

## The Nun's Priest's Tale

### Background

The Nun's Priest Tale most closely resembles the beast-fable in genre, which has its origin in the fables of Æsop. The immediate sources are three-fold. Marie de France's *Del cok e del gupil*. Beast-epics *Roman de Renart* and *Renart le Contrefait*. The beast epic used animals to satirise human behaviour; the fables were moral tales.

The Nun's Priest tells his tale at the request of Harry Bailey only after the Knight has interrupted the Monk's Tale. The Monk, self-confessed practicer of letting old things pass (GP 175), and a favourite amongst those who write about Chaucer's use of estates satire, surprises us, and all the pilgrims, by giving us in his tale a catalogue of examples tragedy: the rise and fall of great men. This is so dull, that, again, surprisingly, the Knight interrupts — surprisingly because the turn of Fortune's Wheel was a major theme in his own tale. But the Knight's Tale, however cynical we may think it was, was not all gloom and doom. The Knight tells that a tale which lightens the heart is more appropriate to the game. Harry Bailey agrees, and rather rudely. He is quite put out with the Monk's Tale; he says it annoys everyone (2789) and only the Monk's harness bells are keeping him awake (2794-97

Harry asks the Monk to tell a tale of hunting, which we expect the Monk to like. But the Monk refuses, so Harry turns to the Nun's Priest. This is a character not described in the General Prologue, so we don't have much to go on in getting a picture of him. Harry seems to be interested in getting merry tales out of religious figures, which is a slightly difficult task, since they are accustomed to sermonising. So the Nun's Priest has something of a task, as he acknowledges in his one line of dialogue. We already know that he accompanies the Prioress. But unlike her rich trappings, he rides on a 'jade': a foul lean nag (2812-13), as Harry points out. But that's all we're given until the epilogue. There Harry tells us a bit more. He makes the ridiculous proposition that, if the Priest had been a secular man, he would have been a right good tread-foul, or cockerel — a real stud (3450ff.). He may seem to be drawing inspiration from the Nun's Priest's Tale, but he actually makes the same proposition about the Monk, though, in the Prologue to the Monk's Tale (1945). He points out that the priest has might and brawn, a great neck and a large breast, sharp eyes, and tanned skin. He says that, if the Priest had the 'corage' or desire to match his might he would need at least 120 "hens" to satisfy him. Again, you have to ask just how many pints Harry had put away by this time.

## Themes

### 1. The Simple Life:

The Nun's Priest begins with an idyllic farmhouse setting where a simple widow lives with her two daughters in a life of moderation, temperance, and therefore good health. Her cockerel, Chauntecleer, is anything but moderate though. Immediately after we have a description of the widow's humility, the tale launches into an extravagant description of Chauntecleer. Chauntecleer is described like a king, but it is perhaps a humorous image that his kingdom is only the bounds of the widow's yard.

### 2. The Significance of Dreams

#### a. Types of Dreams

However, grandiose the description of Chauntecleer and Pertelote may be, they act like an old married couple. When Chauntecleer groans in his sleep Pertelote's first reaction is to ask what is the matter and come up with a practical solution. Chauntecleer's reaction to the dream is anything but a problem to be solved; it is an opportunity for self-aggrandising. He thinks the dream is a message from God warning of his imminent fall from the top of the Wheel of Fortune, and by implication associates himself with tragic heroes who also suffer the whims of Fortune. Pertelote tries to goad Chauntecleer into losing his fear by saying that women like fearless men. There may be further meaning behind her mention of not like 'noon avantour' (2917), as if she senses Chauntecleer's pride swelling. Her practical solution is to argue that this particular dream is a *somnium naturale*, a dream with physical causes, namely an imbalance of humours, the bodily fluids on which medieval medicine was founded. It's all logical, she says: the two colours, red and black, which feature in the dream, represent superfluities of choleric and melancholic humours, since these are red and black. For good measure, she cites a proverb to effect that dreams are meaningless from Cato. Pertelote says she'll make Chauntecleer a prescription of herbs which will purge him of the offending humours: 'byneth and eek above' (2953). In a nice touch, she prescribes worms, a recognised medieval cure for tercian fevers, but also what you might expect a bird to eat.

Medieval dream-theory was complicated, and Chaucer doesn't give very much of it here. The major source-text was the *Somnium Scipionis*, a chapter of Cicero's *De republica* with commentary by Macrobius. Macrobius exhaustively categorised different kinds of dreams according to their causes. In the Nun's Priest's Tale we are given two possibilities: the natural dream and the celestial or prophetic dream, which is a message from God. Chauntecleer gives us both anecdotal evidence and cites auctors to support his case that his dream is of the latter type. This is a 'verray preeve' (2983), the type considered best.

