kin.

<i>Botsaert the Monkey</i>	The King's Secretary. A self-made monkey from Montreuil-sur-Mer. A brilliant linguist, fluent in a dozen languages.
<i>Sir Courtoys the Hound</i>	Pretentious Francophile. Claims to have been a victim of Reynard's thievery through an incident with a sausage.
<i>Bellin the Ram</i>	A mercer of Gent, untitled, but rich and from a good family, hence his presence at Court. A busybody and a terrible bore, obsessed with his relatively minor interests in the Antwerp–Norwich wool trade.
<i>Sir Tybert the Cat</i>	A professor at the University of Louvain and passionate devotee of the Roman philosopher Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius.
<i>Sir Cuwaert the Hare</i>	A nervous faint-voiced animal. His family farm is in Oostveld, where he pursues his passion in life, bulb gardening.
<i>Sir Pancer the Beaver</i>	A pragmatic and extremely tiresome lord; a know-it-all who makes a habit of explaining to others their own business.
<i>Sir Lapreel the Rabbit</i>	Down-to-earth, salt-of-the-earth, practical country rabbit. Accuses Reynard of attacking him.
<i>Chaunticleer the Cockerel</i>	Sober, sensible, head of various guilds. A well-respected cockerel from Lokeren, with a loving and large family, before tragedy strikes.
<i>Sir Tiecelein the Raven</i>	A pessimistic observer of courtly politics, whose great enjoyment in life lies in the misfortune, misery and reduction of others.
<i>Sir Corbant the Crow</i>	Noisy, tough character from the wild, flooded province of Zeeland.

*Lady Sharpbeak* Corbant's deeply beloved wife. From one of  
*the Crow* the oldest and noblest families of Zeeland.  
Her grandmother was known for inventing  
a particularly delicious type of salted  
butterscotch or *boterbabbelaar*, which is still  
made today.

PART ONE

# SUMMONING



## CHAPTER ONE

### In which Noble the Lion, King of all the Beasts, Count of Flanders, sends out his Mandements that Everyone should attend his Feast

*Whit Sunday, 6th June*

Once upon a Whitsuntide in the Low Countries, the land was white with hawthorn and the woods were blithe and greening. The trees were full hazy with new leaves and the ground with sweet-smelling herbs and flowers. All the birds were singing, singing from coiled nest, from branch, from fence, from river reed and from convent spire; songs which sang of fierce life and the kindly warmth of the sun, of journeys made and of journeys yet to come.

King Noble the Lion was lord of this watery, blossomy realm, from the leaden waves of the North Sea to the blue flax fields of Ypres. During the bright and holy days of the Whitsun Feast, he decided to open his Court, issuing forth dozens of mandements and commandments demanding that all animals should attend. And attend they did, streaming along the rough country tracks and gleaming white highways from Mons and Antwerp and Brugge, beasts great and beasts small, fearful and fearsome, rich and poor, from gilded castle and low thatched cottage they came, to celebrate Pentecost and to pay their respect and fealty to their glorious, golden-maned ruler.

All, that is, except for Reynard the Fox.

For Sir Reynard, Baron of Maleperduys Manor in the far east of the country, in the Land of Waas, the wilding wastelands along the banks of the River Schelde, knew himself

guilty of such bad behaviour at Court, of so many crimes and tricks and mischiefs against so many beasts, that he dared not show his whiskers.

And, sure enough, when all were gathered in their best finery, a chattering array of leopards and rams and cats and flitter-mouses and otters and stags and hares and beavers and unicorns and panthers and apes and squirrels and monkeys and lynxes and stone martens and pine martens and polecats and weasels and ermines and foxes and badgers and hawks squashed together on high and low tables in the Great Hall, helping themselves to the King's rich and heavily sauced dishes, there was a whispering, then a rumbling, then an uproar of indignant complaints and accusations against the Fox. At every bench of that Whitsun banquet, outrageous stories of Reynard's misconduct were told and repeated and elaborated, until the entire castle was baying for his blood and his reputation was in shreds.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The First Complaint made against Sir Reynard the Fox by Baron Isengrim the Wolf, his Enemy

The banquet eventually ended in a rowdy, disordered fashion with silver and maple mazers of steaming, spiced clary thumped down on each table to loud cheers. The clary, a mixture of wine and honey and herbs, was concocted each Whitsun to an old leonine family recipe by the King's butler, a snooty hare from Alsace called Witzke, who acquired all the King's wine for him, regularly making unnecessarily expensive buying trips to Paris and Bordeaux and Lisbon.

