

# Obscene Anglo-Norman in a Central French Mouth; or, How Renart the Fox Tricks Isengrin the Wolf, and Why It Is Important

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In Branch Ib of the late twelfth-century *Roman de Renart*, Renart the Fox, believed to be dead, falls into a vat of dye colouring. This enables him to return home, in disguise, claiming to be an English *jongleur*. Upon encountering his old enemy, Isengrin the Wolf, Renart plays his role, uttering a broken French which, presumably, the medieval audience recognised as a caricatural version of Anglo-Norman, the French spoken in England, and/or as the imperfect speech of a foreigner only superficially versed in the language.

The encounter between Renart and Isengrin runs on for a good two hundred lines. I shall discuss the first few lines, one page taken from the Combarieu-Subrenat edition.<sup>1</sup> Here follows the original text, the editors' translation into French, and my translation into English.

## ***Old French Text***

Lors se porpense en son corage	
Que il changera son langage.	2340
Ysengrin garde cele part	
Et voit venir vers lui Renart.	
Drece la poe, si se seigne	
Ançois que il a lui parveigne,	
Plus de cent fois, si con je cuit;	

Tel poor a, por poi ne fuit.  
 Qant ce out fet, puis si s'areste  
 Et dit que mes ne vit tel beste,  
 D'estranges terres est venue.  
 Ez vos Renart qui le salue: 2350  
 — "Godehelpe" fait il, "bel sire!  
 Non saver point ton reson dire."  
 — "Et Dex saut vos, bau dous amis!  
 Dont estes vos? de quel pais?  
 Vos n'estes mie nés de France  
 Ne de la nostre connoissance."  
 — "Nai, mi seignor, mais de Bretaing.  
 Moi fot perdez tot mon gaaing  
 Et fot cerchier por ma conpaing,  
 Non fot mes trover qui m'enseing. 2360  
 Trestot France et tot Engleter  
 L'ai cherchiez por mon conpaing qer.  
 Demorez moi tant cest pais  
 Que j'avoir trestot France pris.  
 Or moi volez torner arier,  
 Non saver mes ou moi le quier.  
 Mes torner moi Paris ançois  
 Que j'aver tot apris françois."  
 — "Et savez vos neisun mestier?"  
 "Ya, ge fot molt bon jogler. 2370  
 Mes je fot ier rober, batuz  
 Et mon viel fot moi toluz.  
 Se moi fot aver un viel,  
 Fot moi diser bon rotruel,  
 Et un bel lai et un bel son  
 Por toi qui fu sembles prodom.  
 Ne fot mangié deus jors enters,  
 Or si mangera volenters."

### ***French Translation***

En même temps, il se dit qu'il va parler comme s'il n'était pas du pays. Comme Ysengrin se trouve jeter les yeux du côté par où Renart arrive, il le voit et sa peur est telle qu'il

est tout près de s'enfuir; avant que le goupil l'ait rejoint, il a bien le temps de faire au moins, je pense, cent signes de croix, de sa patte dressée. Après quoi, il s'en tient là, se disant qu'il n'a jamais vu un animal pareil: il doit s'agir d'un étranger. Et voici que Renart le salue:

— Godehelpe, cher seigneur! Moi pas savoir parler ta langue.

— Que Dieu vous garde, très cher ami! D'où êtes-vous et d'où venez-vous? Vous n'êtes pas de par ici? Ni originaire de France?

— Ni, ma seigneur, mais de Brittain. Moi foutre perdu tout mon gain et foutre chercher après ma compagnon; mais ne foutre trouver qui me renseigne. Partout France et partout Angleterre, j'ai cherché après ma compagnon. Moi rester dans ce pays tant que je sais tout la France. Maintenant moi voulez retourner, non savoir où plus le chercher. Mais moi aller Paris avant moi avoir appris tout Français.

— Et avez-vous un métier?

— Ya, je foutre très bon jongleur. Mais je foutre hier volé et battu et mon vielle foutre pris à moi. Si mon foutre avoir un vielle, foutre moi dire bonne danse, bon conte et bonne chanson pour toi qui as l'air homme honnête. Ne foutre manger depuis deux jours en entier, maintenant, mangerai volontiers.

### **English Translation**

So he (Renart) reflects down deep that he will change his speech. Isengrin looks in that direction and sees Renart coming. He raises his paw and crosses himself more than one hundred times, I reckon. He is so afraid that he almost runs away. Then he stops and says to himself that he has never seen so strange an animal, it must be from foreign parts. Here comes Renart who greets him:

— Godehelpe, he says, mine Lord! Not to know speak your talk.

