

# A countess as goat and a duke as boar

## Animal stories as political commentary

Paul Wackers

Universiteit Utrecht

This article studies three medieval texts in which specific historical persons are presented as animals to comment upon their behaviour and on the situation they were in. The choice of representing animals is studied, as are the literary techniques and the meaning of the texts. It is argued that this meaning is always general, and older scholarly interpretations, that are more specific, are rejected. An explanation is suggested for the rarity of this type of ‘animal story as political commentary’, and it is argued that this type is fundamentally different from the passages in traditional animal stories which have previously been assumed also to contain veiled political commentary.

In the thirteenth century a so-called ménestrel de Reims wrote a story in French about a conflict between countess Margaret of Flanders and the noble family of the Avesnes. In this story, he presented the countess as a goat and her main opponent, her son John, as a wolf. In the fourteenth century a Middle Dutch text was written about a conflict between duke John III of Brabant and seventeen lords of adjacent areas. In this text, the duke was presented as a boar, and his opponents as hunting dogs. There are many differences between these texts: in language, in literary technique, in period, and in region. I wondered, however, whether there are also similarities because in both texts specific human beings are presented as animals. I wondered also how much the properties of this specific type of animal story matched the properties of ‘ordinary’ animal stories, in which animals are used to present a general image of human behaviour. When I started studying this, I discovered almost immediately that these two texts on their own do not contain enough material to reflect on these questions, so I decided also to include the work of Philip of Novare because on several occasions he presents specific individuals as animals and in these cases he always explains his reasons and his techniques, so his work is very useful for comparisons germane to my questions.

I will first discuss these three texts separately and then I will compare them with each other and with the main tradition of animal stories.

The story of countess Margaret as a goat is part of a text known as *Les Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims*.<sup>1</sup> This name was given to it by Natalis de Wailly who published the text in 1876 for the Société de l'histoire de France.<sup>2</sup> It is a text from ca. 1260 which gives historical information with help of the narrative techniques that were developed a few decades earlier for the new prose romances. It is not sure, in fact fairly improbable, that it was composed by a minstrel and its subject matter is far broader than the history of Reims. It regards the history of Northern France and Flanders with special attention to the role of nobles from this region in the crusades. The part of it that interests us here is called in the text itself *un essemble*, an *exemplum*.<sup>3</sup> It is told to comment upon a very complex situation regarding the lordship over the county of Hainaut in the middle of the thirteenth century.

This complexity arose because Margaret of Flanders (also called Margaret of Constantinople) had married twice before she became countess. In 1212, as a very young girl, she married Bouchard of Avesnes, and with him she had three children of whom one died in infancy. Margaret and Bouchard tried to gain more influence and power, and this irritated Joan, Margaret's elder sister, who was then countess of Flanders and Hainaut. Joan asked the pope to annul the marriage of her sister because Bouchard had received holy orders as sub-deacon before his marriage, so that he in fact had no right to marry and his union with Margaret was invalid. The pope agreed with her and annulled the marriage, against the wish of the married couple. Afterwards Joan pressured Margaret to remarry, and in 1223 she took William of Dampierre as her second husband. Together they had five children. In 1244 Joan died, and Margaret became countess of Flanders and Hainaut. From that moment on the children from both marriages started to quarrel about the inheritance of both counties. To end this conflict Louis IX, king of France and overlord of Margaret, decided that after Margaret's death Flan-

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1. For bibliographical information about manuscripts, editions and studies of this text see: [https://www.arlima.net/mp/menestrel\\_de\\_reims\\_chronique\\_dun.html](https://www.arlima.net/mp/menestrel_de_reims_chronique_dun.html), accessed 18-10-2022.

2. *Récits d'un ménestrel de Reims au treizième siècle*, publiés pour la Société de l'histoire de France par Natalis de Wailly (Paris: Renouard, 1876).

3. I have used the partial edition in *Le roman de Renart*, édition publiée sous la direction d'Armand Strubel, avec la collaboration de Roger Bellon, Dominique Boutet et Sylvie Lefèvre, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 445 (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 853-62, see 855. For a study of that part of the text, including the historical background and further scholarly information, see 1397-1411, written by Sylvie Lefèvre. See also John Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart dans la littérature française et dans les littératures étrangères au Moyen Âge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 243-45.

ders would go to the oldest Dampierre child, also called William, and Hainaut to the oldest Avesnes child, John. Margaret, however, did not want to accept this judgment, and the situation remained precarious and unclear. In 1251 the younger William of Dampierre died unexpectedly. Margaret tried then to give both counties to Guy, her oldest remaining Dampierre son, and in reaction John of Avesnes occupied Hainaut to ensure his inheritance. To counter this occupation Margaret offered Hainaut to Charles of Anjou, a brother of Louis IX, in order to obtain his military intervention against John. Charles besieged Valenciennes, but a truce was negotiated and the dispute was again submitted to Louis IX for adjudication. Louis confirmed his decision of 1246 regarding the Hainaut-Flanders split between the Avesnes and the Dampierre children, while Charles of Anjou renounced all his claims over Hainaut. That was not the end of the hostilities, but in the end each family obtained the intended county. The *exemplum* in the *Récits* is a veiled comment on the episode of the intervention of Charles of Anjou from the perspective of Margaret.