Chauntecleer tells us two extended stories, which almost constitute digressions within a digression as well as stories within a story. But they are not so extended that they disrupt the flow of the narrative. So we have the two pilgrims, one of whom is murdered because his friend ignored the dreams which told of his murder. Chauntecleer goes rather overboard describing the survivor's distress, as if he is rather enjoying the tale (3050ff.). The moral is

that ‘heere may men seen that dremes been to drede’ (3063). Next we have the tale of the two travellers. One has a dream that they will drown if they go on their journey. He stays, but the other laughs and embarks on the ship, which then sinks. Moral: ‘many a dreem ful soore is for to drede’ (3109). Next we get the story of Saint Kenelm, king of Mercia, who dreamt himself in a tree which was chopped down and was murdered after ignoring it. A host of other examples is given before he decides that Pertelote’s beauty ‘maketh al my drede for to dyen’ (3162)

b. The value of experience against *auctoritee*.

In Chauntecleer’s defence of dream interpretation, the old question of experience and *auctoritee* returns with what I hope is not tedious predictability. But returning to his subject matter only gets the narrator going on a new digression. The cockerel followed the advice of a woman, poor fool — just like Adam, who got kicked out of Paradise. And then he says (3261ff.) that he’s not really blaming the counsel of women; it’s just the game. For the authoritative opinion you should read what the real *auctores* say; what I’ve said here is just the words of a cock: ‘I kan noon harm of no womman divyne’ (3266), which means ‘I can think of no harm in women’ or ‘I know no harm in a religious woman’. Perhaps this is the Priest’s way of staying in the good books with his employer, the Prioress?

c. Relations between husbands and wives.

Chauntecleer’s response is exactly what ours might be to this cure. What’s more, it is certainly beneath his dignity. In fact, listening to Pertelote’s advice at all is beneath his dignity. So he launches into a learned argument, a spectacular performance of rhetoric designed to contradict and wow his wife, and to which we notably do not get her response.

In the end of the day, Chauntecleer ignores the dream, despite his argument. We can ask three questions: (a) What is Pertelote’s main advice, the laxative or the ignoring the dream? (b) Does Chauntecleer just argue against Pertelote’s theory to escape the laxative; (c) Are the later comments by the Nun’s Priest that Chauntecleer took his wife’s advice accurate?

Chauntecleer turns his attention to more pleasurable pursuits, namely the seduction of Pertelote. His final parting shot in the argument is his mistranslation of *mulier est hominis confusio* in line 3164 as ‘womman is mannes joye and al his blis’ instead of woman is man’s ruin, which he knows she will not catch (Cato was available in English, but most of his sources were not). There is gentle humour of this type running throughout the tale: Chauntecleer’s name means ‘sing-clear’, and Pertelote’s name means ‘one who confuses someone’s fate’.

d. Fortune

Chauntecleer then jumps down from his perch and begins to reign over his hens, ‘roial, as a prince is in his halle’ (3184). The implication is again that he is at the top of Fortune’s

wheel—until a certain day. The elaborate chronology establishes the date as Friday, 3rd May, which is traditionally unlucky. It was the date when Palamon escaped from prison in the Knight's Tale. It is a day for Fortune to operate. The Nun's Priest may even be working in a reference (possibly humorous) to the Knight's Tale, given that it was the Knight's prompting which got him going. The theme of Fortune is taken up again, explicitly: 'For evere the latter ende of joye is wo. / God woot that worldly joye is soone ago' (3205-6). Of course, this is also taking up the theme of the Monk's Tale. In the context of Chauntecleer and his wife, or wives, it is equally applicable to the blissful married state he appears to be enjoying.

Don Russell, the col-fox is introduced as lying in wait in the hedge for the opportunity to pounce on Chauntecleer. He is there by 'high ymaginacioun forncast' (3217), which could mean either Chauntecleer's dream or God's ordinance. Don Russell is described in a melodramatic *apostrophe* (3226-), being equated with the cause of the fall of Troy, of all things.

But then the narrator lapses into a short *digressio* about the scholastic debate on predestination. The debate is between the orthodox Augustinian 'we are granted free will by God to use such as God allows us', against Boethius's distinction between simple necessity (3245) (e.g., by necessity all men are mortal), and conditional, or implied, necessity (3250) (e.g. if you know that a man walks, you can infer that by necessity he does — but your knowledge is not the cause of his walking. Hence God's foreknowledge is not a necessary cause of man's actions).

