

A Reading of Jeffery Chaucer's

"The Nun's Priest's Tale"

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Abstract

Amongst the literary elders, Chaucer forms a school in his own right. His creation in the *Canterbury Tales* comes to construe the grand trope of the medieval times and its weltanschauung. The poetic architecture of his tales absorbs the then scattered literariness of the times into a literary unison. The present study singles out Chaucer's "the Nun's Priest's Tale" for its uniqueness in this regard; it tries to show Chaucer at his best taking to the medieval convention of *inclusionism* (i.e., incorporating several generic variations and literary norms within the body of one poetic whole). The other impetus behind choosing this tale is that it, one may venture to say, is the *Canterbury Tales* in miniature, as far as its thematics and its form (the frame-tale design) are concerned. Furthermore, the tale has been read not only as a separate fictional universe, but also as contextualized within the Tales as a whole. A fresh line of thought has been spotlighted in this regard; the tale's dialogic nature has been overstated. This is done through laying bare the discursive nature of the tale by demonstrating the Chaucerian narrative art.

I. The Tale and the Beast-Fable Tradition

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" has an august tradition behind it: it is based on the convention according to which men, or at least recognizably human characteristics, are presented in the guise of animals. It is a convention that goes back at least to Aesop (600 B.C.), nor does it end with Chaucer and the middle Ages. La Fontaine used the form in the 17th century, John Gay in the 18th, and in the modern times we have George Orwell's *Animal Farm*,¹ which is an indicator that the representation of human qualities in animal form has a universal imaginative appeal. Chaucer's immediate models in the genre are the beast epics or beast fables that were popular in Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries. The most prominent of these was the French *Romande Renard*, and its German version *Reinhart Fuchs*. In situation and event the French beast-fable is very nearly identical with "The Nun's Priest's Tale". The difference, however, lies in the subtle touches Chaucer introduces, and in what he adds by way of emphasis and elaboration. To put it another way, this one Canterbury tale "is another illustration of that quality which makes Chaucer one of the greatest poets in the language; his ability to work within a convention and transforms it."² hence, in all precedent versions of the tale the animals are simply stock figures, but Chaucer makes them sharp, though tolerant, satiric portraits.

II. The Genre of the Tale or the Tale of Genres

As usual with all Chaucer's tales the reader is used to identifying each one of these tales to some known literary genre or convention. The case is different with "The Nun's Priest's Tale" since it is the epitome of the *Canterbury Tales* in that it exploits a variety of medieval genres. Hence, it is no wonder that the work as a whole is considered the library of the medieval literature. Here in this tale as in the whole work there are exempla, sermon, debate, dreams and allegory, all put together in the holistic frame of the beast-fable. And this is what grants the tale with its carnivalesqu-dialogic nature. Gray sheds light upon the major qualities of the fable when he defines it as "a short tale conveying a clear moral lesson in which the characters are animals acting like human beings."³ The cock-hen-fox story, for instance, could be a separate exemplum that, otherwise, could be a sermon. Here the sermon constitutes part of the priest's digressive speeches. The debate form is the backbone of this tale and it is concerned with discussing the significance of dreams, and is performed by birds, just like the Debate of "The Owl and the Nightingale," "which is written about ١٢٠٠, perhaps by Nicholas of Guildford himself."⁴. Concerning the allegorical convention in the tale, it has become customary to identify Chanticleer with a true Christian who raises his voice in prayer at night to dismiss the temptations of the devil, the fox in our tale. Perhaps most important of all is the beast-fable frame which grants a sense of unity to this literary horn of plenty. As mentioned above, Chaucer has transformed this genre of fabulous story. This has been achieved, first, through his introduction within the body of the story of other literary variations as is shown earlier. Besides, Chaucer does not restrict himself to the moral design of such stories in the first place. John C. Stumpf claims that a fable concerned with showing a moral of flattery, needs not be set within the framework of the widow and the human world, nor need it be addressed with the mock-heroic elements.⁵ Here Stumpf marks a deviation from the prototype. What is more, Chaucer introduced the mock-heroic element into this fable, which enabled him to produce the first mock-heroic masterpiece in English language. Also it enabled him to produce such plenty and variety out of a humble plot. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Chaucer borrowed aspects from his bird of science in *The House of Fame* and mixed them with the traditional version of the cock's character. In keeping with Stumpf's argument, the putting of the fable in the framework of human world is an indication to the

breaking off from fable tradition. Charles Muscatine has this to add about this fracture:

Fable respects the boundary between animal fiction and the human truth it illustrates. But the whole spirit of this poem ["The Nun's Priest's Tale"] is to erase or at least to overlap the boundaries : animal and human , fiction and truth severally join and separate.⁶

This last statement may account for the consideration of this fable's characters as being humanly treated or as representations of the foibles of human nature.

