



The History of Reynard the Fox

Frederick Startridge Ellis

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After the Golden Legend and the Romance of the Rose, Reynard the Fox was the most popular book of the Middle Ages. It is a scathing political satire applicable to all time. The crafty fox Reynard preys on the innocent and edible animals of barnyard and forest, and outwits his enemies the wolf, the bear, and the lion with an inexhaustible store of inventions, tricks, and practical jokes. Its brilliant humor and keen sarcasm on the follies of human nature are imperishable.

The legend exists in two main versions: one French and one Germanic. The French is a sprawling collection of tales by some twenty different authors. The Germanic is a more unified, compact story, that loses none of the French's incisive wit and humor. It was originally written in Dutch verse in around 1250, then rendered into Dutch prose to become the standard version in the the Netherlands, Germany, and England. Caxton translated the Dutch book into English prose in 1481, and his edition was turned into verse in 1897 by F. S. Ellis, the pre-Raphaelite, medievalist, and translator of the Romance of the Rose. This edition also includes fifty illustrations by Walter Crane.

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