Note the question of how dreams may or may not provide foreknowlegde connects with the question of how foreknowledge, if we get it, affects the freedom of our actions.

The Nun's Priest doesn't solve the conundrum, saying his tale is of a cock, so what is the point? This raises the question of allegory. Does a tale of a cock provide us with any useful understanding? Does Chauntecleer behave the way he does just because, being a cock, it is his nature? Or does Chaucer come down on one side by the end of the tale? After all, we're invited in the end to find meaning in this tale of the cock and the fox (3436ff.).

### The Stated *Moralitas*

The only way the fox is going to catch Chauntecleer is to trick him, so he says he came to hear his singing, which has more feeling than Boethius, whose work on music advocated a more mathematical model. Don Russell says that he has had Chauntecleer's father and mother in his house 'to my greet ese' (3297). He goes right to Chauntecleer's pride, and Chauntecleer falls right into the flatterer's trap. Don Russell grabs him by the neck and heads for the woods.

Well, we're not going to hear his fate until he is properly lamented by the narrator. The irony is that it is all for nought, since the horrible fall on Fortune's Wheel never comes to pass. But we get good *apostrophes* starting in line 3338 on how Friday was unlucky: the Expulsion

from Eden, the Flood, the Betrayal of Christ, the Crucifixion, and the fatal wounding of Richard I. This high tragedy culminates in a comparison with the events in the *Aeniad*; but then the hens start to shriek and it all turns into barnyard chaos. It is almost as if the tragedy, the fall of a king leads to the collapse of order itself. There is even a passing reference to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Everything is solved with a typical turn of medieval humour in which you get what you deserve. Just as the jealous husband deserves to be cuckolded (Miller's Tale, Merchant's Tale) and the guiler deserves to be beguiled (Reeve's Tale), so the fox deserves to be outfoxed. And he too falls into the pride trap. He has to brag about his feat. Just as pride brought the first turn of Fortune's Wheel, it causes that wheel to turn back. I think there is something profound being said here about the way we interact with Fortune. But the *sentence*, as it were is encapsulated by two *sententiae* or morals, one by the frustrated fox and one by the narrator. The fox says (3433-5) 'God yeve hym meschaunce, / That is so undiscreet of governaunce / That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees' [explain]. The Priest says (3436) 'swich it is for to be reccheless / and necligent, and truste on flaterye'. But then he reminds us to take the morality lest, we think the tale is just a folly.

So does the tale give us a more sophisticated view of Fortune than 'don't talk too much or God will get you' or 'don't let yourself be flattered into foolish negligence'? Are we really to take these morals seriously? Some people have seen the Tale as an allegory of the Fall of Man, and presumably later redemption. What *is* certainly there is respectful ridiculing of rhetorical practice. Not only does rhetoric take up most of the tale, but it seems to reduce everything to rather banal *sententiae* in the end.

Towards the end of the Tale, the Nun's Priest invites addresses his audience directly:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,  
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,  
Taketh the moralite, goode men.  
For Seint Paul seith that al that write is,  
To our doctrine it is ywrite, ywis:  
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (3438-3443)

The idea that literature was for *doctrina*, teaching religious doctrine, was a prevailing one in the Middle Ages. The primary model for literary interpretation was biblical exegesis: the practice of interpreting the meaning of the Bible. This involved training, which is why the Church did not advocate translating the Bible so that everyone could read it and form their own interpretations. They feared that people would always take the Bible literally and so form interpretations that ran contrary to Christian doctrine. In fact, there was a sophisticated exegetical tradition which specified four ways of understanding the Bible:

1. Literal (historical): what the story actually says (*litera gesta docet*). E.g. the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews was actual history.

2. Typological (allegorical): illustrating truths (*allegoria quod credas*). E.g. the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews is to be understood Hebrews as exemplifying “type” or model of the soul redeemed by Christ.
3. Moral (tropological): illustrating what should be done for the conversion of the soul (*moralia quod agas*). E.g. the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews is a lesson: that humans are all sinful and must leave wicked habits and cross over to God, with His help.
4. Anagogical (eschatological): dealing with the four last things – Heaven, Hell, Death, and Judgement – or eternity (*quo tendas anagogica*). E.g. the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews is illustrative of the way God's universe is ordered, all leading out of evil and upward into Heaven.

The Nun’s Priest seems to invite the reader to engage in an interpretation of his non-biblical story. But do any of these methods help us to find the “fruyt”? Is biblical exegesis even appropriate for understanding such a story?