It tells that a wolf offered a goat half of the produce of a piece of land that he owned, if she would be willing to cultivate it. He could not do that himself, but had to go to the court of king Noble because Belin the ram had filed a lawsuit against him. The goat said she did not dare to do that because the wolf was a *grand seigneur*, powerful and of noble family, while she had no rank nor influence (*je suis une petite chose et de pouvre affaire*).<sup>4</sup> When they would have a disagreement about the division of the produce, she had no chance against him. The wolf assured her that she had nothing to fear from him and that he would deal fairly with her, and on that promise the goat agreed to cultivate the land. After the harvest she asked the wolf to come to take part in the division, but he answered that he still could not come, and he requested her to separate the grain from the straw. When she had done this, the wolf came and said that he would take the grain and would leave her the straw. The goat said this was unfair, but the wolf was unmoved and announced that he would take the grain the next day. The goat went to two hunting dogs, called Roenious and Taburious, that she had suckled and nursed when they were puppies, and these two promised to help her. The next day they hid themselves in the straw. When the wolf came to get the grain, he was accompanied by Renart, his compère. The fox discovered the hiding dogs and warned the wolf, but Isengrin ignored the warning and started nevertheless to load the grain on a wagon. Rounious and Taburious attacked him, maltreated him and left him for dead. They and the goat went away with the grain. Renart mocked Isengrin, who was only hurt, not dead. The wolf went back to his lair, where his wife and children mocked him too. He went to his bed because he

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4. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 855.

needed care. His recovery took five whole months. The goat thanked the dogs, and they promised to help her again if she ever needed them again.

After this story, the narrator explains:<sup>5</sup> with the wolf Isengrin he meant John of Avesnes. The goat was Margaret of Flanders. Charles of Anjou was Rounious, and the count of Poitiers was Taburius. That there are two dogs in the story, fits with the ‘historical’ information preceding the *exemplum*: the ménestrel had told that Margaret asked Charles of Anjou and Anton of Poitiers, both brothers of Louis IX, for help, and that they both promised to give it, but that the count of Poitiers fell ill so that he could not fulfil his promise.<sup>6</sup>

What can be said about the choice of the animals representing the human characters? That John of Avesnes is presented as a wolf, is easily understandable. In the medieval view a wolf is powerful, greedy, egotistical and not very clever, and these are exactly the characteristics that the ménestrel wants to ascribe to John. Why Margaret of Flanders is presented as a goat, is less clear. A central element in the choice is surely that a goat is not a powerful animal. This is important because in the story the human character, represented by the goat, must be unable to resist the wolf on her own. She needs a reason to ask for help. But why a goat, and not a sheep or a cow? I have been unable to come up with a plausible hypothesis. On the goat in fables, see below. The *bestiaria* write only about the wild goat or the he-goat, and their information is irrelevant for this story.<sup>7</sup> The information in encyclopaedias also seems irrelevant. However, Bartholomaeus Anglicus notices that goats are useful animals, and I think this element may have played a role, because the goat is presented in the story as an animal that produces goods.<sup>8</sup> I have also wondered whether a goat seemed ‘homely’ or ‘friendly’ to medieval people, but I have found no signs of that. So, the choice for a goat is completely understandable but the choice of another, comparable animal would not have been strange. And lastly: the presentation of Margaret’s helpers as hunting dogs is again easily understandable. Hunting dogs are enemies of wolves and they help human beings to protect themselves from them. Possibly, there is also a link between hunting dogs and the higher nobility. After all, nobles are the

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5. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 860–61.

6. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 854–55.

7. I have used <https://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast163.htm>, accessed 18–10–2022; *A Medieval Book of Beasts. The Second-Family Bestiary. Commentary, Art, Text and Translation*, ed. Willene B. Clark (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006); Richard Barber, *Bestiary* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1992); *Bestiaires du Moyen Age*, ed. Gabriel Bianciotto (Paris: Stock, 1980).

8. See *De proprietatibus rerum*, book 18, cap. 23 (e.g. in the edition Knoblochtzter, Heidelberg, 1488, fol. T3r. Cf.: <https://archive.org/details/A336055/page/n537/mode/2up?q=capra>, accessed 18–10–2022).

only people using hunting dogs and in *Van den ever*, the Middle Dutch text that I mentioned in my introduction, they represent higher nobles, just as in this text. I will come back to this.

The ménestrel presents John not as an anonymous wolf, like we find in fables, but as Isengrin, the wolf from the *Roman de Renart*. He uses the name Isengrin only at the end of his story,<sup>9</sup> but the *Roman de Renart* is present from the beginning because the wolf says he is unable to cultivate his land himself because he has to defend himself in a lawsuit brought by Belin the ram at Noble's court and trials at Noble's court are a major theme in the *Roman de Renart*.<sup>10</sup> And of course, at the end Renart also plays a role, so the link is evident. It is remarkable that Renart is not named in the explanation. The question of whether all animals in a story like this must refer to specific human individuals will be tackled later.

The human individuals are in the first instance characterised by the animals that represent them, but the ménestrel elaborates on this characterisation by elements that he includes in his story. He makes the goat more positive and the wolf more negative. The goat is prudent, because she hesitates before she accepts the invitation of the wolf. She fears problems, and rightly so. The goat is also generous, because she has acted as stepmother and nurse for the two hunting dogs, when these were young. The wolf is egotistical, and his words cannot be trusted. In the beginning the goat hesitates because she fears that the wolf as a great lord will not divide fairly.<sup>11</sup> When the wolf announces that he will take the grain and leave the straw for the goat, he says that he is a great lord and thus needs more than the goat, who is a weak creature.<sup>12</sup> So he does exactly what the goat feared and what he promised in the beginning that he would not do. He is also stupid or pig-headed because he ignores Renart's warnings.<sup>13</sup> And lastly, he is made still more negative at the end, because when he comes home wounded, his wife and his children mock him.<sup>14</sup> He receives no sympathy at all, from anybody. The hunting dogs get less extra attention. Their relationship with the goat is indicated to explain why they want to help her. The ménestrel also recounts that they live in a Cistercian abbey, but he does not clarify whether they are there as monks (which seems improbable) or as guards or protectors.<sup>15</sup> It is also not clear whether it is meaningful that they live there, or whether that this is just a detail taken over

9. The first time in *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 858.

10. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 855.

11. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 855–56.

12. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 856–57.

13. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 858.

14. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 859–60.

15. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 857.

from the *Roman de Renart* background, without any deeper signification. In the presentation of the hunting dogs their function as helpers is central and there is almost no elaboration.

So, influence from the *Roman de Renart* is clear, but there is no branch with a comparable plot. In some respects, the *exemplum* of the ménestrel resembles a fable even more than a branch, but as far as I can see, there exists no fable with the same plot.<sup>16</sup> There is, however, a widespread fable in which a lamb wanders among goats. When a dog (or a wolf) says that he would do better to go to the sheep, the lamb answers that he prefers the company of the one who feeds him above that of the one who gave birth to him.<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps the source of inspiration for the role of the goat as nurse and foster mother in the *exemplum* and perhaps even the explanation why a goat was chosen as representation of countess Margaret.

Although there is no fable with a comparable plot, we know other texts in which something similar is told, although with some important differences. These are *Renart le Contrefait*, the Italian branch *Rainaldo e Lesengrino*, and an anonymous Gascon folk tale, written down in the 19th century. August Todt and John Flinn have tried to determine the relation between these versions (with the exception of the Gascon folk tale) and they both concluded that the version in *Rainaldo e Lesengrino* was the source for the other ones.<sup>18</sup> Sylvie Lefèvre, however, refutes their arguments in the Pléiade edition of the *Roman de Renart* and argues that it is necessary to reckon with the influence of oral tradition and better to assume a common source for all four remaining versions.<sup>19</sup> The reflections on the relations between the four versions are not important in this context, but we should keep in mind the possibility that the ménestrel was inspired by another, already existing story (either oral or written) when he composed his *exemplum*. If the existing story was also about a goat and a wolf, this could also be the explanation for the presentation of Margaret as a goat. On the other hand, this possible expla-

16. I have consulted, for the Latin tradition: Gerd Dicke and Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Fabeln des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit. Ein Katalog der deutschen Versionen und ihrer lateinischen Entsprechungen* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987); for the French tradition: Paola Cifarelli, *Catalogue thématique des fables ésopiques françaises du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1993); and as a general back-up: Gert-Jan van Dijk, *Aesopica posteriora. Medieval and modern versions of Greek and Latin fables*, 3 vols, Pubblicazioni del D.AR.FI.CL.ET. Terza serie 242 (Milano: Ledizione LediPublishing, 2015+2019).

17. Cf. Dicke and Grubmüller, *Die Fabeln des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, 426–28 (nr. 370) and Van Dijk, *Aesopica posteriora*, I, 661–62 (nr. 759).

18. August Todt, *Die franco-italienischen Renartbranchen* (Darmstadt: Otto's Hof-Buchdruckerei, 1903), 82–93. Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart*, 536–42.

19. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1403–5.

nation is not very compelling because we see in fables that it is easy to replace one type of animal by another with comparable properties. Another reason to keep an already existing story as inspiration in mind is that the use of it would say something about the composition technique of the ménestrel, but perhaps more importantly: if the ménestrel knew an already existing text, his intended public may have known it too, and then it is possible that he consciously created some differences relative to the existing version in order to influence the response of his public to his *exemplum* in an indirect way. I find this an interesting idea, but it is all speculation, and it is impossible to resolve this question. So let us move to clearer ground, which means in this case: another text.

Probably in the autumn of 1334 a Middle Dutch text was composed that is nowadays called *Van den ever* (*About the boar*).<sup>20</sup> In this text duke John III of Brabant is presented as a boar. In that autumn the dukedom was threatened by a coalition of the leaders of seventeen adjacent counties or domains, and *Van den ever* is clearly war propaganda to rally the duchy behind the duke. The text was probably written by a herald; in any case it was preserved in the personal manuscript of a herald, albeit from another region.<sup>21</sup>

It consists of a conversation between nineteen characters. The first seventeen each recite a stanza of six lines with rhyme scheme aabccb. The eighteenth speaks two such stanzas, and the last one reacts to all the earlier words in a speech of twenty-two (longer) lines with paired rhyme. The first seventeen all threaten a boar. The eighteenth warns them: do they think they are approaching a hare? It would be better for them to leave their enemy alone, and after that the boar himself states that the threats of his enemies are unjust and that they have not made him afraid. If they want to fight, they can have a battle. His grandfather was

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20. On this text see Dini Hogenelst and Frits van Oostrom, *Handgeschreven wereld: Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur in de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1995; 3rd revised ed., 2002), 226–29; Remco Sleiderink, *De stem van de meester: de hertogen van Brabant en hun rol in het literaire leven (1106–1430)*, *Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur in de Middeleeuwen* 25 (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2003), 114–15; Frits van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden: geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1300–1400* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2013), 70–1. For an edition: Jan Frans Willems, “Wapenlied van Jan den III<sup>e</sup>, hertog van Brabant,” *Belgisch Museum* 1 (1837): 287–96 (cf. [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/willo28belgo1\\_01/willo28belgo1\\_01\\_0026.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/willo28belgo1_01/willo28belgo1_01_0026.php), accessed 18–10–2022).

