

1986

Instruction and Entertainment: Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale

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Recommended Citation

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Instruction and Entertainment:

Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale

(TITLE)

BY

Marco L. Bergandi

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1986

YEAR

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THESIS ABSTRACT

The "Nun's Priest's Tale" is one of the most entertaining stories in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales--it is captivating, witty, and amusing--but it is also one of the most instructive in the entire collection. In fact, the Nun's Priest himself emphasizes the instructional purpose of his tale by telling his listeners "Taketh the moralite, goode men" (NPT 3440), advising them to look for the points he makes in his narration.

Although the Nun's Priest never explicitly states the "moralite" of his tale, many scholars have taken his advice seriously and searched for its instruction on their own. Approaching it from a different angles, they have generated a multitude of interpretations and have emphasized various morals that can be found in the tale. The problem, however, is that none of the single interpretations we can give to the tale, and none of the morals we can draw from it, is satisfactory alone. This circumstance suggests that we might have to accept the multiplicity of interpretations and morals as part of the Nun's Priest's instruction.

This thesis explores the three ways in which Chaucer enhances not just the entertainment, but especially the instructional value of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," encouraging readers to search for its meaning, by looking at it from various angles. Chaucer introduces important structural changes that take the focus away from the

foolish cock and the fable moral, turning instead to life in the hen-yard, the cock's dream, and the chicken-debate, which he uses to tell us something about human nature. Furthermore, he introduces material from other sources into his tale, and interrupts it with comments about fiction, thus heightening our awareness of its fictitious character and stimulating in us an active search for meaning. He also introduces many themes that appear in other tales, and various morals and sententiae, forcing us as readers to evaluate one against the other, if we want to gain a deeper understanding of the tale.

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Annoyed and frustrated by the Monk's tedious and long enumeration of tragedies and by his refusal to tell another tale about hunting, the Host turns to the Nun's Priest "With rude speche and boold" (NPT 2808), addressing him with the familiar appellations "thou preest" and "thou sir John" (NPT 2810).¹ He tells him to be "murie" (NPT 2815), indirectly asking him for a tale that will be more entertaining than that his ecclesiastical superior has just told. The Nun's Priest, who apparently does not dare to object to the Host's rude behavior, immediately assures the Host that he will be "myrie" (NPT 2817), turning to a widespread medieval genre, the fable, which he makes the basis of his story. But the Nun's Priest, in fact, ignores the Host's wish for pure merriment and entertainment, doing what is appropriate for a clergyman: He emphasizes and elaborates upon the instructional value of his fable, teaching the pilgrims and us a fascinating lesson on humanity.

Chaucer scholars generally agree that the tale is funny, but have puzzled over its meaning and, interpreting it in a variety of ways and from various points of view, have deduced different meanings from it. Some have examined the tale in its context in the Canterbury Tales. Robert Lumiansky, for example, focuses on the the person of the Nun's Priest, of whom we do not get a description in

¹ Quotations of Chaucer are from John H. Fisher, ed., The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer, 7th ed. (New York: Holt, 1977).

the General Prologue, and tries to construct a picture of him from textual evidence in his prologue and tale. He believes that the Nun's Priest is a timid and frail man who is utterly afraid of the Host and who uses his extraordinary intellectual powers to tell a funny, antifeminist, mock-epic tale with a non-tragic ending to please the taste of the aggressive leader of the game (108-09). Less interested in the Nun's Priest's timidity, Arthur Broes bases his interpretation on the Nun's Priest's clerical position. Broes believes that the Priest, dissatisfied with working under the Prioress, uses the tale to ridicule her, thereby establishing his own intellectual and moral superiority (157). Such scholars as Bernard Huppé and J. Burke Severs disregard the professional relationship of the Nun's Priest and the Prioress, stressing instead the marital relationship of Chauntecleer and Pertelote. Huppé suggests that the tale be interpreted against a biblical background, and relates it to the Marriage Group, with the Priest arguing that the true source of woes is in marriage (175-77). Severs argues that the tale is about a husband who lets himself be ill-advised by his wife, but whose male intellectual superiority helps him triumph in the end (34).

Other scholars have interpreted the tale in the context of medieval poetic theory. Stephen Manning, for instance, says that the "Nun's Priest's Tale" parodies the medieval notion that a story should always have a moral to

justify its existence. He argues that by offering so many different morals in the tale the Nun's Priest mocks this medieval literary practice (416). Donald R. Howard sees in the tale a satire on medieval intellectual life. He says that the Nun's Priest is making fun of the scholastic frame of mind with which intellectuals approached different matters and of their excessive use of rhetoric (28). R.T. Leneghan believes the tale is entirely a parody on medieval rhetoric. He analyses it in the context of literary history, relating it to the progymnasmata (composition exercises) in which students had to recount a fable, elaborating and ornamenting it with rhetorical devices (301).

A third group of critics approaches the tale in terms of what they see as its genre. Alfred David's view of the tale is that it cannot be described as a mock-epic because it includes so many different kinds of medieval writing. He basically sees the tale as a satire on human learning and man's different interpretations of his human condition (225). Walter Scheps focuses on the relationship between the tale and its fable genre, calling it an "anti-fable." He argues that the Nun's Priest purposely destroys the fable he uses as a basis for his tale, because it cannot adequately serve to represent the complexity of human experience (9).

The multitude of interpretations the "Nun's Priest's Tale" has elicited from scholars suggests the tale's

complexity. Perhaps all of the interpretations and meanings the tale has yielded have to be seen as a whole; none of the meanings is acceptable alone. Scheps says that "the multiplicity of contradictory and irrelevant morals has attenuated the force of each, and to choose one instead of another is to order complex reality in an arbitrarily simplistic way" (5). The point Scheps makes is convincing because the presence of many morals and themes in the tale, and the fact that such widely different approaches can illuminate it in productive ways, suggest that the tale cannot be examined from only one perspective. In this respect the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is analogous to the Canterbury Tales as a whole. It hints at the multifariousness and complexity of human existence and is an expression thereof. Helen Cooper persuasively argues that the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is an epitome of the whole story collection that "brings together most of the themes and styles found in the rest of the work" (244). All the morals that can be deduced from it are therefore valid expressions of a complex work and a complex humanity. Using the character of the Nun's Priest, Chaucer actually creates a mini-version of the Canterbury Tales and offers us the condensed instruction of the whole work.

The Nun's Priest is an example of the medieval combination of artist and learned man. He controls his fiction extremely well, introducing materials from different sources to elaborate upon, amplify and ornament

his source fable in an effort to increase its complexity and meaning because the tale is not only about a foolish cock who disbelieves his hen-wife, but is a representation of the complexity of human nature. Stanley Maveety argues that the long speeches of the main characters of the tale reveal more about human nature than does the bare fable (134). By giving the fable characters and the tale a more complex structure, Chaucer encourages us to look at them from different points of view and to accept in varying degrees all the morals and interpretations it generates. The extreme control the Nun's Priest has over his complex tale is geared toward offering not only entertainment, but especially instruction. Readers can gain instruction only through an active search for meaning, which the Nun's Priest stimulates by making us aware of the fictitious character of his tale, which serves as a model for our reality.