As usual, the hare had helped himself to a few cups in the cellar and, whilst serving, almost caused a diplomatic incident by sloshing some piping hot wine over a very small English weasel, the Bishop of Rochester no less, and an elderly Scottish pine marten, important guests of the Queen, scalding them grievously and ruining their hats.\*

Thankfully for the hare, King Noble and his wife, the lioness Queen Gente, had already retired to their inner chamber, where their grand and highly decorated thrones had been placed. These thrones represented the pinnacle of the Flemish carver's art and had been made over a period of twenty-five

\* The recipe for King Noble's Special Whitsun Clary is as follows. Mix very, very strong red Gascony wine together with clear honey, and generous pawfuls of cardamom, galingale, ginger, cinnamon, spikenard and green fennel. There may have been further bits and bobs accidentally added by the Alsatian hare, but this is the canonical list of ingredients, as recorded in a letter from King Noble to the King of England, who was interested in continental after-dinner drinks.

years by an enigmatic stoat, who liked to be known as the Master of Düsseldorf, despite being the son of a sausage-maker from Hulst. In any case, regardless of origins, the stoat had enormous talent in the sculptural arts, and had carved four fierce griffins for the armrests, intricate views of the towers of Gent on the backrests, and, on the wide overhanging canopy, an impressive frieze of lions performing brave and important acts in various battles of the Second Peloponnesian War.

King Noble had planned to spend an enjoyable hour or two framed by all this magnificence, being praised and flattered by his adoring subjects. All this rumpus about Lord Reynard's misdeeds had disrupted his plans, however, and the irritated lion was faced with a shuffling queue of grumbling, angry animals waiting to lodge their various complaints about the fox with their sovereign.

First up was Reynard's arch-enemy, Baron Isengrim the Wolf, who scowled into the chamber with his cowering family and a rout of slinking, snarling supporters. They didn't need to wait or push in front of the other beasts, as the queue immediately silenced then parted like ripped silk before them.

The wolf was about as nasty and brutal and frightening as they come. He had no compassion, no love, no kindness. He prayed only for himself and his own soul. He kicked his children, bullied his servants, and beat and belittled and betrayed his wife. The only lord in Flanders who had the nerve and the wit to stand up to him was Reynard the Fox. Fired by a mutual loathing which only seemed to increase as the world turned, they had a long troubled history of hostile encounters, going back decades. As often as not, these encounters would leave the surly, arrogant Isengrim in the most humiliating

situations imaginable. For a narcissistic and humourless wolf like Isengrim, the worst thing in the world was being laughed at, and Reynard provided many a ripe occasion for just such mockery.

So, on this fair Whitsun Eve, the air sweet with roses from the Queen's garden, Isengrim the Wolf was determined to destroy Reynard once and for all, and he swaggered across to the thrones and stood close, too close, in front of the King, his thugs fanned out menacingly behind him. He didn't bother to bow. Even Noble the Lion was slightly scared of him, and he nervously tapped his claws on one of the carved griffins.

In appearance, Isengrim was much as you'd expect. He was tall and rangy and covered in jagged, ragged scars from his many duels and skirmishes. His fur was mottled grey with that reddish tinge which the Flanders wolves were once known for. He wore a broad scallop-edged cloak, trimmed in dark beaver fur, which swirled around him like a dirty grey rain cloud, soiled black velvet breeches and high black leather boots, laced at the side. Around his neck, a dirty scarlet kercher. Around his waist, a wide leather belt, also crow-black, hung with various sinister items—curved knives and pewter thimbles and mummified saints' fingers and amulets covered in odd runes and characters, and a tangled rosary with black Ave Maria beads and silver paternosters, which the gossips said had been given to him by one of his mistresses, a duchess from Lancaster, whose fur was as smooth and white as snow.

