

THE ESCAPE OF CHAUCER'S CHAUNTECLEER: A BRIEF REVALUATION

by *Marc M. Pelen*

In older traditions of scholarship on Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, critics such as Mortimer J. Donovan, Stephen Manning, and Charles Dahlberg¹ were concerned with the moral teaching of Chaucer's fable, but perhaps the most elaborate attempt to come to grips with Patristic symbolism in the imagery and theme of the tale is the article of Bernard S. Levy and George R. Adams,² who see in Chauntecleer's dilemma a comic version of the fall of man.³ In some senses, Levy's and Adams' approach is justified by the fact that Chaucer has introduced into his immediate French sources the Genesis theme of paradise and man's fall. Thus, in Marie de France's "Del cok et del goupil,"⁴ there is no mention of Scriptural themes: the fox simply tempts the rooster, apprehends him, and then loses him when he is tempted by the rooster's challenge to open his mouth. As the fox speaks, the rooster flies into the branches of a tree:

Li gupil volt parler en haut
E li cocs de sa buche saut—
Sur un haut fust s'est muntez.⁵

(23–25)

Similarly, in Branch II of *Le Roman de Renart*, the rooster is tempted by the fox, apprehended, and then escapes by flattery from the fox's jaws:

Quant cil senti lache la boce,
Bati les eles, si s'en toche.⁶

(435–436)

Thus, the Scriptural themes of the poem seem to be Chaucer's own addition to his immediate sources. On the other hand, in the "seventies a critical reaction set in, whereby in two articles it is argued that Chaucer's approach to Chauntecleer's escape is ironic, or cannot be taken entirely seriously. Thus, Judson B. Allen treats the close of the tale as comically

inconclusive,⁷ while A. Paul Shillers notes that earlier assessments of the tale contradict one another,⁸ and concludes that its ending has an ironic “irrational” (p.335) meaning. More recently, Larry Scanlon⁹ looks for an ironic appraisal of the poem’s significance (p. 64), while very recent articles appear to argue for Chaucer’s escape from his own imaginative world. Thus, Doron Narkiss¹⁰ sees in Chaucer’s renewal of his imagination “a mass of pseudo-erudition” (p. 60), while Peter W. Travis invokes the work of Jacques Derrida and other contemporary theorists of metaphor to argue that “Chaucer’s advertisement of his art appears to claim that poetry is blessed with a unique and world-illuminating power” (p. 425).¹¹ These latter interpretations obviously address Chaucer’s attitude toward the figural power of language.

That Chaucer should be concerned with man’s fall seems clear from the reference to “*In principio*” (VII 3163)¹² which draws our attention to the opening of Genesis as much as to the opening of the Gospel of St. John, and later to the Priest’s own imprecation following the appearance of the “col-fox” in Chauntecleer’s barnyard. The cock, the Priest declares, has taken the counsel of his wife (3253) in ignoring his dream about the fox, and he adds:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.

(3256–59)

But then, as has often been remarked, he swiftly retracts his accusation against Eve and Pertelote:

But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.
Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.
Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;
I kan noon harm of no womman divyne.

(3260–66)¹³

This kind of contradiction and self-contradiction is a trademark of Chaucerian composition,¹⁴ and it is further developed in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* by the narrator’s considerable antifeminism, and by his habit of invoking concepts or texts that he makes no claim to understand. Thus, on the crucial question of God’s providence in His foreknowledge of man’s fall, the Priest loses control of his own argument:

I wo nat han to do of swich mateere;
My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere...

(3251–52)

In fact, the Priest refers to many texts in the poem in his parade of pseudo-learning, so that in the end we may conclude that his handling of the crucial moment of Chauntecleer's escape from the fall figured in his exit from the fox's jaws, is likewise parodic, or humorous, or an elaborate joke at the reader's expense.¹⁵

In this manner, once Chauntecleer has safely flown "heighe upon a tree" (3417), the closing moment of the text features a discussion between him and the fox over the right use of perception and language. The fox replies:

"Nay," quod the fox, "but God yeve hym meschaunce,
That is so undiscreet of governaunce
That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees."

(3433–35)¹⁶

This scene is inspired directly from Marie de France's fable of the cock and fox:

La buche cumence a maudire,
Ke parole quant deveit taire.
Li cocs respunt, "Si dei jeo faire:
Maudire l'oïl, ki volt cluiner,
Quant il deit garder et gaiter,
Que mal ne vienge a lur seignur."
Ceo funt li fol: tut li plusur
Parolent quant deivent taiser,
Teisent quant il deivent parler.

(30–38)¹⁷

It appears also in Branch II of *Le Roman de Renart*:

". . . Cosins Renart, dist Chantecler,
"Nus ne puet en vos fier.
Dahez ait vostre cosinage!
Il me dut torner a damage."

(453–56)¹⁸

But the oft-cited conclusion is Chaucer's own:

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 writen is,
 To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
 Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.