— And may God bless you, my dear fellow! Where are you from? From what country? You are not French nor of any species from around here.

— Nay, mine lord, but from British. Me you fucking lost all my goods and to fucking look for my mate. Not to fucking find someone who learns me. All France and all England I have you looked for finding my mate. You stay me in this country until I to have had all France. So me you want to go back, me not know still where to look for him. But to return me to Paris before I to have learned all French.

— Don't you have a livelihood?

— Ya, I a very good fucking minstrel but I fucking yesterday to rob and beaten and my fucking viol me stolen. If I to have a fucking viol, me fucking to sing good retrouenge, and a fine lay and a fine song for you who was seem a worthy man. Not fucking eaten for two whole days. So certainly he will eat gladly.

Renart accumulates in a few lines just about all the deviations from grammatical norms a learner or recent immigrant can make. Most of these are the same that twentieth-century anglophone students make in their acquisition of the language. Here are a few examples:

- non-agreement of gender: “ton reson” (2352), “ma conpaing” (2359), “tres-tot France” (2361, 2364)
- mixing grammatical case: “bel sire” (2351), “moi” and “je” throughout
- deleting clausal coding, as in the substitution of the infinitive for a first-person verbal clause: “saver” (2352), “avoir” (2364), “saver” (2366), “torner” (2367), “diser” (2374)
- deleting morphological coding: “bau dous amis” (2353), “tot Engleter” (2361), “qer” (2362)
- inserting redundant auxiliary: “fu sembles” (2376)
- substitution of the infinitive for a past participle: “rober” (2371)
- substitution of a second-person present for the infinitive or for a first-person present: “perdez” (2358), “demorez” (2363), “volez” (2365)
- phonology: substitution of /n/ or /N/ for /S/ as in in “Bretaing” (2357), “gaaing” (2358), “conpaing” (2359), and “enseing” (2360)
- shift in stress: “qer” (2362)
- introduction of foreign lexical items: “Godehelpe” (2351), “nai” (2357), “ya” (2370)<sup>2</sup>
- lexical confusion of “pris” (2364), “taken” or “had” with “apris” (2368), “learned,” with the resulting sexual innuendo.<sup>3</sup>

Note that a number of these deviations are standard in Anglo-Norman.<sup>4</sup> In part because the insular speech incorporated elements from Norman and Picard, the distinctions between “cas sujet” and “cas régime” and between masculine and feminine ceased to function earlier than on the Continent. The phonological and accentual deviations are also standard in Anglo-Norman. This means that Renart, his author, and their central, standard speech community identify as alien both foreign or regional and substandard items, both the speech of the learner and the speech of the foreign or regional intellectual.

One myth—a generally-held belief that may or may not be true—states that foreigners who possess an imperfect functional command of the language will, unbeknownst to themselves, utter obscenities. The semantic confusion will often occur as a result of substituting one phoneme, present in the learner’s repertoire, for another one which is not. The twelfth-century author of *Renart* Ib is aware of the myth and of the fact that, under the right circumstances, his public will find obscene speech humorous, not offensive. For example, on this page of the text the English *jongleur* utters nine times the form “fot” (2358, 2359, 2360, 2370, 2371, 2372, 2373, 2374, 2377), the third-person singular present tense of the OF verb “fotre”: he, she, or it fucks. The term does not have an obvious function—lexical, syntactic, or grammatical—in the jongleur’s speech other than...being itself. Scholars have proposed three explanations for the phenomenon.

1 The *jongleur* mispronounces “fut,” the past definite third-person singular form of the verb “to be.” He would like to say “it was” yet has problems enunciating /ü/, a vowel form peculiar to Gallo-Romance, present in French and Occitan, and absent from Catalan, Spanish, and English.

2 The *jongleur* mispronounces “falt” or “faut,” the present tense of the verb meaning “it is necessary to/we must/we have to” (cf Modern French “il faut”).

3 He wishes to utter the third-person auxiliary of the nonexistent (invented) auxiliary “futre,” a form which would bear no lexical relation to “fotre” but could be identified as a homonym (Schmolke-Hasselmann).