III: The Tale and the Teller

In the mosaic Chaucerian world of *The Canterbury Tales* each tale derives part of its significance, its status, and literary mode, from the tale that goes before it beside its relation to the

whole narrative. When the knight interrupts the Monk's tale on the ground that it is full of tragic anecdote, he and the Host soon call upon another ecclesiastic – The Nun's Priest - to tell another tale, and they recommend that the tale be light and gay in spirit. The result is "The Nun's priest's Tale," with its mock-heroic design and comic tone. The tale comes to be a fable with its elementary story-line. It is about the rooster, Chanticleer, the boastful master of the barnyard and his seven hens.

This rooster's well-being is troubled by a dream in which he is being devoured by a beast whose description, as told by the rooster to his wife, Pertelote, comes to be identical with that of a fox. Pertelote chides her husband for his easy panic, and starts to explain the dream on medical basis. Chaucer "effectively undermines the commonly held medieval idea of the natural inferiority of women to men by representing articulate and intelligent women at the centre of human affairs rather than on the periphery."^v Chanticleer belittles Pertelote's womanly commonsensical interpretations, and he starts theorizing about dreams by referring to many authorities in this regard. In the end, neither the rooster's, nor his wife's explanations are of any avail; the dream comes true, and the rooster is seized by the fox. Yet this near tragedy comes to a happy ending, when Chanticleer succeeds in breaking free from the fox through playing a trick on the latter. It is a very basic plot, yet the tale's complexity and literariness is due to the fact that it makes use of other literary conventions, and to the fact that it is full of learned and philosophical digressions. Thus a story about "vanity and self love is told in an exhibitionistic style which is equivalent to Chanticleer's crowing."[^]

The easily recognizable moral of the tale, emphasizes that: Chaucer's treatment is rich in suggestive and ironic overtones concerning the relation of sexes, outwit, pedantry, and human frailty in general. The writer has certain vision to achieve his message to the audience by playing upon the frame and the style of his tale, "Frame" and "tale" thus pull in opposite directions, "the style of the first insisting that this is a tale 'of a fox, or of a cock and hen' ... in an actual farmyard, the style of the second saying it is about anything—and everything."[^] So, the epilogue affirms the moral lesson of the tale.

A fable of a fox, a cock and a hen,
Take hold upon the moral, gentlemen.
St. Paul himself, a saint of great discerning,
Says that all things are written for our learning.¹¹

The nature of such well-wrought tale makes us wonder about the nature of its teller, and how far he is related to it. It is said that not necessarily all the tales are, or should be, related to the status or character of the tellers who are recounting them. The Prioress, for instance, who adopts the device of confession in her tale, has much to do with the tale being recounted. The same holds true of Wife of Bath whose character might be identified with that of the old woman in her tale. Other tales, as it were, has little, if any, bearing on the tellers. As for the Nun's Priest, he is not granted full description in "The General Prologue," unlike the other pilgrims. In this regard, Nevill Coghill thinks that "it may be that he [Chaucer] wished to leave himself some blank cheques, in case he