21. Piet Avonds has argued that *Van den ever* was written by the Herald of Brabant, Steven, but this hypothesis cannot be proven. Cf. Piet Avonds, “Heer Everzwijn: oorlogspoëzie in Brabant in de 14e eeuw,” *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis* 63 (1980): 17–28. The text is preserved only in the famous Gelre armorial, which dates from 1395–1402 and was written by Claes Heynensoon, Herold of Gelre. Nowadays it is in the collection of the Royal Library in Brussels (sign. KBR, 15652–56). The text is found on fol. 1r–2v. The manuscript is digitised. See: <https://uurl.kbr.be/1733715>, accessed 18–10–2022.

victorious in a decisive battle. He expects to do the same. The threats are all fairly general, but the reaction to them is specific because of the reference to the battle of Worringen in 1288, in which duke John I enlarged the power and the influence of Brabant enormously. John III hopes to be able to do something comparable.

The enemies of the boar are at no point characterised explicitly, but they must be hunting dogs. There is no narrator telling us this, and in the only manuscript in which we find the text, this is not shown visually by reason of the enemies being indicated by their coats of arms, but it may be derived from some of their statements, such as:

Her Ever, ghi zelt  
 Op dit velt  
 Verliesen tspel;  
 Want die tande  
 Uwer viande  
 Zijn te fel.  
 Lord Boar, you will lose the game on this field, because the teeth of  
 your enemies are too fierce. (Willems, "Wapenlied," 291)

Ever, ic moet  
 In u bloet  
 Mijn tanden netten  
 Boar, I must wet my teeth in your blood. (292)

Het es hier bi  
 Twilt, dat mi  
 Te vaen behaget,  
 Daer ic om liep,  
 Bies ende riep,  
 Ende hebbe gejaget.  
 The game is here that I like to catch, for which I ran, barked and  
 hunted. (293)

Ic hebbe gejanc,  
 Over lanc,  
 Ende groot gescal  
 Gehoort van honden:  
 Hi es nu vonden  
 Diet gelden sal.  
 I have long heard yelping and big noise from dogs; he is now found  
 who will pay for it. (294)



... Dat ic gebassen  
 Heb so langhe.  
 ... that I have barked so long. (294)

Te dinen scanden  
 Sijn dine tanden  
 Hem comen so bi.  
 Shame on you that your teeth have come so near him. (295)



Figure 1. Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Handschriftenverzameling, 983, fol. 266r

And in another manuscript from 1438, a collection of important charters regarding the history of the duchy of Brabant, we find an historiated initial as opening of the text of the peace treaty that ended this conflict (Figure 1).<sup>22</sup> This

22. It regards the inventory of Brabant charters from the year 1438, collected by Adriaan vander Ee, then secretary of duke Philip the Good of Burgundy (ms. Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief, Handschriftenverzameling, 983). See Janick Appelmans, "Werd het wapendicht 'Van

initial shows a boar and a dog within a wooden wall, surrounded by 17 dogs. All animals wear a coat of arms. This image is clearly a reference to *Van den ever*, and the combination of boar and hunting dogs gives, of course, a fitting overall image, that was still seen as relevant after a hundred years.

The representation of John III as a boar is based on the fact that boars were in the Middle Ages considered to be very strong and dangerous. Gaston Phoebus, one of the most renowned hunters of the Middle Ages and author of a very popular hunting manual, even named the boar the most dangerous of all animals, because he was so strong and so completely fearless.<sup>23</sup> A boar is therefore a good image for a fearless and strong lord, who should rather be left alone because attacking him would be very dangerous.

The representation of his opponents as hunting dogs is also completely understandable. Boar and hunting dogs form together a coherent image, and dogs are respected animals and dangerous too. Moreover, hunting dogs are associated with the nobility. This plays no explicit role here, but I find it striking that not only in *Van den ever*, but also in the *exemplum* about Margaret of Flanders and John of Avesnes, noble persons of high rank are represented by hunting dogs. The ménestrel de Reims represented two counts as hunting dogs. In *Van den ever* the dogs represent two archbishops, one bishop, nine counts and six lords of domains.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that the image of a hunting dog immediately evokes the idea of the higher nobility. However, I have found no irrefutable proof for this idea.

I now come to my third text, the work of Philip of Novare.<sup>25</sup> As already stated in the introduction, this is useful when one wants to study why and how specific

den ever' in 1438 te Leuven opgevoerd?" *Eigen schoon en De Brabander* 100, 4 (2017): 469–84, esp. 480–81.

23. See Gaston Phébus, *Livre de chasse*, éd. Gunnar Tilander (Karlshamn: Johansson, 1971; reprint: 1976; Graz: Akad. Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1994), 88 (Chapter 9, 2–6).