4 I propose a tentative fourth hypothesis, which, to my way of thinking, is not meant to rule out numbers 1 and 2 above.<sup>5</sup> In this text “fot” may have a linguistic function: as an intensifier and speech marker similar to the marker in substandard American working-class, black, and military English, as in: “I fucking woke up and

put on my fucking clothes and opened the fucking refrigerator and there was no fucking pizza left.” Hence my translation of “fot,” and Mme de Combarieu’s and M. Subrenat’s modern French equivalent “foutre.”<sup>6</sup> More socially respectable markers punctuate nonstandard teenager and movie star English, what I call the Beverly Hills Demotic, as in: “I kind of woke up and like put on my clothes and like I opened the refrigerator and I mean there was like no pizza left.” Could then “fot” or its equivalent have been a marker in substandard Old French, the demotic, say, of peasants in the Ile de France or what had already become the Parisian ruffraff? We don’t know and have no way of knowing.

Literary scholars, still the heirs of German romanticism, often like to think that medieval texts reproduce the spoken vernacular better than modern texts do. However, medieval literature is magnificently, superbly literary and stylised, magnificently high-culture and not folkloric, so that we find *genus grande* in the epic and lyric, *genus medium* in courtly romance and the lay, and *genus humile* in works such as Renart. Or, rather, *Renart* exhibits a juxtaposition and mixture of styles, as Auerbach would say.<sup>7</sup> The relationship of these levels of style to the spoken vernacular remains problematic, at best. This said, if some of the *jongleur*’s speech characteristics—here I mean the non-observance of normative grammatical principles as well as the marker—can be ascribed to popular usage, either in Paris or London, then they would demonstrate less the *jongleur*’s limited command of French than his limited command of register and social context, his failure to “up” his speech, as it were, when addressing a *seigneur*. In this case, the social comedy would then mock the peasant, the artisan, or the *parvenu* as much as it would the foreigner and the tourist. Also, whereas in 1 and 2 above, the *jongleur* slips into obscenity unawares, here, presumably, he does so deliberately. The narratological stance would be different although the word “fotre” remains the same.

The author creates a comic situation in which Isengrin relaxes his guard because of his presumed superiority due to social stratification (superiority of a lord over an entertainer) and linguistic variety (superiority of a native speaker over a foreigner). Isengrin is conscious of what the standard (codification of norms) is or should be; Renart’s persona, the English minstrel, is not. Isengrin displays high communicative competence, and the minstrel apparently a lower competence. Group identity and communal solidarity are maintained, and sometimes created, through linguistic solidarity, by sharing the same registers of speech. Those who do not partake of such registers are effectively excluded. When the exclusion assumes a comic guise, the

excluded then become subject to laughter. If not Isengrin himself, the medieval implied audience can be assumed to laugh at the minstrel's fractured French, funny because it is foreign and foreign because it is funny. The minstrel also partakes of an outgroup stereotype, the Englishman who speaks bad French, a type prevalent in the Middle Ages, and one which appears from time to time since then. The assumption was—on the French side of La Manche—that the Englishman cannot talk properly, therefore is funny, and because he is funny and English, he has to be slow, heavy, and stupid. We can assume that this is Isengrin's response—a self-satisfied, condescending reply from one who stood initially in terror of the outsider. Given English and Norman prowess in warfare, evident already by the 1190's, Isengrin's first response was perhaps the more appropriate one.

Henri Bergson, among so many other things theoretician of the comic, insists upon laughter as a means of social correction as well as social exclusion, a lesson in reforming those not supple enough to function in the community. We find here, indeed, something of the Bergsonian notion of the comic, the repetition of mistakes by a presumed fool who babbles on *ad infinitum*, breaking every rule of grammar all the time, again and again. This would be Bergson's *du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant* (29), and also his snowballing effect, as the mistakes pile up and up and up for no discernible reason.

As it turns out, however, the slow, heavy, and stupid beast proves to be not the fox but the wolf, not the entertainer but the lord, Isengrin who, in this parody of a courtly world, can trace his ancestry back to the equivalent of one of Charlemagne's peers. For it is he who manifests most convincingly the Bergsonian comic. Naively, mechanically, with no degree of social or linguistic sophistication, he takes Renart's performance at face value, never allowing himself to question the excess of discourse or to recognise what sort of beast this is who sports yellow fur. In fact, it is he who possesses only a limited command of code, register, and repertoire, and who cannot adapt to an unexpected situation or to unexpected speech habits. Throughout the scene he retains, mechanically, what he merits least: satisfaction with the world and with himself.