should find himself with a story that suited none of the filled-in characters."¹¹ To some extent, this statement might testify to the fact that the literariness and the artistic complexity of this tale would have suited no another pilgrim but Chaucer's pilgrim-persona. Besides, Chaucer as a pilgrim/tale-teller is twice interrupted through his narration of two tales, and that he might have cherished the idea of recompensing. However, and as far as "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is concerned, we can draw out the Priest's character from the fact that he is one of the eleven ecclesiastics mentioned and described in *The Canterbury Tales*. George Lyman Kittredge infers from the context in which the Prioress is introduced that the Priest is one of the three Priests who escort the Prioress to protect her against the rougher elements in the journey.¹² Moreover, the Prioress's fondness for animals may account for the Priest's choosing a beast-fable to be his tale. Textual references to the Priest's character can be traced to the Host's address to the Nun's Priest whose name now appears to be Sir John, the name by which priests used to be called in the Medieval Ages. Hence, the Host's words: "This charming priest and kindly man, Sir John," (Prologue L. ٥٤) sheds some light on the latter's character. Besides, the description of the Priest's horse may serve as an indication of his general state; Sir John is riding a "jade" which is "poor and thin." This calls to mind the description of the rich, jolly and secular monk, with the fine horse and clinking bridle bells, which serves as a contrast to the horse that bespeaks the Priest's poverty. Back now to the relatedness of Sir John to the tale he is telling. The Host's comment on the Priest's character in the epilogue at the end of the tale insinuates this relatedness. In addition to the afore-mentioned fondness for animals on the part of the Prioress, and the Priest's, her companion, choice of a beast-fable, we have here the Host likening Sir John's eyes to those of a "sparrow-hawk's". The Host's address to the Priest about the latter's physique and wholesome and robust bearing, about his ability to tread "a pretty fowl", and about his red complexion, betrays Sir John's worldly appearance and sensuality. The reference to the Priest's red complexion also has to do with the four humours mentioned at the beginning of the tale by Pertelote. Here the red complexion also indicates a specific humour that characterizes a person with lustfulness and sensuality. That is part of Chaucer's suggestiveness to the resemblance holding between the Priest and Chanticleer. Also here one is met with an implied criticism directed against the religious character in general as represented by Sir John, which is something one becomes familiar with in *The Canterbury Tales*. This criticism is meant by Chaucer and conveyed through the Host's speech now. The priest's situation as a confessor amongst the Nuns is parallel to that of Chanticleer who is the only macho among seven hens. What is more, Sir John's being lower in the ecclesiastical office than the Prioress, makes one aware of the implied religious and anti-feminist criticism meant by the Priest and put into the mouth of the rooster, when the latter derides Pertelote's womanly and mundane explanation of his dream. This stand on the Priest's part can also be traced in the allusion he makes to the Biblical story of the Fall and Eve being tempted and then responsible for man's predicament. Other associations accounting for the relatedness of the teller to the tale can be

inferred from the context of the tale. The Priest is sermonizing and arguing making use of exempla; the same is done by Chanticleer throughout the tale. Like the Monk before him, the Priest is showing off through his classical allusions, the matter which holds true of Chanticleer who refers to nine exempla and authorities not only to support his argument but also to boast.

IV. Characterization and the Mock-heroic Mode

There are many approaches to characterization in Caucer's art, one of which is through using the mock-heroic mode as it is successfully brought into practice in "The Nun's Priest's Tale". When the Nun's Priest starts to recount his tale, he tells that it will be about a widow, later, the narrative shifts to the barnyard and the tale is centered on a rooster. The introduction of the widow and her life has much more to it than the formal bearings of frame-narrative. The down-to-earth realistic description of the widow highlights the mock-heroic mode of the tale; she stands in contrast to the romantic luxurious world of the barnyards as represented by the sensual rooster among his seven hens. Also her description is a forewarning that the hen, Pertelote, might be a widow. Apart from the widow's realistic character, the description of the rooster, Chanticleer, and the hen, Pertelote, beside Sir Russel, the fox, has a Chaucerian twist and air about it. In all earlier versions of the story these animals are simply stock figures, but Chaucer "has created a perfect rooster, hen, and fox, and at the same time, managed to convey the marvelous illusion that they are human."¹³ And that accounts for the fact that the characters in this tale are prone to be dealt with as either typical or realistic. Kendrick states that "this mock-heroic beast fable is a comic riposte to the pessimism of the Monk's To begin with, Chanticleer is introduced in tragedies of painful accommodation to destiny."¹⁴

mock-heroic terms; his physical description thus goes:

His comb was redder than fine coral, tall
And battlemented like a castle wall,
His bill was black, and shone as bright jet,

(L. ٣٩-٤١)