24. Cf. Appelmans, "Werd het wapendicht 'Van den ever' in 1438 te Leuven opgevoerd?" 474–76.

25. For more information on this author and his work and an excellent edition of the 'Mémoires' see Filippo da Novara, *Guerra di Federico II in Oriente (1223–1242)*, ed. Silvio Melani, *Nuovo Medioevo* 46 (Napoli: Liguori, 1994). English translation: Philip de Novare, *The Wars of Frederick II Against the Ibelins in Syria and Cyprus*, translated, with notes and introduction, by John L. La Monte, with verse translation of the poems by Merton Jerome Hubert, *Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies* 25 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936). See also [https://www.arlima.net/mp/philippe\\_de\\_novare.html](https://www.arlima.net/mp/philippe_de_novare.html), accessed 18–10–2022. *Philippe de Novare: le premier auteur « juslittérien » = Miscellanea Juslittera* 1 (2016). [https://www.juslittera.com/wa\\_files/philippe%20de%20novare%20le%20premier%20auteur%20juslittetien%20\(volume%201\).pdf](https://www.juslittera.com/wa_files/philippe%20de%20novare%20le%20premier%20auteur%20juslittetien%20(volume%201).pdf), accessed 26–10–2022; Kathrin Lukaschek and Michael Waltenberger, "Tierepische Herrschaftskrisen. Füchsische Bedrohungen der politischen Ordnung im ›Roman

individuals are presented as animals in the Middle Ages because he does this several times.

Philip was a Lombard who spent most of his life in the Middle East, especially in Cyprus. He lived from ca. 1190/1195 to ca. 1261/1264. We know his historical work only because parts of it have been included in another text, *Les gestes des Cyprois*, but the existing editions have taken Philippe's parts out of that larger whole again and presented them as a single unit. This artificial unit is traditionally called his *Mémoires*, but their subject is not so much his own life but rather the conflict between his master, John of Ibelin, and emperor Frederick II over the rule of Cyprus. John of Ibelin was lord of Beirut but also had much influence on Cyprus. When Frederick II acquired the overlordship of Cyprus, he wanted to restrict the influence of the Ibelins and appointed five stewards to govern the island for him during the period that the young king of Cyprus, Henry I, was under-age. All five stewards were enemies of the Ibelins. The Ibelins accepted the overlordship of Frederick but did not want to give up their position completely, so a series of conflicts arose. Several times Philip commented upon a situation in this series of conflicts by presenting persons taking part in it as characters from the *Roman de Renart*. In all cases the starting point is that he named Aimery Barlais, one of Frederick's stewards, Renart because of his lies and his deviousness. Other analogies follow from this starting point.

I want to illustrate this by discussing two of the texts in which Philip used this 'Roman de Renart comparison' while placing them in their historical context.<sup>26</sup> In 1229 John of Ibelin and his eldest son, Balian, were in Lebanon. The five stewards of Frederick II decided to break the power of the Ibelins on Cyprus and attacked their main bastion, a castle in Nicosia. This castle was defended by Philip of Novare. He sent a rhymed letter to Balian (then in Acre), asking for help. In this letter he presented three of the stewards as animals, and this is how he explains his choices: because Aimery Barlais was the meanest person, Philippe called him Renart. He called Amaury Betsan Grimbert the badger because Amaury was a nephew of Aimery, and Grimbert is Renart's nephew in the *Roman de Renart*. And lastly, he called Hugues de Gibelet the ape because he had a deformed mouth, and

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de Renart, im ›Reinhart Fuchs‹ und bei Philipp von Novara," in: *Die Zeit der sprachbegabten Tiere. Ordnung, Varianz und Geschichtlichkeit (in) der Tierepik*, Kathrin Lukaschek, Michael Waltenberger and Maximilian Wick (eds), *BmE Themenheft 11* (2022), 191–224, esp. 208–19. See <https://ojs.uni-oldenburg.de/ojs/index.php/bme/article/view/171/187>, accessed 28–10–2022.

26. I use the partial edition in *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 845–51 and am indebted to Sylvie Lefèvre's commentary on the "animal parts" in Philip's work. See 1386–97. I have also used Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart*, 158–73.

so a distorted face.<sup>27</sup> Observe that he does not give Hugues a proper name. This corresponds with the situation in the *Roman de Renart*. When the ape plays a role there, he is sometimes called Cointerau, but almost as often he is presented just as ‘ape’.<sup>28</sup> Philip calls himself in this letter a nightingale, because he was able to produce poetry even in these difficult circumstances.

Balian of Ibelin came to the rescue of Philip, and the situation changed. Now the five stewards were besieged in the castle of Deudamor. Their position became very difficult, but John of Ibelin decided to make peace and stop the siege. His children seem to have opposed this decision, and Philip was clearly against it. At the end of the hostilities, Aimery Barlais visited the court of John of Ibelin but was received there by most of the courtiers in a hostile way. To escape from this hostile environment Aimery said he was ill. He went to his residence, asked for a priest and made confession, as if he was preparing for his death.<sup>29</sup> Philip seems not to have believed in this illness. In any case, he uses a feigned illness as central element in a text that he called a *branche* and that he seems to have written to warn John that Aimery Barlais was duplicitous and that a peace with him could only be false.<sup>30</sup> He starts this *branche* again by characterising a number of protagonists as animals. This time he starts with the Ibelin faction. He will present John of Ibelin as Isengrin, his children as the wolf cubs, Anceau de Bries as Brun the bear, and Toringuel as Tibert. These two were kinsmen of John, so they supported him in the conflict with the stewards. He gives himself the role of Chantecler, a singer, just as the nightingale of the letter. He ends this list by stating that all these animals belong to Isengrin’s side in the *Roman de Renart*. On the other hand, he presents Aimery Barlais as Renart, Amaury Betsan as Grimbert, and Hugues de Gibelet as the ape, just as in his letter. And he ends this list by stating that these animals belong to Renart’s side in the *Roman de Renart*.