(3438–43)

The “fruit/chaff” figure has obvious Scriptural overtones outlined in the Riverside annotation to line 3443, but, since Chauntecleer seems to have escaped the fall, it is not clear to critics of the tale exactly what is the chaff here, and what is the fruit of inner meaning. At this point it may be useful to remark that Chaucer has a special interest in ironic or contradictory endings in the Canterbury Collection: thus, we recall that, at the close of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the hag offers the young knight a choice, to have her foul and old, but faithful (III 1220–1221) or young and fair, but adventurous (1224), as she then contradicts herself by promising to be both (1240), that is, fair (young) and good (old) (1241). Or again, at the close of the *Franklin’s Tale*, the narrator challenges us with a triumphant question (“Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?” [V 1622]), when it can easily be argued that none of the characters is generous, but all have tried to deceive each other in a tangle of deception and illusions throughout the narrative.¹⁹

Perhaps it would be appropriate in closing to suggest that one of Chaucer’s obvious points is, as we have already noted, that the Priest has lost control of his argument. For the argument of the tale has not only to do with man’s fall, but his redemption. In allowing the rooster to escape his fall, the Priest has reduced to the level of language and action what is really a problem of figural interpretation. Adam and Eve do not get back into paradise, but we are redeemed from the fall by Christ’s death (Romans 6:5). It would appear that the Priest has reduced a figurative meaning to a literal one, in patent violation of Augustine’s teaching on the proper function of signs in *On Christian Doctrine* I, 2, 2:

All doctrine concerns either things or signs, but things are learned by signs. Strictly speaking, I have here called a “thing” that which is not used to signify something else, like wood, stone, cattle, and so on; but not that wood concerning which we read that Moses cast it into bitter waters that their bitterness might be dispelled, nor that stone which Jacob placed at his head, nor that beast which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son. For these are things in such a way that they are also signs of other things. [Footnote references omitted]²⁰

On this paragraph, Joseph A. Mazzeo comments:

Now words are also realities; otherwise they would not exist at all, but they are never employed except as signs of something else. Hence while every sign is also a thing, not every thing is also a sign. [Footnote reference omitted]²¹

Essentially, we may now argue that the Priest has reduced a figurative meaning (man's redemption) to a literal episode, and, in the regard, this is the joke that Chaucer has played on us. It reveals a habit of mind he has with regard to the proper use of language.²² Ultimately, we may argue that Chaucer has written on the redemption from the fall, but with an ironic closing that discredits the Priest's literal-mindedness. Perhaps we should also observe that Levy and Adams are not entirely wrong in suggesting that Chauntecleer "assume[s] the divine nature" (p. 192), but that they confuse the content of the poem with its meaning, or that they take the content of the poem too seriously. Thus, I have tried to show that the tale has an extraordinary manner, in Chaucer's poetic art, of transcending, denying, or transfiguring the material of its sources.

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1. Mortimer J. Donovan, "The *Moralite* of the Nun's Priest's Sermon," *JEGP* 52: 498–508; Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude toward Fables," *JEGP* 59 (1960): 403–16; and Charles R. Dahlberg, "Chaucer's Cock and Fox," *JEGP* 53 (1954): 277–90.

2. "Chauntecleer's Paradise Lost and Regained," *MS* 29 (1967): 178–92.

3. Levy and Adams, p. 178.

4. *Fables*, ed. and trans. Harriet Spiegel (Toronto, 1987), 168–71.

5. Trans. Spiegel: "But as the fox began to shout

From fox's mouth, the cock leaped out-
And up the trunk of an old tree.

(23–25)

6. Ed. Ernst Martin, *Le Roman de Renart* (Strasbourg, 1882), Branch II, vol. 1, reprinted in W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster, eds., *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"* (London, 1958), 646–58. My translation: "When the rooster felt the fox open his mouth/He beat his wings and took to flight." Following the older work of Kate Oelzner Petersen (1898), Robert A. Pratt studies carefully the relationship of Chaucer's poem to its immediate French models: "Three Old French Sources of the Nonnes Preestes Tale," (Part I), *Speculum* 47 (1972): 422–44, and (Part II): 646–68.

7. "The Ironic Fruyt: Chauntecleer as Figura," *SP* 66 (1969): 25–35.

8. "The 'Nun's Priest's Tale': An Ironic Exemplum," *ELH* 42 (1975): 319–37, esp. p. 320.

9. "The Authority of Fable: Allegory and Irony in the Nun's Priest's Tale," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 43–68.

10. "The Fox, the Cock and the Priest: Chaucer's Escape from Fable," *ChauR* 32 (1997–98): 46–63.

11. "Chaucer's Heliotropes and the Poetics of Metaphor," *Speculum* 72 (1997): 399–427. Travis' article is an original and illuminating assessment from French formalist methods of the value of Chaucer's figurative language.