Perhaps the key to understanding what Chaucer is doing in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is to note that the Priest in telling his tale does not follow the Host's latest command that he be only "murie" (NPT 2815). Rather, he follows the rules for story-telling set down by the Host in the General Prologue, which the latter ignores completely later on, emphasizing entertainment and merriment more than instruction. In the General Prologue the Host determines the rules of the game, asking for stories of the following kind:

Of adventures that whilom han bifalle.

And which of yow that bereth hym best of alle,

That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas

Tales of best sentence and most solaas.

(Gen Pro 795-98)

The demand for stories that contain "sentence" and "solaas" is expressed more than once in the Canterbury Tales, although it is phrased differently.² Chaucer seems to be using the examples as a means to introduce the two traditional Horatian criteria for all good literature, instruction and entertainment. How these two criteria are to be applied in the tales is not specified by the Host in the General Prologue. We only learn that he wants them in "adventures that happened once upon a time." That Harry Bailly specifically asks for adventurous tales from the distant past might be translated into his wish to have each pilgrim retell an old folk tale of a supposedly true adventure in a new way and thereby demonstrate his skill as a storyteller. The practice was fairly common in the Middle Ages, and Derek Brewer discusses it extensively (Poet as Storyteller 99). The purpose of it was to

² There are several instances in which the Host specifically expresses the idea that stories generally contain "sentence" or "solaas," or both elements, rephrasing those terms in his own words, and according to his own wish for a special kind of story. We can find two examples in the "Cook's Tale" and the "Clerk's Tale." He tells the Cook "A man may seye ful sooth in game and pley" (CKT 4355), implying that the elements can be combined in a story, and that an entertaining story can contain some truth. Later, he asks the Clerk for "som murie thyng of adventures" (ClT 15), emphasizing "solaas" more than "sentence;" he wants a story that simply entertains.

emphasize a different aspect of an old story by recounting it in a novel way, elaborating upon and amplifying it.

This practice demanded a high degree of artistic skill. But Harry Bailly is never interested in the artistic achievement of the story-telling pilgrims in balancing "sentence" and "solaas." His real interest is to entertain and to be entertained. He prefers "solaas" to "sentence," light entertainment to instruction. The rules he establishes are actually in opposition to his character and his preferences. When Chaucer introduces the Host in the General Prologue, he uses the words "mury," "myrie," and "myrthe" eight times (Gen Pro 751-859). This cannot be mere coincidence on Chaucer's part. He probably wants to present the Host as a character whose taste for "merriness" and light entertainment establishes him as what Alan Gaylord terms a typical bourgeois (227). Later in the Canterbury Tales, this first impression of him is confirmed. His interest is not to evaluate the competence of the story-telling artists; his primary concern is to keep up the good humor in the group, a goal he pursues aggressively.

The Host's aggressiveness is most strongly felt in Fragment VII in which the "Nun's Priest's Tale" appears. Gaylord argues that in this group the Host separates "sentence" and "solaas" completely, demanding, for the sake of variety, stories that either instruct or entertain (231). Gaylord's argument is convincing because in

Fragment VII Harry Bailly makes his demands for entertainment or instruction more explicit, being very careful not to ask for a combination of both. He addresses the pilgrim Chaucer and asks him for "a tale of myrthe" (Thopas 706), before the pilgrim tells his "Tale of Sir Thopas." When he is dissatisfied with the tale, he asks him to tell a tale "In which there be som murthe or som doctryne" (935), giving him the opportunity to make his tale either instructive or entertaining. He also offers the Monk a second chance to tell a tale by urging him to "sey somewhat of huntyng" (NPT 2805), and then finally turns to the Nun's Priest with the imperative "Looke that thyn herte be murie evermo" (NPT 2815), demanding a funny tale.

The Nun's Priest, in his wish to please the Host, and maybe in his desire to win the story-telling contest, turns to a tragi-comic fable, making it the basis of his story. As a medieval clergyman he puts himself in an awkward position by telling a beast-fable because in the Middle Ages many scholars believed it was morally objectionable for priests to engage in that kind of activity. The most vigorous objection came from the moralists, who believed that a priest should only be concerned with the promulgation of the divine truth of the Scriptures (Manning 412). In the Canterbury Tales we find a reflection of the moralistic attitude when the Parson, having been asked by the Host to tell a fable, strongly refuses, saying

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,
 For Paul, that writeth unto Tymothee,
 Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse,
 And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.

(Parst 30-34)

The Nun's Priest must be aware of the position he has put himself in by using a fable as the basis of his story because he uses the very same quotation from St. Paul the Parson refers to here at the end of his tale: "For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is, / To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis" (NPT 3441-42). His use of the quotation, though, is placed in the light of Christian Humanism, and is employed here to justify his use of fiction to teach a lesson (Sayce 237). In any case, we may safely assume that Chaucer lets him turn to a beast-fable because fables were supposed to teach and to delight, and this would fulfill the Host's wish in the General Prologue for entertaining and instructive tales and the traditional Horatian ideal.

The entertainment value of the tale is clear--it is witty, captivating, and amusing. More important, though, are the changes Chaucer introduces to increase the tale's instructional value: 1) He introduces important structural changes that shift the focus from the foolish cock and the fable moral to life in the hen-yard, the cock's dream, and the chicken-debate, which he uses to tell us something about human character. 2) He introduces into his tale material from other sources and interrupts it with

comments about fiction, thus heightening readers' awareness of its fictitious character and stimulating in us an active search for meaning. 3) He includes many themes that have appeared in other tales, and various morals and sententiae, forcing us as readers to evaluate one against the other, if we want to gain a deeper understanding of the tale.

I

Focusing on the dream, the debate and the hen-yard world allows Chaucer to develop the complexity of his two main characters, Chauntecleer and Pertelote, and their cosmos. In them and their world he emphasizes and polarizes oppositions such as human/animal, intellect/instinct, and mind/body, present in the analogues, and, leaving them unresolved, teaches us a lesson on our human nature. The shift in focus also allows Chaucer to introduce material from other sources into the fable, thus discarding the single point of view of the original fable and increasing the complexity and the instructional value of the tale. Derek Brewer says that the metonymic enrichment of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" destroys the dramatic consistency and the single point of view we would normally expect in a tale (103). The consequence of Chaucer's artistic decision is that what is discussed in the tale transcends the fable frame, the beginning and ending of the tale. This is also true for the Canterbury Tales as a whole. The pilgrimage is a kind

of frame that holds all the stories together, but ultimately the stories break the limitations of that frame, offering the reader a complex view of humanity. The analogues Chaucer used for the "Nun's Priest's Tale," though not devoid of some complexity, did not possess the complexity Chaucer desired to create this very instructive, smaller version of the Canterbury Tales. A comparison of the tale and its analogues will illustrate this point.