The *branche* opens by stating that the land is in bad condition because Renart has waged war for a long time. However, in the end he is besieged by Isengrin and his situation becomes hopeless, but thanks to Noble he nevertheless gains peace. Chantecler warns Isengrin against this and reminds him of Renart’s misdeeds. Renart comes to Noble’s court and behaves audaciously, but Tibert and Brun treat him in a hostile way. Renart becomes scared, goes home together with Grimbert and feigns illness. Grimbert, Cointereau the ape, Renart’s children, and Hermeline his wife are worried. A priest comes and gives Renart communion.

27. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1390.

28. Cf. Micheline de Combarieu du Grès et Jean Subrenat, *Le Roman de Renart. Index des thèmes et des personnages*, Senefiance 22 (Aix-en-Provence: C.U.E.R.M.A., 1987), 271–72.

29. Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart*, 167.

30. This *branche* is edited in *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 845–51.

He pretends that he wants to reconcile with Chantecler, but the cock refuses. He knows Renart's falseness too well. The fox speaks a confession but has no remorse. He asks for absolution and obtains it, but that is all in vain because he is insincere and incorrigible. He was bad and he will remain bad until his death.

It is important to realise that Philip does something different than the other two authors when he characterises people as animals. He does not depart from the natural properties of the animals, as was done by the other two authors. His system is based on literature. He does not call Aimery Barlais a fox, he calls him Renart, and all the other connections follow from that. It is a family relationship that makes Amaury Betsan Grimbert and it is undoubtedly not by accident that two kinsmen of John of Ibelin become Tibert and Brun. In this way, Renart is confronted with his traditional enemies: wolf, cat, and bear. This choice is especially important when reflecting on John of Ibelin.<sup>31</sup> This seems to have been a good lord who was generally respected, even by his opponents. He was not stupid, egotistical, and brutal, so there is no real likeness between him and Isengrin in the *Roman de Renart*. The correspondence is only created because Isengrin is the main opponent of Renart as John is the main opponent of Aimery Barlais. This is a clear difference relative to the presentation of John of Avesnes as Isengrin by the ménestrel de Reims.

Although there are some peculiarities in the matches that Philip creates between his human protagonists and their animal representatives, there is almost a perfect similarity between the historical situation (as presented by Philip himself) and the *branche*. He tries to make two points: that many partisans of the Ibelins, including John's children, are against the peace and that their opponent, Aimery, cannot be trusted because he is completely false and will never change. He uses every chance to say negative things about Renart/Aimery.

It is interesting to notice that while the plot of the *branche* follows the historical incident closely, Philip nevertheless succeeds in presenting a story that resembles other branches very much. He uses many elements of authentic branches to give life to his story, so he must have known the collection very well. And it seems reasonable to assume that his intended public knew the *Roman de Renart* too, otherwise Philip's adaptation of it would not have worked. However, their knowledge was perhaps only superficial. That would explain in any case the remarkable allusion to which animals belong to Isengrin's side and which animals to Renart's side.

We now come to issues pertaining to all three texts. The first thing that needs to be pointed out is that although all three texts refer to complex situations, their message seems to be global and not very detailed. This implies, in my view, that

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31. On John of Ibelin's representation by Isengrin see: Lukaschek and Waltenberger, "Tierepische Herrschaftskrisen," 214–17.

many narrative details in the stories of the ménestrel and of Philip have no relation with the meaning of the text but are only there to make the story as the vehicle of the message more interesting. I will explain this in further detail, but first a few words about the message of *Van den ever*.

We have already seen some of the threats by John III's enemies. These were purely general. There is one threat that could possibly be specific and that is spoken by the lord of Cleves:

Ghi hebt te voren  
 Gedaen toren  
 Den vorders mijn;  
 Dat zal an u,  
 Her Ever, nu  
 Ghewroken sijn.  
 You have previously caused harm to my ancestors; that will now be  
 avenged on you, lord Boar. (Willems, "Wapenlied," 292)

There is, however, no historical evidence of a recent conflict between earlier lords of Cleves and John III, and when we interpret the words as an awkwardly worded reference to the battle of Worryngen, it must be remarked that Cleves took no part in that battle. So, this threat also can only be interpreted in a general way, just like the text as a whole. Its meaning is: Our lord has many enemies. They are all angry and want to attack him, but he is not afraid. What a good and valiant lord we have! And of course, the hidden suggestion behind that is: let us support him.

All scholars who have written about Philip's *branche* agree that the main message of this text concerns the bad character of Aimery Barlais and the unreliability of the recent peace. However, they also fill in some details that Philip leaves open. Philip says for instance that the besieged Renart and his companions would have died if Noble had not been part of the situation.<sup>32</sup> Flinn and Lefèvre both interpret Noble as the young Henri I, king of Cyprus, who was with Frederick's stewards in Deudamor during the siege.<sup>33</sup> The remark would then indicate that the Ibelins did not want to threaten the life of this child king and that this was one of the reasons for the peace. They also suggest that there is a relation between Philip's reference in the *branche* to Renart urinating over the wolf cubs (l. 35–37) and the actual treatment of the two sons of John of Ibelin by Aimery when he kept them hostage in a period before the events that we have discussed so far.<sup>34</sup> Both suggestions may be true, but to make the link a recipient of the text needs a good

32. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 846, l. 11–12.

33. Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart*, 165; *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1395.

34. Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart*, 165; *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1395–96.

deal of knowledge of the actual events. If that knowledge is absent, the details do not function as a reference. However, this does not influence the main message, which stays the same and stays just as clear. Hence, I think both details could also be interpreted as part of the background of the story, taken from the *Roman de Renart*. Flinn and Lefèvre accept also that the *branche* contains such details because they do not try to interpret Hermeline and Renart's two sons who also play a short role in the story, so they see them as just part of the animal setting and not of the human conflict that is commented upon. So, there is a certain inconsistency in their interpretation.