12. The following line ("*Mulier est hominis confusio*," [3164]) refers to the temptation of Adam by Eve, and thus to the Fall. Chauntecleer's mistranslation of the Latin tag has of

course generated much comment. For a recent interpretation, see Patrizia Grimaldi Pizzorno, "Chauntecleer's Bad Latin," *Exemplaria* 4 (1992): 387–409. All citations of Chaucer in this article are keyed to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd. ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford, 1988).

13. For an attempt to translate this ambiguous line, see Lawrence L. Besserman, "Chaucerian Wordplay: the Nun's Priest and His *Womman Divyne*," *ChauR* 12 (1977–78): 68–73.

14. For an approach through Classical Latin poetics to this problem see my "Contradictions and Self-Contradictions in Chaucer's Poetic Strategy," *Florilegium* 10 (1988–91): 107–25.

15. A critical appreciation of the humor of the poem has a long history. See, for example, the older but still valuable discussion of Dorothy Everett, "Some Reflections on Chaucer's 'Art Poetical,'" *Proceedings of the British Academy* 36 (1950): 131–54. Everett concludes: "Chaucer often makes fun of things for which he had a serious regard, and particularly in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* he mockingly alludes to many things in which he elsewhere shows deep interest—the significance of dreams, for example, and the question of predestination and free will. So it seems to me likely that if, as we read the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, we laugh too heartily and unthinkingly at the rhetoricians, there is a danger that Chaucer may be laughing at us." (p. 148). More recently, John V. Fleming, *Classical Imitation and Interpretation in Chaucer's Troilus* (Lincoln, 1990), 179–200 analyzes the relationship of Chaucerian poetics to Horatian precedents represented, for example, in the *Ars Poetica*. Also useful: Joerg O. Fichte, *Chaucer's 'Art Poetical'* (Tubingen, 1980).

16. Chaucer's concern with jangling (i.e. with the misuse of poetic language) can be traced back to Latin sources. For example, the Man of Law's fear that he could be likened to the incompetent Pierides in their contest with the Muses (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* V) is expressed in his Prologue (II. 91–93). For a discussion of this analogy, see Marc M. Pelen, "Providence and Incest Reconsidered: Chaucer's Poetic Judgment of His Man of Law," *PLL* 30 (1994): 132–56.

17. Trans. Spiegel:

"The fox began to curse his mouth
For speaking when it ought to hush.
The cock replied, 'I'll do as much
And curse the eye that thinks to shut
When it should safegard and watch out
Lest the seignior should suffer ill.'
And thus with fools, for they all will
Speak out when they their tongues should check
And check their tongues when they should speak.

(30–38)

18. Ed. Martin, in *Sources and Analogues*, p. 657. My translation: ". . . Cousin fox," said Chauntecleer, "No one can put his trust in you. Away with your dupery! It has done me harm."

19. There is substantial discussion of Chaucer's poetic endings in Larry Sklute, *Virtue of Necessity: Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry* (Columbus, 1984). See also, more recently, Rosemarie P. McGerr, "Medieval Concepts of Literary Closure: Theory and Practice," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 149–79. I have not seen this author's *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville, 1998).

20. Trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis, 1958), p. 8.

21. "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence," *JHI* 23 (1962): 175–96, here cited p. 178. Mazzeo's classic discussion is amplified in an important essay on the nature of Augustinian linguistic signs by Margaret W. Ferguson, "St. Augustine's Region of Unlikeness: The Crossing of Exile and Language," *The Georgia Review* 29 (1975): 842–64. Ferguson writes: "According to Augustine's radical philosophy of Being, human language can never be truly 'literal' because all referents other than God are constituted by 'not-being' and are therefore, like the referent 'time,' themselves figural with respect to the one absolutely literal truth" (p.856). See also the discussion of Roger P. H. Green, "Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*: Some Clarifications," *Res Publica Litterarum* 15 (1992): 99–108.

22. On Chaucer's attitude toward the capacity of language to express a figurative ideal see the article of Rodney Delasanta, "Chaucer and the Problem of the Universal,"

Mediaevalia 9 (1983): 145–63. With reference to the *Boece* III, meter 11, Delasanta remarks: “The Platonist, of course, would interpret the inner principle to be an innate idea which the mind abstracts from phenomena, but either way the truth-giving value of the universal Idea, whatever its origin, is being celebrated,” (p. 159). For a recent review of Delasanta’s positions, and of the positions of other writers on Chaucer’s philosophy of language, consult Robert Myles, *Chaucerian Realism* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 1–32. P. 29: “The wordes moote by cosyn to the dede’ (GP I 742), but they may also be willed *not* to be ‘cosyn’ to the ‘dede’: the real intention is in the mind of the sign-maker. If the sign-maker so intends, signs need *not* signify the real thought in the mind of the user of the word, or the thought in the mind of the wearer of the clothes as signs, or the thought in the mind of the maker of the physical expression as a sign, or the thought in the mind of the doer of the physical action.”