In the original fable, of which we only have two fairly close versions, the French "Roman de Renart," and the German "Reinhart Fuchs" (Hulbert 645-63), the cock is a conceited fool who, repeatedly warned about the prophetic nature of his dream by his hen-wife, struts around freely in the barnyard in which the fox has been waiting for him since almost the beginning of the fable. The fox tricks the foolish cock into singing for him. When the cock sings with his eyes closed, the fox grabs him by the neck and runs off with him. Then the cock tricks the fox into opening his mouth to shout at his pursuers and flies to a tree, thus saving himself.

What is stressed in the two analogues is the foolishness of the cock in disbelieving the warnings of his hen-wife and letting himself be tricked by his natural enemy the fox. Chaucer changes this in the Nun's Priest's Tale. Here, Chauntecleer is disturbed in his sleep by a very realistic and nightmarish dream any chicken could have--if a chicken could dream. He dreams that a fox comes

into his hen-yard and brutally abducts him. When he wakes up, he tells his hen-wife about it, interpreting it as a divine warning. She immediately discards the possibility of a prophetic dream. Then a long debate on the dream follows in which Chantecleer cites "auctoritates" to prove that his dream means something and Pertelote makes use of her practical knowledge in dream and medical lore, claiming that his dream was caused by a physical disturbance, poor eating habits. Whose explanation is the correct one is not determined. In the end the fox enters the yard, beguiles the cock, grabs him by the neck, and runs off with him. Chantecleer then tricks the fox and escapes to a tree.

Stanley Fish points out two types of differences between tale and analogues that make the cock appear less foolish and make the debate the central point around which the tale is constructed. One of these differences is that in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" the cock himself believes in the prophetic nature of his dream and defends his opinion against the attacks of his hen-wife. Related to this is the late entrance of the fox in the tale, which deemphasizes the role of Chantecleer's enemy and brings the focus on the discussion of the dream (224). The fox's function is merely to bring about the fable ending, which all the pilgrims have been waiting for.

The second difference between analogues and tale Fish points out is the extreme poverty of the widow in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" (224). This difference brings about

a complete separation of the farm and the hen-yard world, of human characters and animal characters, opposing the two worlds to one another, and heightening our awareness of the Nun's Priest's fiction, while at the same time it brings focus on the chicken-world. In the analogues the chickens belong to wealthy farmers, and their wealth is reflected in the hen-yard and the chickens. The chickens are extensions of their owners, their world a microcosm. In the "Nun's Priest's Tale," everything implied about the hen-yard is in complete opposition to what is implied about the widow and her farm. The chicken-world of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is not a reflection of the farm-world. It is more ideal and more complex. It is an independent, humanized cosmos, containing elements of court, church, marriage and university (David, 225). Chaucer uses this chicken-cosmos to represent our world with its institutions and morals.

A world of its own, Chauntecleer's domain is not influenced by the poverty that characterizes the widow's farm-world. The widow eats "ful many a sklendre meel" (NPT 2833) and we are told that "repleccioun ne made hiere nevere sik" (NPT 2837). The hen-yard, however, is the place where repletion is the result of too much good food. Pertelote tells Chauntecleer that "swevenes engendren of replecciouns" (NPT 2923). The widow is denied life, color and "social status." Peter Elbow says that "everything about the widow is denial of color" and that "Black and white and dullness are emphasized" (104). The chickens in

the hen-yard, though, are vibrant with life, full of color and aristocratic in their appearance. We are told of Chauntecleer that

His comb was redder than a fyn coral;
 And batailled as it were a castel wal;
 His byle was blak, and as the ject it shoon;
 Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
 His nayles whitter than the lylie flour;
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour

(NPT 2859-64)

Chauntecleer's beauty is emphasized against the white and black background of the widow's farm. Chauntecleer's red comb, like a castle wall, makes us associate him with the court. The colors red, black, azure, white and gold, used in his description, make us think of the courtly fashion. Pertelote is not comparable to the widow either. She is described as a "faire damoysele" (NPT 2870), Chauntecleer's aristocratic lady. Chaucer intends these associations. He wants us to think of Chauntecleer as a king strutting in his royal hen-yard, and of Pertelote as his queen.

Although the hen-yard is a physically enclosed world--with its dry ditch all around it reminds us of an isolated castle--it does not have anything of the limited nature of the physically open farm-world. Its inhabitants, and most particularly the cock, possess the capacity to look beyond the enclosure, and thus make the hen-yard world expand. Chauntecleer's sound knowledge of ancient authors enables

him to surpass the enclosure intellectually, to perceive a reality far away in distance and in time, and thus transcend his hen-yard reality. He, as a cock, does not have to rely on the knowledge he could obtain only in the enclosed hen-yard, unlike the foolish cock from the analogues who never looks beyond the barnyard fence. The intellectual activity that takes place in the hen-yard helps it expand, contrary to the world of the farm, which is not enclosed, but where the inhabitants do not perceive the world outside. This world becomes restricted and small.

The widow of this farm-world does not seem to have any physical or intellectual contact with the world surrounding her. She does not question her everyday routine, and events do not mean anything more to her than what she can see with her eyes. When her cock is carried away by the fox, she does not see in the event a deeper meaning. She only runs after the fox to get back her cock, a natural physical reaction. Chantecler reacts to events intellectually. For him events have meaning, and he puts the world he perceives into words. Even a small detail like a dream is important enough to be discussed and analysed. The discussion about the dream, overwhelming in its presentation of varieties of forms and styles, helps him to overcome the enclosure around the hen-yard and to open doors to different worlds. Chantecler, by drawing from historical, philosophical and literary sources,

surpasses his environment. He sees himself and indeed becomes connected with men from all eras and places.

The major structural changes Chaucer has made in the "Nun's Priest's Tale"--the cock's belief in the prophetic nature of his dream, the late entrance of the fox, and the widow's poverty--serve to bring the focus onto the hen-yard and the verbal activity that takes place in it. This activity, which constitutes a large part of the instructional value of the tale, is engendered by the opposing views the two main characters have about the dream and the narrator's comments on their actions. Chaucer dramatizes this opposition in the chicken-debate. What is revealed in the tale are not only the different views Chauntecleer and Pertelote have about the dream and their opposing characters, but also their attitudes toward life and reality. Chaucer uses the chickens to tell us something about human nature. He tells us that to look at something from only one angle is wrong, and that is precisely what Chauntecleer and Pertelote are doing. They limit themselves in their understanding of the world by not accepting the other's viewpoint as a possible way of looking at an event.

Chauntecleer believes in the prophetic nature of his dream. Whereas Pertelote interprets the dream in terms of its cause, as a simple digestive problem (Elbow 95), he interprets his dream in terms of its meaning. The very basic opposition Elbow finds in Chauntecleer and Pertelote

is represented in their attitudes toward the dream; it is the opposition between intellect and body. All the other oppositions we find in Chauntecleer and Pertelote derive from this basic opposition. Chauntecleer represents the male, bookishly intellectual scholar and artist. His perception of the world is shaped by the "auctoritates" he uses to prove that his dream has a meaning; he uses his sources to find out about the future. Pertelote is not interested in the future. She emphasizes the body and the present. Her knowledge is not intellectual, but practical; it does not relieve the mind, but the body. She gains her knowledge from inside the hen-yard.

