

**THE MOST DELECTABLE HISTORY
OF REYNARD THE FOX AND OF
HIS SON REYNARDINE, A REVISED
VERSION OF AN OLD ROMANCE**

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The Most Delectable History of Reynard the Fox and of His Son Reynardine, a Revised Version of an Old Romance by Anonymous

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**THE MOST DELECTABLE HISTORY OF
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THE

MOST DELECTABLE HISTORY

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REYNARD THE FOX,

AND OF HIS SON

REYNARDINE.

A REVISED VERSION OF AN OLD ROMANCE.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE History of Reynard the Fox is one of the most remarkable books of the middle ages: Germany, France, Belgium, and Holland, have contended for its authorship, and the conflicting claims appear to be hardly yet decided. Within these twenty years, libraries have been ransacked for old copies, and very large sums have been expended in the purchase of manuscripts discovered in private collections; a considerable number of editions of ancient versions have been printed, and all this research has been accompanied by much controversy and criticism, in which some of the greatest writers in Germany and Holland have taken part. We do not propose to enter into this discussion, but only to state the uncertainty that exists, and to set down our own opinions.

The balance of evidence upon the whole, inclines us to think that the work, as we now have it, was written by a Fleming or a Dutchman. It is not easy to distinguish between the Flemish and Dutch languages, even now; they differ to our ears little more than the dialects of Somerset and Yorkshire, and the similarity appears to increase as we recede in time.

The oldest manuscript of the romance of Reynard known is in rhyme; it was written soon after the year 1300, and is now in the public library of Stuttgart. It is in this Flemish or Dutch language, and was printed at Delft, in Holland, in the year 1485. Several editions of it have since appeared, though it seems never to have had so much popularity on the continent as the Low German version; probably because the language was not so generally understood. Another copy of this early manuscript was bought by an Englishman at Amsterdam in 1826, and a

few years afterwards sold by auction in London. This was purchased about ten years ago for the King of Belgium, at the recommendation of the learned Belgian Professor Willem, who says that an enormously high price was given for its acquisition. It is now deposited in the Burgundian Library at Brussels, and was made the basis of a new edition in 1834.

Another version appeared in print still earlier, in prose, and in the same language; which has a greater interest for an Englishman, if, as is alleged, it was the original from which our Caxton translated the work published by him in 1481. This *editio princeps* of Reynard was printed at Gouda in Holland in the year 1479, and is of excessive rarity; we have never seen it, but it is said to follow the metrical version very closely. We have no means of judging to which of these two versions the palm of antiquity must be given. It must be understood, that at any time within fifty years after the invention of printing, the date of a printed book is no criterion whatever of originality of authorship; as works were written and published for many years in manuscript only, while others, the authors of which were perhaps better able to afford the expense, were printed as soon as they were completed.

A poetical translation, but with very considerable additions, was made into the language of Northern Germany called *Plattddeutsch*, and printed at Lubek in 1498, of which edition it is said that the copy in the Wolfenbüttel library is the only one existing. Of this we give the first eight lines, with an English literal version, both as a curiosity, and to shew how readily the old *Plattddeutsch* runs into English:

It geschah up enen Finkste dach,
 Dat men de wolde un veide sach
 Gronc stân mit lóf un gras,
 Un mannich vogel vrolik was,
 Mit sange in hagen un up bomen;
 De krude sproten un de blomen,
 De wol rôken hier un dár:
 De dach was schone, dat weder klár.

TRANSLATION.

It happened on a Whitsun day,
 When all the woods and fields were gay,
 When all was green in leaf and grass,
 And every bird rejoicing was,
 With songs in trees and eke in bowers;
 The plants were sprouting, and the flowers
 Were sweetly smelling here and there;
 The day was fine, the weather clear.

The whole book might be readily translated in the same way.

The next version, in point of time, and still earlier in print, is the English one made by Caxton, and printed by himself in 1481. Of this there is a fine copy in the British Museum, as clear after a lapse of three centuries and a half as though it had just issued from the press, and equally legible to one acquainted with the old language and character; for the obsolete words and monkish type render it somewhat difficult to others. This version is said by Grimm to have been translated from the Gouda copy; he perhaps judges from the date of the book, but there is reason to suppose that Caxton translated from a manuscript, as he would hardly have been able at that epoch to procure a book printed in Holland in 1479, translate it into English, and publish it in London in June 1481, which is the date of his book. True it is that Caxton professes to translate from the Dutch, but it is well known that old English writers used this word for the languages both of Germany and Holland, often without distinction, and sometimes with the addition of the words, *high* and *low*. The concluding words of Caxton are, "For I have not added ne mynussed, but have folowed as nyghe as I can my cotype whiche was in Dutche: and by me, Willm Caxton translated in to this rude and symple English in thabbey of Westmestre. Fynysshed the vi daye of Juyn the yere of our Lord MCCCC.lxxxj, and the xxi yere of the regne of Kyng Edward the iiiijth."