Remember, this is a French not a North American public, one which, in the twelfth century as today, rewards intelligence, not "being nice," and prefers Astérix to Forrest Gump. The implied audience may laugh at the English minstrel; it laughs *with* Renart the Fox, who creates him. The audience sympathises with Renart and recognises his superiority, intellectual and linguistic. For Renart, who pretends to be

capable of only the most restricted code possible *vis-à-vis* the elaborated code of his interlocutor, because of his extraordinary verbal repertoire switches codes with brio and directs the functioning of speech and its registers. The knave bests the fool, the *trompeur* deceives the *trompé*, and brain defeats brawn.

Renart mocks Isengrin with his obscene innuendo, the “fot,” appropriate to an erotic champion—the intertextual parody of the hero in courtly romance, Lancelot or Gawain—he who has, in the past, cuckolded Isengrin and will do so again a few hundred lines further on. Is Isengrin’s wife the “ma conpaing” (2359) whom he has lost? This is also the intertextual parody of Tristan who, to meet Isolt and thereby deceive King Marc, resorts to disguises—as a fool, a leper, and a minstrel. One aspect of courtly and heroic satire in *Renart* underscores both the erotic competition between these beasts, animals after all, and that Renart seduces and rapes as he argues and deceives, from the top and the bottom, with tongue and penis, at will.

Therefore, with the text presented as it should be, by a master *jongleur*, the audience would delight in the carnivalesque excess of Renart’s discourse, which mocks the rules of language as it mocks the rules of polite society, and also enjoy what I have called earlier his performance—Renart the theatre director staging himself as the chief actor in the hoodwinking of a spectator—Isengrin—who unknowingly is also an actor, for Renart and for the extradiegetic audience, us. Carnival is one way of envisaging the courtly universe turned upside down and inside out, occupied by beasts, and which emphasises their bodies, their concrete physical reality, what Bakhtin called the material bodily lower stratum.

The aesthetic of comedy here resides in a tension between the high and the low, the spiritual and the corporeal, the quotidian and the carnivalesque. In terms of language, humour is generated by the fact that both locutors are animals and, therefore, on the level of mimesis, incapable of any speech, French or Anglo-Norman. Humour arises because the fox, master of ruse, tricks the wolf verbally, through discourse—low, obscene discourse—while pretending to be a *jongleur*, a low-class entertainer yet one who performs high-art discursive texts, in what we know to be a poem of high art. In a work of high art and extreme linguistic self-consciousness, the standard contains, encircles so to speak, a substandard that breaks the normative code. The embedded text enriches the frame. What is unthinkable in early *chanson de geste* and *roman courtois* here, at the turn of the century, in the beast epic, becomes thinkable. The low and obscene—*sermo humilis*, *genus humile*—the spoken vernacular deemed appropriate to peasants, foreigners, and animals also finds a place and is included in



high art. Also revealed by our passage is the supreme importance of language, the notion that, in the twelfth as in the twentieth century, *homo sapiens* is actually *homo locutor*, even if we have to ascribe the discovery to lesser beings: warlike beasts in the wild or pretentious poststructuralists at the Collège de France.

This passage also contributes to an ongoing scholarly debate, a fascinating historical problem concerning the prevalence of French in medieval England.<sup>8</sup> Who spoke it? And for how long? Maria Dominica Legge, who represents the older generation of scholars, argued that, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, French became a true vernacular across the Channel; nearly everyone was bilingual to some extent and nearly everyone had some fluency in French, a tongue that, more than the dialects of English, functioned as the insular *lingua franca*.

Revisionists, led by William Rothwell of the younger generation, contest this theory. Rothwell claims that the masses remained largely monolingual and that, by the thirteenth century, perhaps as early as the end of the twelfth, French became, for everyone, an acquired language not used in everyday life. Supporting his thesis are the following: texts stating that Englishmen of good family went abroad or undertook special studies to learn French; written texts, continental and insular, indicating that the French spoken in England (Marlborough French) was subject to mockery; word-lists, grammars, and conversation books that appeared in England, and also in the Low Countries, to teach French; apologies from Anglo-Norman authors for their inadequate command of the medium; and church writings confirming that both Latin and French were elite tongues not normally understood by the faithful.

While in general agreement with Rothwell (the corpus of evidence is daunting), I should like to refine the interpretation we give to the evidence. For example, did everyone need to acquire French? Or were the middle classes and some county families eager to rise socially? Or did people feel insecure in their Anglo-Norman vernacular *vis-à-vis* the French of Paris, now become an international standard? In other words, did they wish to learn French or to unlearn Anglo-Norman?