I shal myself to herbes techen yow

That shul been for youre heele and for youre
prow;

And in oure yeerd the herbes shal I fynde

(NPT 2949-51)

Chauntecleer gains his knowledge from outside the hen-yard, from "olde bookes" (NPT 2974). It helps him

intellectualize the instinctive fear he felt when he had

his dream. He sees himself as one of the examples of men

he cites, who has been granted foreknowledge, communicated through a dream by a divine force. Pertelote's

interpretation of the dream is presented as scientific,

whereas Chauntecleer's interpretation is ultimately

religious. Chaucer presents both interpretations as

possible ways of looking at one event. Both, Pertelote and

Chauntecleer, argue their points convincingly and in accordance with their field of interest.

Severs and Lumiansky discard Pertelote's interpretation as unbelievable and claim that Chaucer wants to make Pertelote look less intelligent in comparison with Chauntecleer. They interpret the ending of the tale as a male triumph and put it in the antifeminist tradition. This interpretation is certainly debatable.³ Chaucer does not make his heroine entirely unintelligent in comparison with Chauntecleer. He is careful not to let the Nun's Priest explicitly take sides in the debate. Indeed, Pertelote's way of looking at the dream is just as believable or unbelievable as that of Chauntecleer.

Although Chauntecleer's speech is much longer and verbally more elegant than Pertelote's, she nevertheless argues her point correctly and in accordance with medieval dream and medical lore. She thinks Chauntecleer has had a "somnium naturale," a dream caused by a physical disposition, and prescribes the correct cure for that kind of disturbance (Curry, 219-32). On a physical level Pertelote is right in her interpretation. Chauntecleer, on the other hand, argues on a spiritual and intellectual level. He thinks he has had a "somnium coeleste," a dream produced by divine forces. Curry argues that Chauntecleer's interpretation is in accordance with his wish to see

³ Lawrence Besserman argues rather persuasively that Chaucer is hinting at some hostility against the Prioress on the Nun's Priest's part (68-69).

himself as one of the illustrious men who have been granted such an "avisoun" (229-30). It lies in Chauntecleer's nature to see himself as more than a simple rooster. His knowledge of the "auctoritates" has stimulated him to see more in the dream than a physical disturbance.

We do not know what caused Chauntecleer's dream, a physical disturbance or a divine force, but both interpretations are possible explanations for the same dream. By letting Chauntecleer have his dream early in the morning hours, at "dawenyng," Chaucer leaves us in an uncertain situation. According to Curry it was believed in the Middle Ages that divinely inspired dreams were most likely to occur in the early morning, because at this time a person was relaxed and not digesting any food (208). But we never are explicitly told that Chauntecleer's interpretation of the dream was the right one, even though the ending of the story might lead us to this conclusion. He refuses to accept Pertelote's knowledge and advice, simply telling her "Madame," "..., "graunt mercy of/youre loore" (NPT 2970). He, not Pertelote, is ultimately responsible for his fall. When he flies down from "the beam" (NPT 3172), he makes his own decision to ignore the dream and to join his hen-wife for lovemaking.

Part of the fun in the chicken-debate stems from the fact that Chauntecleer and Pertelote are husband and wife. On one level we witness a polemic confrontation of two opposing schools of knowledge, one that stresses

experience and another that stresses the "auctoritates," but on another level we see domestic dispute. On the domestic level Chauntecleer and Pertelote cannot accept each other because they are both frustrated in their wish to have an ideal partner. Pertelote is disappointed that her chicken-husband is afraid of a simple dream. She claims to argue with all women and says:

We alle desiren, if it myghte bee,
 To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free,
 And secree, and no nygard, ne no fool,
 Ne hym that is agast of every tool,

(NPT 2913-16)

The kind of husband she wants is strong, pragmatic, and more compatible with her own character. Chauntecleer, who has been temporarily rejected by Pertelote because he believes his dream has a meaning, sees that Pertelote is no understanding partner and, like the Wife's fifth husband, Jankyn, answers back to her with his "auctoritates," telling her "Ther nedeth make of this noon argument; / The verray preeve sheweth it in dede" (NPT 2982-83).

By giving his characters a dual nature, Chaucer has created an additional irony. They are humans and animals at the same time. According to Scheps, Chaucer has violated the most basic rule of a beast-fable. Instead of disregarding the differences between animals and human beings, as is the case in traditional beast-fables, Chaucer emphasizes these differences by creating animal characters

that are not entirely human (8). By attributing a human point of view to the chickens whose chickenness is strongly emphasized at the same time, Chaucer shows us between which two poles these gallinaceous creatures are torn. They want to be human, but they are only chickens. Again, Chaucer is telling us something about our human nature. We are like those chicken in that we would like to forget our humanness and be god-like and have perfect explanations and solutions for the problems of this world. We are like Chauntecleer who wants to forget his rooster limitations, but cannot do so completely. And we are also like Pertelote who believes that medical lore can cure all ills.

Chauntecleer's dual nature is revealed in several instances. His love relationship with Pertelote corresponds to our human concept of marriage, and thus makes him somewhat human. However, we must not forget that there are altogether seven hens that share one Chauntecleer, so at the same time he is a polygamous rooster. But can we call a "trede-foul," which is obviously Chauntecleer's function in the hen-yard, "polygamous?" The problem is that since Chauntecleer appears human to us, we naturally would like to see our human moral standards reflected in his situation, but we really cannot do so because we are constantly reminded of his animalness. What happens to us as readers is that we become more aware of the morals that shape our human lives and the fact that they are simply not applicable to an

animal situation. At the beginning of the tale we learn that it is by nature that Chauntecleer knows when to crow. Later in the story we find out that he knows the scientific reason for his crowing. But this knowledge does not help him, since he will crow every morning anyway because he does it instinctively. Another instance where we see the gallinaceous Chauntecleer come through is when he spots the fox hiding in the cabbages. All the verbal skills that he has demonstrated so adequately throughout the tale suddenly disappear. His immediate verbal response to the upcoming catastrophe is a simple "Cok, cok." The chicken has overmastered the human in Chauntecleer.

Pertelote possesses the same dual nature. She is a very human wife, and "Madame Pertelote," an aristocratic lady. She cares for her husband and is angry with him when he is frightened by a dream. She offers him her practical advice and is frustrated when he does not accept it. At the same time, though, Pertelote is a simple hen. At the beginning of the tale we learn that Pertelote's love affair with Chauntecleer began when she was seven nights old, which is a little early for human standards. Later in the tale, in his amorous speech to Pertelote, Chauntecleer comments on the beauty of her face and the scarlet red around her eyes. Obviously, to be scarlet red around the eyes is something that is highly desirable according to chicken beauty standards. For us the situation is comic

because we see something of the chicken nature shine through here. Not even in the Middle Ages was redness around the eyes of a woman considered beautiful.