'High and Mighty Prince, my Lord the King,' gnarred Isengrim, his foul breath, a sour mixture of old meat and decaying teeth, trailing with each word, 'I beseech you, that

through your great might, right and mercy, you will have pity on the serious crimes and trespasses and unreasonable misdeeds which Reynard the Fox has done to me and my wife.’ Isengrim’s wife, Lady Erswynde, a delicate, melancholy flint-mottled wolf with a slight limp in her front paw, made as though to speak at this point, but with one sharp look from her husband, stopped and hung her head.

‘Last Midsummer,’ declared Isengrim, ‘Baron Reynard swanned into my house and befouled it. He came in against the will of my poor dear wife, and he found my sleeping cubs, and he peed on them, stinking yellow addle all over my sweet and innocent whelps! And can you guess why? Can you fathom that evil ruffin’s soul? He wanted to blind them, so he did! Spoil their innocent sight with his brimstone mig!’

There were gasps of horror around the chamber. One of the rams, a devoted father to a flock of lambs, let out an audible sob.

‘And where were you, Sir Isengrim? What did you do when you returned home to this terrible scene? It must have been rather shocking. Your cubs have entirely regained their sight, I see.’ Queen Gente gestured at Isengrim’s children, who were silently standing behind their mother. Isengrim looked at the Queen as though a worm had risen up and spoken.

Addressing the King, rather than the lioness, he continued, ‘I was out finding food for my little family, as all good parents must. The fox had, er, gone by then, but I went and found him on the road, and demanded he agree on a day to come to my manor and excuse himself, and swear on my Holy Saints book that it was a mere accident, not by design.’ Isengrim’s

tail flicked from side to side; he was pleased with the shape of his account. Queen Gente gave him a very long look.

‘Well, Reynard shows up on the day, all bright and early, but when I gives him the book of saints’ stories, he wouldn’t touch it, let alone swear on it. And he whips around and runs away like a devil, back to his sordid hole in Rupelmonde.’\* More shocked mumblings and exclamations, and Isengrim begins to exploit his audience, circling the room, all fangs and spittle and darkness. ‘He didn’t set much store about the matter, that fox. Blinded cubs? He didn’t give a fig! And they still can’t see properly—look at them.’

He roughly picked up his youngest cub by the scruff of his neck, who started to whimper and weep. ‘See how he cries! Look at those tears! All is as dark as night to him! And look at all of you gathered here at the King’s Court. Good animals. Honest animals. Loyal animals. Lives ruined, smashed, broken by that red-faced black-legged criminal.’ Isengrim dropped his son, who landed awkwardly on the stone flags, then walked behind his wife, placing a heavy grey paw on her thin shoulder. But for her one trembling bad leg raised above the ground, she stood as unnaturally still as a stone statue in the Abbey of Saint Bavo.

‘Oh, my fellow beasts, I could tell you of many other ways Baron Reynard has injured me. Stories to make your fur stand on end and your whiskers bristle. Indeed, were all the cloth of Gent gathered and unfurled as if it were parchment,

\* Isengrim’s Holy Saints book was the *Legenda aurea* or *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1228–1298), a collection of hagiographies or lives of the saints. It was wildly popular in late medieval Europe, not least amongst Noble’s courtiers, although its spiritual influence on the Wolf appears to have been somewhat negligible.

there would never be enough to scribe all that I now leave untold,' he rasped, stroking Erswynde's frozen back with his dirty claws, 'but the shame and villainy he has done to my wife, *that* I will howl from the highest ramparts to all of Christendom, and I will not—hear me, I will not—suffer that unavenged. Reynard the Fox will pay; by the thick blood of God, he will pay.'

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Second Complaint cast against Sir Reynard the Fox by Sir Courtoys the Hound, conveyed entirely in French

After this speech, there was a hush, pitted with a few nervous assents: 'Aye, aye, he must pay! Wicked Reynard! What a thing, eh!' Then, pushing through everybody's legs and tails, a little hound named Courtoys strode right up to the King, who was quickly having another snifter of clary to warm his blood after Isengrim's chilling performance.