The question of which elements are relevant for the message and which form only a part of the fleshing out of the narrative is still more important for the interpretation of the story of the ménestrel de Reims, because the conflict behind his *exemplum* was very complex, far more than I have described it so far. What I have left out until now is that John of Avesnes looked for allies in the conflict with his mother and found one in William II, count of Holland and Zeeland, and designated as the next emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. To counter William's help, Margaret's Dampierre children invaded Zeeland, but their military action became a fiasco. Their army was beaten, they were taken prisoner, and their action cost Flanders much prestige and money. John of Avesnes asked William for help when he invaded Hainaut, but William refused. Flinn interprets the story of the ménestrel against the background of all this.<sup>35</sup> He thinks that the ménestrel let Renart represent William of Holland/Zeeland because Renart plays a prudent and indirect role. He neglects that the ménestrel says of Renart that he enjoys the misfortune of others and is a hypocrite.<sup>36</sup> Lefèvre points this out and uses it as a reason to consider it improbable that the ménestrel had meant Baldwin of Avesnes, John's brother, by Renart, but she does not dismiss Flinn's interpretation explicitly.<sup>37</sup> In my view, however, Renart does not refer to a specific human being, but is part of the narrative frame. He is Isengrin's eternal *compère*, and his role is, just like that of Hersent and the wolf cubs only to show that nobody has sympathy for Isegrin/John of Avesnes. Just like king Noble and Belin in the beginning of the story, he is part of the animal background of the narrative. Until now nobody has ever tried to link Noble, Belin, Hersent and the wolf cubs to specific humans, so we see here the same inconsistency that I pointed out in the interpretations of Philip's *branche*.

I think the safest way to interpret the ménestrel's *exemplum* is to stick to the information he himself gives us. That implies that the actions of the Dampierre

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35. Flinn, *Le Roman de Renart*, 243–45.

36. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 859.

37. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1402.

children in Zeeland are irrelevant. They are not mentioned in the story, nor in the historical information around it. The ménestrel is not interested in the whole conflict, but only in what happened in Hainaut. His fictional narrative differs much more from the historical situation than in the case of Philip of Novare, but his message also seems simple and clear. He states it himself thus:

Et Jehans d'Avesnes voloit avoir le grain, et voloit sa mere laisser la paille, car il voloit tolir sa terre ou il n'avoit droit et la voloit deseriter.<sup>38</sup>

And John of Avesnes wanted to have the grain and to leave his mother the straw, because he wanted to rob her of her land, to which he had no right, and he wanted to disinherit her.

So, the main point that the ménestrel wants to make is that John of Avesnes did something unjust and unlawful. All the elements in his *esemple* match with this message and all the details that he does not mention in his explanation can be seen as embellishments of the narrative background, so it seems wise to stress the central message and to refrain from the interpretation of details as references to specific elements of the historical situation as a whole.

This is the first conclusion that we can draw from this comparison. Of course it is possible that the three texts that we have analysed contain references to details in the historical situation they comment upon, but if so, these have only functioned for the really informed persons in the original public and they do not influence the general meaning. Since in both cases the analogy between the story and the message is not complete, it is impossible for modern scholars to determine with certainty which details in the stories were relevant for the message and which served only as embellishment of the animal narrative. Hence, they should do well to restrict themselves to study the general meaning for which the texts were primarily devised, and to use only the keys of interpretation that the texts themselves present.

Another question is how popular and how widespread this type of text may have been. In manuscripts, the type seems rare. I know of no other representative outside the three that are discussed here. And we know *Van den ever* and Philip's *branche* both only from one manuscript, and Philip's *branche* only because it was taken over into another text.<sup>39</sup> Philip's original is completely lost. We know the *Récits* of the ménestrel de Reims from eleven manuscripts, but these can be divided into two families. The *exemplum* of goat and wolf is only present in the text of one family. That family contains five manuscripts, and one of them has a

38. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 860.

39. *Van den ever*: KBR, Brussel 15.652–653; *Geste des Chiprois*: Royal Library, Turin, Varia 433. Cf. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1394.



very abridged text and has left out the *exemplum*, so in fact we know it only from a third of the whole tradition.<sup>40</sup> That seems to suggest that it was not an important element of the larger story in which it was included.

On the other hand: the single manuscripts of *Van den ever* and of the *Geste des Chiprois* are both from a later period than the text they contain, so there must have been at least some sort of continuing interest in them. And the visual reference to *Van den ever* in the collection of important charters regarding the history of Brabant (Figure 1), mentioned earlier, proves that a hundred years after its composition the text was still known, otherwise the illustration would have been meaningless. Furthermore, the Belgian historian Appelmans has argued that it is probable that in 1438 *Van den ever* was presented as a sort of tableau vivant on the Big Market in Leuven.<sup>41</sup> The miniature of the boar and the hunting dogs together with the indications for a public presentation of *Van den ever* in 1438, combined with the lack of written sources from the interim period, suggest that the continuous existence of this text was not based on written copies but on oral tradition. And perhaps that is true for the whole type of animal story as political commentary. In all three cases that we know in writing the subject is a situation that causes much attention and sensation, but for most people that situation became far less important after a few years. That implies that the chance for the stories being written down is not very great, as we have seen. But in a restricted circle of people, directly involved in the original incident, like the Ibelins or the Dampierres, the interest may have stayed alive, and this could have been the motor of an oral tradition. This type of oral tradition disappears after a time, unless there is a reason that makes it relevant again. For *Van den ever* that was the moment that Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, also became the Duke of Brabant. That was a reason to look back at important moments in Brabant's history when the dukedom had proven its worth. And John III's defence against the great coalition was such a moment. If this line of reasoning is correct, there might have been more animal stories as political commentary that have only functioned in an oral context and are now lost, but we will never know that for certain.