The chickens we encounter in the "Nun's Priest's Tale," especially the cock, are torn between their animalness and their humanness, between their instinct and their intellect. Chaucer is in a dilemma from the very beginning of the tale because he pays attention to his instinct when he should pay attention to his intellect and vice versa. He gives in to his sex drive and has sex with Pertelote in the barnyard, although his elaborate speech should have led to a different behavior. When he sees the fox for the first time, his instinct tells him to escape, but since the fox appeals to his intellect by making an eloquent speech on his father's talented singing, Chaucer listens and completely forgets about his instinct. Chaucer does not master this dualism of instinct and intellect within him until the very end of the story when he makes free use of his intellectual powers to escape.

The key to the Nun's Priest's instruction lies in the complex arrangement of oppositions that are never resolved, but rather emphasized. So far, we have looked at oppositions Chaucer achieves by making structural changes in the tale. We have looked at the farm-world which is in opposition to the hen-yard world; the human characters which are in opposition to the animal characters;

Chauntecleer, the bookish intellectual, who is in opposition with the pragmatic and experience-oriented Pertelote, and the human nature within the characters, which is in opposition to their animal nature. The key is that as readers we are constantly forced to redefine the nature of the tale we have in front of us because the strongly emphasized oppositions somewhat diminish the fable illusion. The fable characters in the "Nun's Priest's Tale," their particular problem and the way they handle it, and the setting are greatly exaggerated in comparison with the analogues. Instead of ignoring the human and the animal in his characters and tale, the Nun's Priest stresses it by constantly opposing one to the other, thus dissolving the dramatic illusion (Scheps 8). As readers we become aware of the fictitious nature of the narrative and gain the necessary distance we need to search for meaning.

II

Another way in which Chaucer destroys the dramatic illusion of his narrative, forcing us to a heightened awareness of its fictitious character, is by making the Nun's Priest interrupt it, introducing other fictitious, historical, philosophical, and religious material, and by having him make comments about fiction. We can see that Chaucer is working with oppositions on this level too, opposing the material that is introduced to the fiction that is being told. The new material forces readers to take their attention away from the story that is being

told, and concentrate on every new piece of information that is offered. This shift in attention makes us more aware of the story-telling process, giving us the required distance to search actively for the tale's intended meaning. The meaning becomes clear when we ourselves sort out the material that is introduced and find out how it is tied in with the rooster fable. The source material that Chaucer introduces thus governs our reading and the actual fable which is the basis of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" (Burlin 232).

All three animal characters and the narrator, the Nun's Priest himself, introduce material from other sources, interrupting the "flow" of the tale. When the narrator interrupts the story, he signals this by short remarks, such as

Thus roial, as a prince in his halle,
 Leve I this Chauntecleer in his pasture,
 And after wol I telle his aventure.

(NPT 3184-86)

Now wol I torne agayn to my sentence.

(NPT 3214)

I wol nat han to do of swuch mateere
 My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,

(NPT 3251-52)

Now turne I wole to my tale agayn.

(NPT 3374)

These remarks are structural signals, functioning like exclamation points or colons in punctuation. They show us clearly where longer interruptions begin or end, and where we will be confronted with new subject matter. Readers thus are constantly made aware of the story-telling process and how it evolves. But it is not only the new subject matter as opposed to the Nun's Priest's fiction that produces this awareness.

The very basic opposition, which seems to reappear continually, is that between animal and human, discussed above. This basic opposition exists also between the Nun's Priest's story about animals and the human wisdom he introduces into it. The irony of the tale is that readers have difficulties applying the human wisdom of the sources that have influenced our history of thought to Chauntecleer's animal reality. We will perhaps ask ourselves why St. Augustine, Boethius, or Bishop Bradwardine should matter to the Nun's Priest's fictitious rooster. This effect is exactly what Chaucer intended. Our awareness of Chauntecleer's fictitious animal situation is a necessary precondition for our heightened awareness of the human wisdom which has shaped our lives and thought, as presented in the story. The inapplicability of our human wisdom to an animal condition makes attentive readers question its applicability to our human condition. We

discover that we are all like the arrogant Chauntecleer of the Nun's Priest's fiction in that we try to transcend our human condition with our human wisdom, but can never do so entirely.

In addition to the Nun's Priest's introducing material from other sources to destroy the dramatic illusion of his fiction, Chaucer also makes him comment on fiction, establishing the tale he is telling as a fictitious construct, and thus forcing a reader to accept it as such. A reader's acceptance and awareness of the Nun's Priest's Tale as fiction are very important. If we see that art is not a faithful representation of life, but that it can, nevertheless, due to its model-like character, tell us something about life, we gain a deeper understanding of Chaucer's instructive purpose in the tale.

In the tale there are several instances in which the reader's awareness of the fiction is directly manipulated. The first is introduced by a passage very early in the tale and comments on the ability of the main characters to speak and to sing. It appears immediately after the Nun's Priest has introduced the main characters of the tale, Pertelote and Chauntecleer, with a very human description and lets them sing the popular song "My lief is faren in londe" (NPT 2879). He comments on their verbal abilities:

For thilke tyme, as I have understonde,
Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge.

(NPT 2880-81)

On the surface, the intention of Chaucer's narrator in interrupting his tale with this passage is to assert its truthfulness. By setting the entire story in the distant past, he makes it impossible for a reader to investigate the existence of speaking and singing animals, and establishes this circumstance as a fact that is truthfully represented in his fiction. The effect Chaucer wants to achieve, however, is quite the opposite. We are suddenly reminded that the characters in the tale are animals; in fact, Chaucer never lets us forget it in the tale. It does not matter whether animals could speak or sing in the past. What matters is that at the time the Nun's Priest tells his tale they do not sing nor speak, and this fact makes a reader aware of the fictitious nature of the tale.

A second comment on the truthfulness of fiction occurs immediately before the entrance of the fox into Chauntecleer's hen-yard:

This storie is also trew, I undertake,
 As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,
 That women holde in ful greet reverence.

(NPT 3211-13)

The narrator, in this passage, compares his story with Walter Map's adventurous story of Launcelot de Lake, stating that both are true stories. Severs notes that Walter Map's reputation for truthfulness was rather doubtful, and that Chaucer here is "humorously intimating that neither romance nor beast-fable is true" (37). If it

were generally accepted that the story of Launcelot de Lake was fictitious, we can assume that Chaucer, by comparing it to the "Nun's Priest's Tale," wants to assert the fictitious nature of his own tale, forcing us to accept it as such.

While the two previous passages are comments on fiction that merely heighten a reader's awareness of the fictitious nature of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," the third and last passage, which appears at the end of the tale, has an additional function. The Nun's Priest seems to use this passage to defend the tale he has excellently told, specifically addressing those people in his audience who might object morally to his telling a story of something that could not have happened, a folly. He defends it by saying

But ye that holden this tale a folye,

As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,

Taketh the moralite goode men.

For Saint Paul seith that al that written is,

To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis.

Taketh the fruyt and lat the chaf be stille.