Courtoys was a small dog of indeterminate breed, who was rather pretentious. He fancied himself as doyen of fashion at Noble's Court, which he privately condemned as rather provincial, spent a small fortune on his clothes and jewels, and only fenced in the Parisian style. Except occasionally to servants, he refused to speak Dutch or English, conversing in nothing but French (translated here), which he considered vastly superior in every way. Some of the animals took his appearance as a good point for a break and nipped to the closet or went to refill their cups in the Great Hall.

'I've listened to Monsieur Loup here,' gestured Courtoys, rubies glinting, best Brugge satin gleaming in the candlelight, 'and I would like to formally lodge my own complaint against the Fox. In fact, I'm very upset to impart to you all that, during the cold winter last, I endured a similar outrage.'

He extracted a frilled lace *mouchoir* from a sleeve and blew his nose. 'During that terrible hard frost, I was sore wintered and starving. My larder was almost empty apart

from a single sausage—a lovely plump *boudin*, rich and fatty and salty.’ Courtoys turned to the thinned crowd. ‘Reynard, that scoundrel, stole that sausage. He stole it and he ate it, all by himself. My fine sausage.’

‘A sausage, you say,’ boomed King Noble, who could see this was going to be a long night. ‘Well, well, well. A sausage.’

Suddenly, there was a flash of smooth grey fur and beautiful whiskers, and a clatter of claws on stone, and Sir Tybert the Cat, in a terrible fury, hissing like an adder, leapt half on top of the hound (who was heard by some nearby animals to bark a very earthy swear word which was definitely not French). A group of young lordly hares heading for the kitchens and three old crows, who were slipping out to go home, swiftly returned. Tybert, a professor at Louvain, was widely believed to be the cleverest animal at Court and he was a fiery and exciting rhetor when he was roused.\*

‘A sausage, indeed!’ Tybert began, jabbing his paw at the hound, tail puffed in anger to three times its normal size. ‘You are a liar, Courtoys! A liar, a gabber and a *coquin*! My Lord the King, I have been at Court all day and have heard Reynard sore complained upon, both in public and whispered in the shadows, in the stench-closet, behind sleeves. Accusation after accusation after accusation! Like flies to rotten meat! The fox is not even here to clear his name! Well, this meat in question, this sausage, minces away a wide cut of Reynard’s case.’

\* The last time being during an energetic argument with an Italian philosopher, an elderly boar visiting Gent from the University of Padua. Sparked by something to do with wine glasses and Diogenes of Sinope, it took place during King Noble’s riotous Twelfth Night celebrations and, according to all, represented a high point of the dinner.

‘Speak plainly, Tybert!’ gruffed King Noble, ‘Less of the tricky words. Some of my courtlings are not as clever as you, Cat!’

Tybert bowed. ‘What I am saying is this, Sire: the matter of which Courtoys speaks took place many years ago, not last year at all.’ Courtoys shrugged in a nonchalant sort of way. ‘Reynard still took my sausage.’

‘But that’s precisely it,’ spat Tybert, ‘that sausage, that lickeroous pudding, that tasty *boudin*—it was mine. I had acquired it one night, I believe on the Feast of Saint Stephen, from a miller’s house. I’d been taking the air, and was rather peckish, and the miller was asleep, and well, he was a fool, anyway, and it was wrapped up near the window. Anyway, I took it; it was my sausage and Courtoys stole it from me. If anyone should be sued and charged it should be that silly little hound! If he had any claim to the sausage it was through me!’

‘Ha!’ mocked Isengrim from the back of the Hall, where he was lounging with the other wolves.

Courtoys raced at Tybert, teeth bared. ‘*Bricon! Vilain! Glos pautonnier!*’ he barked, as Tybert mimed eating a sausage.\*

\* Courtoys is using some rather salty old French insults he picked up in the taverns of Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, meaning ‘fool’ (*bricon*), low person (*vilain*) and ‘gluttonous scoundrel’ (*glos pautonnier*).