He is a boastful master of seven hens, who leads a luxurious and corporeal life. Also he tends to see himself as a lion or as "royal as a prince who strides his hall." (L. ٣٦٤). Chanticleer's pride constitutes the basic material of the mock-heroic presentation of his character. Being proud, he indulges in a seemingly scholarly parade of knowledge to overshadow his semi-literate wife's effort to interpret his dream. Through his debate with Pertelote, he reveals an anti-feminist attitude; this is clearly shown through his intentionally mistranslating the Latin proverb: "woman is the ruin of man" into "woman is man's delight and all his bliss" (L. ٣٤٦). This has the effect of both mollifying his wife and reminding him of his own superiority over her and all the semi-literate hens. This little touch of self-confidence prepares the near-tragic events that follow: he forgets the horrors of his dreams and flies from his perch to the waiting fox. The mock-heroic staging of Chanticleer's

character is shown through the fabulous knight-fowl and scholar-fowl compounds. Hence, "Chanticleer's magnificence passes into courtly love, and hence by the way of dreams and medical sciences into most unromantic, domestic familiarity."¹⁰ That is why one cannot just single him out as a type; i.e., a personification of pride. As for Pertelote, she is the down-right, commonsensical spouse. Her character comes to light through her discussion with Chanticleer about the significance of dreams. Despite the fact that her diagnosis, her prescription of a laxative, and her recital of remedies, is exasperating to Chanticleer, she proves to be the sole object of his affection and love. He is enchanted by her beauties to the extent that he forgets all about his approaching disaster. Still, through the attachment that exists between Pertelote and Chanticleer Chaucer is gently satirizing the doctrine of courtly love. All in all, the presentation of her character throughout the tale straddles between the bestiary world and the human world, and marks one of the violations of the fabulous fiction in the tale. Sir Russel the fox is depicted as a flatterer, tempter, and deceiver. He is sharply delineated as a character. As the villain of the story he is "full of sly iniquity", and Chaucer gives him the disarming civility and social polish traditionally associated with villainy. The fox appeals to Chanticleer's pride in his singing and entraps him. Stumpf states that "the fox is also treated in epic terms. He is also predestined by divine planning."¹¹ Yet when he is fooled by Chanticleer, and then chased by both the widow and the barnyard animals in a farcical scene, he comes to be a mock-heroic figure. Gill affirms that "the pleasure of mock-epic lies in the ingenious way in which poets find trivial equivalents for conventional epic features."¹² The chase scene closes up the tale with combining the beast world with the realistic world of the widow. It only remains to say that this accentuates that fact that the animals in this Chaucerian tale have a great human potentiality, and sometimes the margins between the beast and the human world are erased.

V: Debate and Dream Theories

Dreams were a subject of great frequency in the medieval literature, and in Chaucer. Chaucer is quite informed about the theories of dreams in his time, due to his wide reading, yet he pretends here to be ignorant of his subject, and he keeps wondering about the significance of dreams and their classification into "visions", "revelations" and "prophecies". This Chaucer does by letting his characters quote authorities and speak about theories about which he is quite knowledgeable. So most of the medieval body of dream theories is revealed through the debate between Chanticleer and Pertelote about the significance of the former's dream. The dream episode in the tale comes from what may have been one of Chaucer's sources of his story, namely; *Roman de Renart*, but in that version, Pinte, the wife of Chanticleer interprets the dream prophetically, not medically. Here in "The Nun's Priest's Tale," Pertelote is the spokeswoman for the medieval medical viewpoint on dreams, and she is remarkably well-informed one. She depends, for her interpretation of Chanticleer's dream, upon the medieval view of man as composed of a combination of the four humours, and thus sees dreams as a physiological phenomenon, as a result of "swollen tight" and