(NPT 3438-43)

The narrator tells us not to take his fiction of a rooster and a hen as light entertainment and advises us to look for the instruction, the moral we can find in it because, he seems to say, although fables are not true, they, nevertheless, traditionally teach us a lesson. He uses the

quotation from St. Paul to justify his telling an untrue and fictitious tale and to assert the instruction it has to offer. As a cleric, his wish to emphasize instruction more than entertainment is in accordance with the duty of clergymen in the Middle Ages to instruct both workers and secular rulers (Myers 215). As a member of the lower clergy the Nun's Priest has brought himself into an awkward position in the presence of his ecclesiastical superiors, the Monk and the Prioress, by using an ordinary fable as the basis of his story, but his secular use of St. Paul's quotation helps him to justify this procedure because his ultimate goal is to instruct.

The Nun's Priest never explicitly states what the instruction is in his tale. He tells us to take the "fruyt," but he does not tell us where we can find it. Apparently, Chaucer wants us to find it on our own, engaging in an active search for its hidden meaning. However, the difficulty every reader encounters in his or her desperate search for the true meaning or instruction of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is that of sorting out the various morals and sententiae, and the many themes that appear in other tales of the collection, in an effort to compare and evaluate them against each other. Only by doing this can a reader hope to get to the instruction of the tale. We have to find out for ourselves the connections that can be made with other tales, and the connections that exist between the vast amount of morals

and sententiae and the tale itself. This search brings readers face to face with with the ultimate instruction of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," which is that the story, its characters, and the connections that can be made are just as diverse as life itself, and that it is impossible to look at life or the story in only one way. For Muscatine the tale is a celebration of the "normality of differences" (242), and Brody says that the tale is "about the very existence of moral possibilities" (43). It seems to me that what Muscatine and Brody say is a very adequate way of summarizing not only the Nun's Priest's instruction, but the instruction of the Canterbury Tales as a whole, and that if the reader can see how the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is connected with other tales that appear in the collection, and how it reflects their diversity, he will understand that the diversity of possible interpretations and connections is its instruction.

III

Since in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" Chaucer creates a very human and complex hen-yard world, containing elements of court, church, university, and marriage, the tale inevitably becomes connected thematically with other tales in the collection. These connections increase the instructional value of the tale vastly, and we, as readers, have to find them in order to see how the diversity of our human condition is represented in the tale. The tale is, for example, connected with the "Knight's Tale" through its

representation of an epic, chivalric world. In the tale Chauntecleer becomes a lord, who struts around with his lady, Pertelote, in his isolated castle-like hen-yard, surrounded by a ditch. Their appearances are modelled on courtly ideals; she is "faire" (2870), like the ladies described in romances, and the colors in his description (red, black, asure, white, and gold) reflect his royal status and the courtly fashion. The theme of courtly love also answers back to the Knight's Tale. Chauntecleer eloquently describes his physical longings for Pertelote and comments on her incomparable beauty.

But the tale is connected to the Knight in a different way. Doris Myers suggests that the Nun's Priest follows the Knight's interests in telling his tale (216). The Knight interrupts the "Monk's Tale" because, he argues, he does not like to listen to tragedies in which great men fall. He says that it is rather the following kind of stories that give him pleasure:

And the contrarie is joye and greet solaaas,
 As whan a man hath been in poure estaat
 An clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
 And there abideth in prosperitee.

(NPT 2774-77)

Perhaps the Nun's Priest answers the Knight's wish for a story in which a poor man rises socially by creating the character of Chauntecleer, a simple rooster, who, in the story, is elevated to the level of a prince (NPT 3184),

but he gives the story a little twist in that he does not leave Chauntecleer in his comfortable position, as perhaps the Knight would like. He lets the princely rooster fall and climb up again--Chauntecleer literally climbs up into a tree. The Nun's Priest seems to be telling the reader and the Knight that life and fortune are ever-changing, and that nothing in life is static. His point is that any man can rise and fall, and then, through his own mistake possibly fall again.

The theme of the fall, of course, answers back to the "Monk's Tale." In the tragic examples the Monk enumerates, the fall is the inevitable destiny of all the characters. There is nothing they can do to escape that destiny. The Nun's Priest's version of a falling character seems to give the reader a little hope. Chauntecleer falls through his own, human mistake--he makes use of his free will, and chooses to listen to the flattery of his worst enemy--but he rises in the end, and escapes his predicament, by making use of his intelligence. The narrator seems to be saying that life is not always tragic, and that what happens to us is largely determined by our own actions, and the choices we make. Leneghan calls the genre the Nun's Priest has created a "merry tragedy" because it lacks the serious tone of real tragedy (305), like the kind the Monk tells.

Within Fragment VII, the tale is yet connected with another ecclesiastic storyteller beside the Monk: the Prioress. Broes, who thinks the Nun's Priest is

dissatisfied with working under her rule, believes that Chaucer has the Nun's Priest create the character of the poor widow as a veiled criticism toward the Prioress, her irreligious and worldly behavior, and her indulgence in luxury. This assumption is credible, and it suffices to look at the description of the Prioress in the General Prologue and compare it to the description of the poor widow to see how completely opposed the two characters are.

In the General Prologue (Gen Pro 118-64) we learn that the Prioress tries to follow the rules of courtly behavior in order to establish herself as an aristocratic lady (Gen Pro 140-41). Secular recognition apparently means more to her than anonymous piety. An addition to her secular aspirations is her violation of the church rules by owning dogs, which she feeds with roasted meat and bread of superior quality, in a time when poor people died of hunger (Gen Pro 146-50). She herself likes good food and indulges in sumptuous and hearty meals, dipping morsels of fine bread into a thick and rich sauce (Gen Pro 128-31), which, of course, does not help her figure at all: Chaucer tells us that she was not "undergrowe" (Gen Pro 156), hinting at some corpulence.

The poor, rustic widow of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," on the other hand, is most likely "undergrowe" because Chaucer tells us that "Attempree diete was al hir phisik" (NPT 2838). The description of what she eats reminds the reader so strongly of the sauce-dipping Prioress that one

can only assume that Chaucer is establishing a connection between the characters of the widow and the Prioress:

Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel-

No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte

Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.

Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;

(NPT 2834-37)

The widow has no bread of superior quality and no thick sauces she could dip it into. In addition to her poverty and lack of food, the widow's life is also devoid of other worldly joys. We are told that she leads a very basic and simple life, and that she lives it patiently (NPT 2826).

But her patient humility and active life as a dairy woman strike the reader as positive, compared to the pretentious aspirations of the much too worldly Prioress.

The ambitions of the Prioress to be like a courtly lady clearly also connect her with the character of Pertelote in the tale. Broes mentions that their descriptions are fairly similar and suggests that the Nun's Priest seeks this identification (159). Of course, a hen who behaves like an aristocratic lady is just as ridiculous in the eyes of the reader as a Prioress who tries to "counterfete cheere/ Of court" (Gen Pro 139-40); both try to be something they are not.

