

Talking Animals: Medieval Fables, and Robert Henryson's "Preaching of the Swallow"

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Primary Sources

Robert Henryson's version of the fable, "[The Preaching of the Swallow](#)," is available in David J. Parkinson's edition of Henryson's poetry for the TEAMS Middle English texts series. It is Middle Scots, a language spoken in lowland Scotland from roughly 1450 to 1700 (if you would like to read a Wikipedia entry about this language written in Scots, see [here](#)). As Professor Jennifer Brown explains [here](#), "This edition, like all of the TEAMS editions, is extremely student friendly. It contains a glossary, a bibliography, and footnotes that explain the Middle English," or in this case, Middle Scots, "making it easy for a student to navigate as they learn the language."

If, however, you would like the assistance of a translation into modern English, you can check out [George Gopen's 1987 translation of Henryson's fables from archive.org](#). Gopen's introduction is very smart, a good guide on thinking through the structure of Henryson's fable collection, and how to read them.

[British Library, Harley MS 3865, f. 43v-49v](#). The entire manuscript can be viewed through the British Library's "Digitised Manuscripts" website. You might want to compare the illustration in Harley MS 3865 [to an illustration from a fifteenth-century French manuscript](#) (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Smith-Lesouëf, 68, XV, 34v).

It might surprise you that manuscripts were still being made, for example, during the life of Shakespeare, but Harley MS 3865 is, in fact, a handwritten copy of a collection of Robert Henryson's fables printed in 1571 by the Edinburgh printer Thomas Bassandyne (interestingly, Harley MS 3865 may have been based on an extensively illustrated version of Bassandyne's edition, which is now lost). If you have access to [Early English Books online](#), you can explore the surviving copy of Bassandyne's curious book. It's not easy to read: much of it is printed in a now very rarely used typeface called "[Civilité](#)," based on a late medieval and early modern "lettre courante" hand, designed in France by Robert Granjon (d. 1590) to be used in books for children. Surprisingly, the fables of the morals are printed in a Roman typeface.

Other useful tools for teaching and research

The fundamental story of the Swallow fable is very old. Like most of the old fables, it was told and retold, and often refashioned, through the Middle Ages (and likely into the present day!). Medieval Latin versions of the fable are therefore easy to come by, for example, [here](#) and [here](#). You might also want to read a [translation of a twelfth-century French version by Marie de France](#): her version is notable for the treachery of various birds. You can find links to additional versions on the

mythfolklore.net website, [here](#), and through the [Aesop wiki](#). Here is [Laura Gibb's](#) translation of an early version of the fable into Modern English for the [Oxford World Classics series](#):

THE SWALLOW AND THE OTHER BIRDS

Some birds who had flocked together saw a man sowing flax seed but they thought nothing of it. The swallow, however, understood what this meant. She called an assembly of the birds and explained that this was an altogether dangerous situation, but the other birds just laughed at her. When the flax seed sprouted, the swallow warned the birds again, 'This is something dangerous; let's go and pull it up. If it is allowed to grow, people will make it into nets and we will not be able to escape the traps that they devise.' The birds mocked the swallow's words and scorned her advice. So the swallow went to the people and began to make her nest only under the roofs of their houses. Meanwhile, the other birds refused to heed the swallow's warnings, so now they are constantly being trapped in nets and snares.

Charmingly, [the Wikipedia page on Henryson's Fables includes a photograph of a swallow along with the bird's characteristic song](#).

The Middle English Dictionary can help you with reading Henryson. Henryson uses the word "pennis" for "feathers," for example (from the Latin *penna*, which is where we get our modern word "pen"): [here is the Middle English Dictionary entry for that word](#).

For comparison, you might explore the literary genre of animal complaints against humans. Here are two:

[*The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 22*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2012), ed. and trans. Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor

Martin Luther, "Complaint of the Birds," in [*The Letters of Martin Luther*](#) (MacMillan and Co, 1908), trans. Margaret E. Currie

Discussion Questions

1. Consider the variations between the fables. What is the base form of the story, and what changes get made? Especially, what's significant or interesting about Henryson including a human eyewitness within the fable itself, who sees what happens without being able to change the outcome?
2. Compare the two illustrations. Harley 3865's is very unusual: why represent the swallow as an actual human preacher? Why is the farmer just represented by a hand?

3. Consider the print and manuscript context (you might want to offer a little book or typeface history). The social register of different typefaces might be very interesting to talk about: why a roman typeface for the morals, and *civilité* for the stories?

Creative Exercise

Since antiquity, the fable tradition has involved rewriting and remediating fables. Can you imagine a modern version of this fable? Would you tell the same story? Would it still feature a prudent, but frustrated swallow and heedless small birds, or perhaps other animals (would, in fact, you prefer to tell the story with something other than birds)? Or would you illustrate the story, perhaps either in one panel (like the manuscript) or maybe in a multi-panel version? Would you include a witness to the fable (like Henryson)? Who would it be? And would your prudent character, like the swallow in some versions of the story, decide to give up on birds and -- as one Latin version has it -- "ad homines se transtulit" [to go over to the humans]?

Further Reading

[*Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain*](#) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), Susan Crane.

[*From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2009), Jill Mann.

Marie de France, [*Fables*](#) (University of Toronto Press, 1987), trans. Harriet Spiegel.

"Medieval," in [*The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2017), ed. Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, article by Karl Steel.

The Powerpoint

You can access it [here](#).