"disorder" of the humours in the body. She diagnoses Chanticleer's trouble as "superfluity and force", or excess of "red choler", quotes Cato on the subject, and advises a laxative. According to her, it is this red choler that causes Chanticleer's nightmare. She has -and Chaucer behind her- a whole range of authorities to support her opinion. Among these authorities is the 10th century Persian philosopher, Avicenna, who theorized about dreams and melancholia. Actually, up until the moment when Chanticleer's dream is shown by the final outcomes to be a prophetic version, one is inclined to agree with Pertelote's judgment. Pertelote is then the practical dispenser of medicine, who sees dreams as nothing more than symptoms of disturbed physiology, while Chanticleer tends to be scholarly and philosophical, a student of the supernatural who will have nothing to do with housewifely remedies. In this regard, David Hollbrook emphasizes that Chanticleer's dream "was a supernatural warning of the evil state of soul."¹⁸ In addition, he has now had more than enough of Pertelote's volubility and knowingness, and feels that it is high time that he took part in the dialogue. Since, for the Medieval Ages, scholarly reference was made a male prerogative, Chanticleer is particularly irritated by the reference to Cato and quickly invokes his authorities from "ancient books," That are "of many a man of more authority / Than ever Cato was, believe you me." L. 100-6. Then Chanticleer goes on demonstrating the wide range of his reading on the subject; Dreams from Cicero, St. Kenelm, King of Mercia. The Old Testament dreams of Daniel, Joseph, and the King of Egypt, Croesus, King of Lydia, and Andromache, wife of Hector, together with the testimony of Macrobius concerning the validity of dreams. This wealth of anecdote and learned allusion is presented to overcome the pretensions of the poor hen. In all these allusions, Chanticleer wants, as it were, to overemphasizes the visionary and prophetic bearing of dreams, and thus he rejects Pertelote's laxatives on the basis that they are "venomous ". Still, "in the debate between [the] cock and [the] hen on the significance of dreams, both fail, in their retreat into bogus knowledge, to recognize the evidence before them."¹⁹ Truly, all this learned parade of knowledge on Chanticleer's and Pertelote's parts proves to be of no avail at the end, since the former falls an easy victim in Sir Russel's grasp. As far as the debate convention is concerned, we are introduced to another debate in this tale in addition to that between Chanticleer and Pertelote. This debate is instigated by the Priest, Sir John, to tackle the question of why Chanticleer should fly down from his roost and then be an easy catch for the fox. This brings up a discussion of the philosophical problem of freedom and necessity and the responsibility man has for his actions.

VI: Conclusion

The fact that "The Nun Priest's Tale" is a beast-fable, though this form is significantly modified by Chaucer, accounts for its moral bearings. The main moral drawn from the story has to do with Chanticleer's patriarchal and scholarly pretensions and pride that prove to be of no avail, and make him blind to the imminent danger. The outcome of the fox's flattery and villain comes to constitute another moral. All in all, the satiric discourse in "The Nun Priest's Tale" is meant by

Chaucer to be discursive, and, being so, it is directed to the other pilgrims, and above all, to the Prioress whom he is escorting. Moreover, the tale does not only abide by its moral bearings, which is the medieval literary norm of didacticism, but it goes further than that to the extent that it self-consciously makes these literary norms and forms one of its thematic concerns; it subtly questions the limits of the medieval genres and their expressive frames, and by so doing, it becomes a tale of genres, a tale about literature. **Notes**

- ¹J. A. Cuddon. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* (England: Clays Ltd, St Ives plc, 1999), s. v. Beast-fable.
- ²J. B. Trapp, *Medieval English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1973), p. 176.
- ³Martin Gray. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: York Press, 2004), p. 114.
- ⁴Roger Sherman Loomis and Rudolph Willard. *Medieval English Verse and Prose in modernized versions* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1948), p. 548.
- ⁵John C. Stumpf, *History of English Literature: Anglo-Saxon and Middle English* (Toronto: Forum House Publishing Company, 1969), p. 93.
- ⁶Charles Muscatine, "The Mixed Style," in Charles A. Owen, Jr., ed., *Discussion of the Canterbury Tales* (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961), p. 59.
- ⁷Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (U.S.A.: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 60.
- ⁸Karen Lawrence, Beitsy Seifter, Lois Ratner, *The McGraw-Hill Guide to English Literature: Volume One*. (USA: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1980), p. 48.
- ⁹Richard Neuse, *Chaucer's Dante: Allegory and Epic Theater in The Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 91.
- ¹⁰Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: William Clowes and Sons Ltd., 1902), p. 200. Subsequent references to the tale will be to this edition.
- ¹¹Nevill Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford Paperbacks University series, 1967), p. 110.
- ¹²George Lyman Kittredge, "The Shipman and The Prioress," in Charles A. Owen, Jr., ed., *Discussions of The Canterbury Tales*, p. 30.
- ¹³David M. Zesmer, *Guide to English Literature: From Beowulf through Chaucer and Medieval Drama*, Barnes and Nobel College Outline series (New York: Barnes & Nobel, Inc., 1961), p. 204.
- ¹⁴Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in The Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 100.
- ¹⁵Charles Muscatine, p. 60.
- ¹⁶John C. Stumpf, p. 90.
- ¹⁷Richard Gill, *Mastering English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 206.
- ¹⁸David Hollbrook, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," in Boris Ford ed., *Medieval Literature: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition*, vol. I, Part One of the New Pelican Guide to English Literature (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), p. 168.

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