The character of Pertelote allows the Nun's Priest to introduce antifeminist remarks from the "auctores" into the tale because he makes her responsible for Chauntecleer's

downfall. The antifeminist remarks can be interpreted as the Nun's Priest's way of indirectly attacking the Prioress. That the narrator ends his enumeration of antifeminist statements by telling us "These been the cokkes wordes and nat myne" (NPT 3265), thus assigning his own remarks to Chauntecleer, whom he has long left behind in his tale, suggests that he himself notices that the Prioress might become aware of his indirect attack against her. He corrects his mistake by saying "I kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (NPT 3266). However, Lawrence Besserman suggests that Chaucer lets the Nun's Priest pun here, still indirectly criticizing the Prioress, because semantically the sentence can be interpreted in various ways. Two interpretations Besserman proposes are "I am not able to foretell the sin of any woman" and "I know no harm of any truly religious woman" (70). The last of these interpretations would clearly answer back to the character of the Prioress.

Still a different story the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is connected with is the "Tale of Melibee." Both stories portray a marital relationship between aristocratic characters. But there are considerable differences in the depiction of the relationships in the tales. In the Tale of Melibee we are confronted with an idealized husband-wife relationship, in which the wife is clearly the more intellectual partner. The catastrophe that befalls to the secular ruler Melibee and his wife, Prudence, brings the

partners closer together. In Dame Prudence Melibee finds a very understanding, intelligent, and knowledgeable partner who is willing to accept his first reaction to the disaster--extreme grief and anger--but who will not allow him to start a war against his enemies on the basis of this emotional reaction. She tells him to call together all his true friends and discuss with them what to do next. Throughout the story Prudence counsels her husband wisely, demonstrating a high degree of eloquence and appealing to Melibee's reason. Sexuality and sensuality are completely absent from this relationship. Melibee and Dame Prudence interact rationally with their common goal of solving Melibee's problem.

Chauntecleer's and Pertelote's relationship is quite different. The discussion of Chauntecleer's dream produces a complete intellectual separation between hen-wife and cock-husband. They are not interested in solving the problem of the dream together; they are content to verbalize their own point of view and will not agree on a common solution. Intellectually Chauntecleer and Pertelote are worlds apart. The only thing that brings them together temporarily--at least physically--is their sexual contact. Their marital relationship is not an idealized one, but perhaps it is a more realistic, a more human one, showing the reader that husband and wife do not always agree, or, more generally speaking, that people do not always agree.

The "Tale of Melibee" and the "Nun's Priest's Tale"

are connected in still another way. Both tales contain passages about the negative influence of flatterers on secular rulers that are strikingly similar.

Thou shalt eek escheue the conseillyng of
flatterers, swiche as enforcen him rather
to preise your persone by flatterye than for
to telle you the sothfastnesse of thinges.

(Melibee 1174)

Allas ye lordes, many a fals flatour Is in youre
courtes, and many a losengeour, That plesen yow
wel moore, by my feith, Than he that
soothfastnesse unto yow seith. (NPT 3325-28)

Although the two passages are uttered in different fictional situations, their communicative purposes are strikingly similar. In the passage from the "Tale of Melibee," Prudence warns her husband against the negative influence of flatterers. Melibee listens to her advice, and thus prevents a war. The communicative situation here is an interaction between the two main characters, in which one character warns the other with the purpose of influencing his future behavior. The passage in the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is not uttered by any of the characters, but by the narrator himself. The narrator uses the passage to comment on what happens to Chauntecleer. The communicative situation in this tale is that of an interaction between narrator and audience, in which the narrator draws a moral

from the behavior Chauntecleer has demonstrated in the tale to influence the future behavior of his listeners.

So far we have looked at the connections that can be made between the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and other tales and characters within Fragment VII, where it appears. The tale is, however, certainly also connected with tales and characters that appear outside of this group. The "Wife of Bath's Tale" and character are without doubt reflected in the "Nun's Priest's Tale." Chaucer answers back to this character and her tale by creating the characters of the widow and Pertelote, and by focusing on the marital relationship of two main chicken characters. From the beginning of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" (NPT 2821-46) we know the widow is poor, advanced in age, and leads a very simple life as a dairy woman. She has very little to eat and drinks no wine. Chaucer gives this character very little color and almost no life at all. The Wife of Bath, however, is a very colorful character. She is vibrant, vital and full of life. The Wife is not a poor, rural widow, but an urban, rich, bourgeois one, who goes on pilgrimages, drinks wine and ale (WBT 194), sings when she is inebriated (WBT 458-59), and believes in sexual pleasure.

The character of Pertelote is more like that of the Wife of Bath. Both are aggressive, pragmatic females. At the beginning of her Prologue the Wife of Bath stresses that she relies on experience in her life by saying

Experience though noon auctoritee

Were in this world is right ynogh for me

(WBT 1-2)

Her attitude is reflected in Pertelote who refuses aggressively to give credence to Chauntecleer's "auctoritates," which he uses to prove the validity of his dream. She relies on her knowledge of herbal-lore and folk medicine, which she gains through practical experience in her hen-yard. The Wife of Bath reacts to the "auctoritates" her fifth husband cites with the same aggressiveness. His extensive reading of the "auctoritates" creates in him an awareness of his own marital situation under the dominant and pugnacious Wife of Bath. The consequence of this intellectual stimulation is that he wants to change reality--his own position as a man who is married to a hard-headed wife--using the "auctoritates" to justify this wish. The Wife of Bath's reaction, though, to Jankyn's sermonizing about wicked women is a physical attack; she rips a page out of his book (WBT 635).

Jankyn and Chauntecleer are similar in that both perceive the world and the situation they are in through books. They trust the authorities and use them to intellectualize their situations. Moreover, both are inconsistent in that they put the "auctoritates" aside at a critical points and behave in unexpected ways--Jankyn gives

in to the Wife, allowing her to dominate in their marriage and to burn his book (WBT 813-16), and Chauntecleer flies into the hen-yard and has sex with Pertelote (NPT 3172-78).

Pertelote and the Wife of Bath show yet another similarity. They try to manipulate their husbands by using their experience and practical knowledge in dream-lore.

The Wife of Bath informs us that her mother taught her some dream-lore, which she uses to invent a prophetic dream that she tells Jankyn. But not only does she tell her future husband the invented dream, presenting it as a real dream she had, she also expounds upon it for him, making it clear to Jankyn that the dream foretells a financial advantage for him (WBT 576-84). She uses the false dream to manipulate Jankyn to marry her, which he does. Pertelote also uses her dream-lore in an effort to manipulate Chauntecleer's behavior. She wants him to take care of his body and the physical disturbance that caused the bad dream. Her manipulation, though, fails. Chauntecleer bluntly refuses to be manipulated and continues to believe that his interpretation of the dream is correct.

* * *

By including themes from other tales, and by answering back to them, Chaucer increases the instructional value of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" immensely. The instruction we can gain from the tale depends largely on our ability to see the various connections that can be made. These connections show us how our humanity is reflected in

Chauntecleer's domain and how complex and diverse it is.