Our passage from *Renart* and similar texts cited by Rothwell and Short indicate only that some native English speakers had difficulty learning and speaking French, or, rather, that native French-speakers thought they did. They also or alternatively thought that the French spoken in England (Anglo-Norman) was incorrect. These texts reveal language prejudice in the Central French region, reveal that, by the 1190's, French had attained a significant degree of standardisation and that the

Parisian and court standard was asserting hegemony over the insular language and also over Picard French and Occitan. Thus, Central French-speakers looked down upon non-native language users and upon the Anglo-Norman and Picard regional varieties much as, today, many among the Parisian *bourgeoisie* still look down on Belgian or Québec or Marseille usage.

We also know, however, and Rothwell is the first to say it, that Anglo-Norman, whether native or acquired, remained for centuries a vital medium of law, commerce, diplomacy, administration, and literature. Law French persisted in England until the eighteenth century. The tradition includes first-class writers—Thomas of England, Hue de Rotelande, Robert Grosseteste, Nicholas Bosc, and John Gower, among others—who composed superb poetry with a native-like command of a complex linguistic system, all the while apologising (ironically, I expect) that they were not born in the shadow of Notre-Dame and, therefore, might get their cases wrong.

Perhaps, today, recognising that so many people on the planet are bi-, tri-, and quadrilingual, and, preferably, tempering the romantic fetishisation of the Mother Tongue, we can suggest that the question of native as against acquired language is less important than the language's functioning in society. That is, more significant is the fact of diglossia in medieval England and Flanders, through which the learned, refined register would dominate in literature, the schools, the court, the law, administration, foreign commerce, and the cloister; and the familiar register would prevail in the home, the tavern, the market, on the road, and on the farm. For a, to us, contemporary analogy, instead of South Asian tongues failing to survive in today's England (Rothwell's example), I offer the mirror opposite of English in India and Pakistan, where, acquired for some and native for a few, the extremes of dialect development juxtapose against the most elegant Oxonian, and where, for some—especially those involved in government and education—yet not at all for the teeming masses, diglossia has become the rule. For centuries after the death of French in England, English intellectuals and the upper classes gazed fondly toward France and considered France to be a second home—well they might, since they once owned the place. Because of this, the English lower classes loathe the Froggies and all that they think they stand for. Something like this pattern may be evolving today in India and Pakistan, fanned, among other elements, by religious nationalism.

It is difficult to predict the future. Some (actually a minority) would say that in time, and perhaps in fewer centuries than it took for French to die in England, English may cease to be the vehicular language of South Asia. Others might suggest

that, by then, our planet will have been invaded and we shall all be acquiring Basic Klingon.<sup>9</sup>

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### **Notes**

1 The Old French, ll 2339-78, is to be found in Combarieu du Grès: 348, 350, the translation into modern French: 347, 349, 351. Combarieu-Subrenat follow Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS fr. 20043, the manuscript used in the old, reliable Martin edition. For excellent recent criticism of *Le Roman de Renart* in general, see Batany, Scheidegger, Simpson, and Suomela-Harma, also the articles collected in Dufournet and Varty.

2 These terms do not indicate Renart's functional command of English. They can just as easily be derived from and construed as Dutch.

3 Sexual innuendo also, perhaps, *a propos* of the minstrel's "ma conpaing." A male friend or companion? Or a female companion, his own or Isengrin's wife? This is why I translate "conpaing" as "mate" rather than, say, the North American vernacular "buddy" or "pal."

4 The text itself—gone through the hands of more than one scribe—is by no means consistent. For example, we find an Anglo-Norman form "aver"(2368) juxtaposed with the Central French "avoir" (2364).

5 The *trouvère* himself may have intended both 1 and 2.

6 However, "foutre" gives the French translation a quaint, old-fashioned air, as in nineteenth-century boulevard comedy, such as: "O foutre, je vois ma femme qui arrive!"

7 For other examples of the obscene and the rhetorical manipulation of registers in Old French, see Calin, *In Defense*, pp. 59-70.

8 Short examines this question with brio. I take it up, in somewhat greater detail than here, in *French Tradition*, pp. 3-16.

9 Linguists (see Nicholas, Okrand, Schoen) have profited from the Star Trek phenomenon by publishing the original Klingon play *Khamlet*, two introductions to Klingon (elementary and more advanced grammar), an annotated compilation of proverbs, and a collection of "grammatical opinion and wisdom." The *trouvères* who composed *Renart* would have approved.

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