The term 'oral tradition' is perhaps misleading or even wrong, because writing may have been part of the original dissemination and of the preservation of the 'animal analogies'. This can clearly be shown by the letter that Philip of Novare sent to Balian of Ibelin to ask for help against Frederick's stewards (see above). The analogies Aimery Barlais = Renart, etc. were written down, but the letter was recited to Balian's company, so the reception was oral.<sup>42</sup> Philip comments that the

40. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1405–7.

41. Appelmans, "Werd het wapendicht 'Van den ever' in 1438 te Leuven opgevoerd?"

42. *Le roman de Renart*, éd. Strubel, et al., 1390.

listeners laughed about the ridiculing of their enemies. However, we do not have the letter. We know of its existence and of the reaction of the originally intended public because we find information about them in a manuscript. And this may be a general phenomenon. It is possible that written versions of this type of text existed for a time in the form of loose leaves, wax tablets, etc., but as they almost never were written down in a manuscript, their material testimonies disappeared, and that may be the reason that they are now so scarce.

The last point to be discussed is the question of whether these three narratives are unique as written political commentary or if we find comparable phenomena in the main bulk of medieval animal stories. Let us first look from the three to the rest of the tradition. *Van den ever* is completely unique because it is not a narrative in the strict sense but the ‘recording’ of a conversation. It was probably designed for oral presentation to large groups of spectators and it is fairly accidental that we still know it in written form. The narratives of the ménestrel and of Philip of Novare fit seamlessly in the tradition as a whole. If we did not have the explanatory text, it would be easy to accept them as normal branches of the *Roman de Renart*, so on the level of narrative elements and literary presentation, the tradition is uniform.

But what is the result when we look from the tradition as a whole to these three texts? Earlier scholars have argued that many texts in the tradition as a whole contain political commentary, many more than the three I have discussed here. We find this view already in Jacob Grimm, the Founding Father of the study of fox stories. He suggests for instance that Botsaert, the king’s clerk from *Van den vos Reynaerde*, refers to Bouchard of Avesnes (who was a clerk before his marriage with Margaret of Flanders).<sup>43</sup> This idea has subsequently been revived and Leopold Peeters has even suggested that *Van den vos Reynaerde* also deals with the conflict between the Avesnes and the Dampierres, just like the ménestrel’s *exemplum*.<sup>44</sup> The camel in branch Va of the *Roman de Renart* has been interpreted as a caricature of the papal legate Peter of Pavia (died ca. 1180), and the camel of Tuschalan in *Reinhart Fuchs*, who becomes abbess of the nunnery of Erstein, as a reference to the unfair behaviour of emperor Henry VI towards the city of

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43. Jacob Grimm, *Reinhart Fuchs* (Berlin: Bei Reimer, 1834), CCLVIII. Cf. <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10116926?page=280>, accessed 18-10-2022).

44. Leopold Peeters, “Historiciteit en chronologie in Van den vos Reynaerde, I-II,” *Spektator* 3 (1973-1974): 157-79 and 347-69. Reprinted in Hans van Dijk en Paul Wackers (eds), *Pade crom ende menichfoude: het Reynaert-onderzoek in de tweede helft van de twintigste eeuw*, Middelleeuwse studies en bronnen 67 (Hilversum: Verloren, 1999), 125-65.

Tusculum and the abbey of Erstein.<sup>45</sup> All these examples need more explanation but I mention them nevertheless to stress that we see here something completely different from what we found in the work of the ménestrel and Philip. These examples all concern details in the narrative reality that are interpreted as references to the actual reality of the intended public and they are never explained explicitly, so there is a fundamental difference on two levels: details versus whole, and absence or presence of an explicit interpretation. If there is political commentary in the other texts, it is presented in a completely different way and it must be seen as a separate phenomenon that should be studied on its own. In that study these three texts should play no role, certainly not in the beginning.

I am aware that I have been continuously advocating extreme caution, far more caution than earlier scholars have shown. Many scholars in medieval studies think that a certain audacity in interpreting medieval works is necessary, because there is so much that cannot be proven with certainty. I think, however, that it is wise only to assume relationships when there are positive indications for them, and I hope that I have shown that there is enough to think upon when one restricts oneself to the information that a text itself offers in a clear and unambiguous way.

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## Address for correspondence

Paul Wackers  
 Universiteit Utrecht  
 Hertstraat 39  
 6531KM Nijmegen  
 Nederland  
 p.w.m.wackers@uu.nl

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45. Peter of Pavia: see Lucien Foulet, *Le Roman de Renart* (Paris: Champion, 1914; several reprints), 218–24. Larissa Birrer, “‘Quare, messire, me audite!’ Le choix du chameau comme légat papal dans le *Roman de Renart*,” *Reinardus* 26 (2014): 14–32. Camel of Tuscalan: see Jean-Marc Pastré, “Morals, Justice and Geopolitics in the ‘Reinhart Fuchs’ of the Alsatian Heinrich der Glichezaere,” in: Kenneth Varty (ed.), *Reynard the Fox. Social engagement and cultural metamorphoses in the beast epic from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York / Oxford: Berghahn, 2000), 37–53, esp. 44–46.

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