This diversity is also reflected in the variety of morals presented in the tale. By drawing different morals from what happens to Chauntecleer, Chaucer prevents us from looking at the rooster's dilemma in only one way, which would result in our gaining a very limited understanding of Chauntecleer's world, and consequently, of our own world. Scheps argues that Chaucer, by including various morals in his tale, contradicts the notion that one action inevitably leads to only one moral judgment (8). Perhaps Chaucer had the idea that no action automatically leads to only one moral conclusion when he was reading the analogues of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" and discovered the double moral at the end, in which the fox and Chauntecleer draw different morals from the same event. Maybe for Chaucer this double moral still did not reflect adequately the variety of moral lessons one could actually draw from the tale, and so he changed the analogues and included various morals that do not mutually exclude each other but reflect the possibilities we have for looking at what happens to Chauntecleer.

Whatever may have given Chaucer the idea to include many morals in the tale, the fact remains that the analogues and the "Nun's Priest's Tale" both contain the double morals of Chauntecleer and the fox.

For he that wyneketh whan he sholde see,

Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!

(NPT 3431-32)

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

(NPT 3432-34)

In the "Nun's Priest's Tale" these two morals follow each other closely. The fox is actually responding directly and in the negative to Chauntecleer's moral, telling him that his moral is a different one. It seems logical that the characters draw different moral conclusions from the same event because they look at it from different points of view. Chauntecleer's moral reflects the physical and intellectual blindness he demonstrates vis-a-vis the fox and his flattery. The fox's moral is also a result of his personal experience. Had he not verbalized his feeling of victory out of pride, stimulated by Chauntecleer, he would still hold a juicy chicken in his mouth. Chauntecleer and the fox cannot see the event in the same way because they approach it from different perspectives.

In the same way the other morals we find in the tale reflect the different ways in which Chauntecleer's fall can be approached. Constance Hieatt produces a list of the different morals that can be found in the tale, and argues that they can be divided into groups that are related to the central problem of the tale: Why did Chauntecleer fall?

In one group she puts the morals about Fortune, divine foreknowledge, and free will. This group includes the morals of the fox and Chauntecleer; what happens to them can be seen as the result of the way they use their free will. Hiatt's second group consists of morals about the bad influence of women (4-5). All these morals are tied in with the problem of Chauntecleer's fall, but they differ in that they look at what happens to him from different perspectives. A closer look at some of the morals will help us understand this point.

The two morals on the influence of Fortune appear shortly before the fox enters the hen-yard and shortly before Chauntecleer escapes from the fox. They are phrased in the following terms.

For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.

God woot that worldly joye is oone ago,

(NPT 3205-06)

Lo, how Fortune turneth sodeynly

The hope and pryde eek of hir enemy!

(NPT 3403-04)

The two passages are comments from the narrator on the action in the tale, Chauntecleer's abduction and escape, and the influence of ever-changing Fortune. In the first passage we look at Chauntecleer's abduction from a divine perspective. Chauntecleer does not know that Fortune will soon turn her back on him, ending his worldly happiness, but God does. Divine foreknowledge is probably implied in

this passage too. If we look at the events from this perspective, then Fortune is responsible for Chauntecleer's downfall; he becomes the poor victim of her whims, yet he also profits from her whims. In the second passage we learn that Fortune is also responsible for Chauntecleer's escape; she turns her back on the fox. Both passages imply that neither the fox nor Chauntecleer can really be held responsible for the consequences of their actions since Fortune plays such a important part in what happens. Also, the two passages on changing Fortune tell us to beware of worldly happiness like that which Chauntecleer possesses because through the influence of Fortune that happiness can easily be taken away at any time, although we might wish to keep it.

In a different passage we find another explanation for the events in the tale.

But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee,

After the opinion of certein clerkis.

(NPT 3234-35)

Like the other two passages this one also relieves Chauntecleer somewhat from the responsibility of his fall. It suggests, from a theological point of view, that Chauntecleer's fall has already been set down in a divine plan. There is nothing Chauntecleer can do to change it. The passage also implies a difference between the knowledge that is available to humans and the divine knowledge God possesses. Chauntecleer cannot foresee the consequences of

his actions but God can. In the same way the omniscient narrator knows exactly what is going to become of Chauntecleer and reveals this knowledge to us, his audience, so that we are momentarily granted a divine view of the future action in the story. Looked at from this perspective what happens to Chauntecleer is a demonstration of how divine foreknowledge works and how the consequences of our actions are predetermined by it.

Still another way of looking at Chauntecleer's fall is by drawing the conclusion that it is all Pertelote's fault. The following passage illustrates this view.

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

(NPT 3256-59)

This anitifeminist passage relates Pertelote to Eve and suggests that what happens to Adam is paralleled by what happens to Chauntecleer. Both supposedly follow the bad counsel of their wives and hence are destined to fall. Here, the entire responsibility of Chauntecleer's abduction is given to Pertelote. However, attentive readers will examine this moral statement against the action in the tale and find that it is not at all clear whether Pertelote can be blamed for Chauntecleer's fall. Although it is true that Pertelote counsels Chauntecleer on the subject of his dream, he refuses to listen to her. When he flies down

into the hen-yard to have sex with her, he makes his own decision. So, can Pertelote still be made responsible for Chauntecleer's fall? Chaucer probably intends this ambiguity because it shows us how relative this moral is. If we hold Pertelote entirely responsible for counseling Chauntecleer wrongly, we cannot hold her responsible to the same degree for his fall.

The question of who or what is responsible for Chauntecleer's downfall is never resolved in the "Nun's Priest's Tale." By offering us different morals that can be drawn from the events in the tale, the narrator leaves it to us to look for the right one. The fact, though, is that we cannot find the right moral because each of the morals looks at the events in the story from a different point of view, and they are not mutually exclusive. The fact that God foreknows what is going to happen to Chauntecleer does not preclude the possibility that Fortune played a part in Chauntecleer's personal dilemma or that his hen-wife unknowingly, maybe through her sexual attraction, precipitated his misfortune.

The instruction of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is the same instruction we gain from the Canterbury Tales as a whole. The tale is a representation of the multifariousness of human existence, and its message is that humanity, like the characters, the dream, the event, the morals, and even the tale itself, cannot be looked at in only one way. Cooper says that the tale "does not set

out to impart knowledge or adopt stances, but remains open to different human or generic perspectives...(241). It is this openness that leads readers to approach the tale from different angles, encouraging us to discover the variety of interpretations and morals it generates, finally to accept the entire body of them as true.

The "Nun's Priest's Tale" is not a fable that leads to one inevitable moral in the end. Rather than making a point, the Nun's Priest presents many points of view, and just as Chaucer's dream can be looked at from different points of view, so can the story itself. Elbow argues that Chaucer's dream and the tale are analogous in that they both become objects of an interpretation (109). It is this interpretation which the Nun's Priest stimulates that becomes the readers' instruction. Our active search for meaning frees the Nun's Priest from the paternalistic role of the fabulist, who guides the reader through his fable and passes on to him the final moral to be drawn from it (Scheps 9). The Nun's Priest--like any really good teacher--teaches us a lesson without giving us the answers: he knows that the only way we can gain instruction is by looking for it ourselves. His instruction to us is that there is never just one answer, just one meaning in the way things are, but many. We limit ourselves in our understanding of the "Nun's Priest's Tale," and of the humanity it represents, if we do not look at it from different perspectives.

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