

The Prologue and Tale
of
The Nun's Priest

*There is no description of the Nun's Priest in the General Prologue
where we learn simply that he is a chaplain of some sort to the Prioress*

Introduction

When the Monk has tired the pilgrims with his tedious narrative -- a long collection of tragedies which could literally go on for ever because he has given them no focus -- the Knight, who says he likes happy endings, calls a halt to the monotonous chronicle. The Host agrees heartily, and calls for a tale from the Nun's Priest, chaplain to the Prioress. We learn a good deal about many of the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*, including the Prioress, from *The General Prologue*, but we learn very little about the Nun's Priest there. The only mention of him is in the lines about the Prioress:

*Another nunnè with her haddè she
That was her chapelain, and priestès three (GP 163-4)*

This second nun (who is referred to confusingly, as her chaplain, i.e. her assistant) tells an unmemorable tale, but we hear no more of the other two priests. Some scholars think that the second half of line 164 here was not finished by Chaucer and was filled in by a scribe. In any case, when the Host turns to this one of the priests three for a more entertaining tale, we get a little more information about the Nun's Priest who is addressed by the Host with what might seem undue familiarity. Harry Bailly, however, does this to many people with the notable exceptions of the Knight and the Prioress. Clearly the priest's job is neither prestigious nor lucrative, for he rides a nag that is both "foul and lean" and this is one reason for the innkeeper's lack of respect.

At the end of the tale we also learn that the Nun's Priest is solidly built, a virile-looking man, wasted like the Monk in a celibate profession, according to Harry. This is not much to know, all told, but it hardly matters, for we have his tale which has delighted generations of readers.

The Nun's Priest is a priest, a rather obvious statement that has a considerable bearing on the tale he tells, for priests were and are by profession preachers. And the tale that

our Priest tells has a great deal in common with a sermon, except that it is not boring as sermons have a reputation for being.

The tale he tells is a Beast Fable, a form that dates back to the Greek of Aesop and that is still familiar in cartoons. The animals talk, discuss medicine, argue about dream theory, and so on. This is absurd and acceptable at once, though some of it is more acceptable or absurd than the rest. For example, that they should talk is acceptable enough and has been since Aesop, but that the hen should comment on the absence of a local drugstore where one could get laxatives, and that her "husband" should quote Cato and discuss predestination is deliciously daft.

One of the subjects that the animals talk about is the significance of dreams — a favorite subject of Chaucer's, who wrote a good deal of "Dream Poetry," a very common medieval form. In the Dream Vision the author generally portrays himself as falling asleep, and the poem is a report of what he dreamed. But Chaucer was also interested in the **theory** of dreams, and the discussion between the cock and the hen in the tale represents well enough the differing points of view in the Middle Ages about the origin and significance of dreams. (See also Select Glossary)

The argument is carried on to a sizeable degree by a common medieval method — the "exemplum." The exemplum is an anecdote ranging from very brief to extended, told to illustrate the point being made in an argument or in a sermon (and the teller of this tale is, as we have said, a priest). There is a string of these *exempla* in this tale: biblical references of one or two lines each, a passage of around eighty lines about the two travelling salesmen; stories from folklore, English or Old Testament history and the Latin classics. These were "authorities," that is, authoritative sources adduced to bolster the assertions of the speaker or writer. The people of the Middle Ages believed greatly in "authorities" .

Another topic favored by Chaucer and much argued in the Middle Ages, but somehow a good deal less plausible in this context and hence perhaps more comic, is the problem of Free Will, that is, the difficulty of reconciling man's free will with God's omniscience. If you do something, do you do it because you were really free to do it, or did you *have* to do it? Since God in His omniscience foresaw from all eternity that you would or would not do it, does that imply that you were not free to choose in the first place? Is free will a delusion?

Since this argument generally occurred in the context of discussion about sin and

eternal salvation, it was a deeply serious matter for many people. Introducing such a problem into a barnyard squabble between a cock and a hen is comic, but it does not dismiss the topic as ridiculous in itself, just as it does not reduce the literary or historical significance of the Fall of Troy or the burning of Carthage because they are comically compared to the goings on in the widow's barnyard.

There are other forms of humor embedded in the tale, some of them less obvious than comparing the seizure of a cock by a fox to the Fall of Man or the Fall of Troy. The humor depends upon the reader's recognition of some features of medieval rhetoric, such as *exclamatio* to express great emotion, recommended especially by one book well known to Chaucer and his contemporaries, Geoffrey (or Gaufred) de Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*. But the three passages of "exclamation" have a mock epic quality obvious enough even without knowledge of de Vinsauf's work.

Like most beast fables *The Nun's Priest's Tale* ends with a moral, in this case for anyone who trusts in flattery and for him who "jangles when he should hold his peace." Take the morality, good men. Or, to put it another way, "take the fruit and let the chaff be still." The reader will have to decide which is which.

PROLOGUE TO THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

*The Knight interrupts the Monk's Tale , a string of tragedies.
He prefers happy endings.*

	"Whoa!" quod the Knight. "Good sir, no more of this.	<i>said the K.</i>
	What you have said, is right enough y-wis,	<i>indeed</i>
	And muchel more. For little heaviness	<i>much</i>
3960	Is right enough to muchel folk, I guess.	<i>most people</i>
	I say for me, it is a great dis-ease,	<i>distress</i>
	Where as men have been in great wealth and ease,	
	To hearen of their sudden fall, alas!	
	And the contrary is joy and great soláce,	
3965	As when a man has been in poor estate,	
	And climbeth up, and waxeth fortunate,	<i>grows, becomes</i>
	And there abideth in prosperity.	
	Such thing is gladsome, as it thinketh me,	<i>it seems to me</i>
	And of such thing were goodly for to tell."	

The Host agrees.

- 3970 "Yea," quod our Host, "by Saintè Paulè's bell
 You say right sooth; this monk he clappeth loud *said our Host*
 He spoke how Fortune covered with a cloud *You speak truth*
 I n'ot never what, and also of tragedy *I know not*
 Right now you heard; and, pardee, no remedy *by God*
- 3975 It is for to bewail, nor to complain
 That that is done, and also 'tis a pain, *That which*
 As you have said, to hear of heaviness.
 Sir Monk, no more of this, so God you bless.
- 3980 Such talking is not worth a butterfly,
 For therein is there no desport nor game. *no fun*
 Wherefore, Sir Monk, Daun Piers by your name, *Daun: see Endnotes*
 I pray you heartily, tell us somewhat else,
 For sikerly, n'ere clinking of your bells, *certainly were it not*
- 3985 That on your bridle hang on every side,
 By heaven's king, that for us allè died,
 I should ere this have fallen down for sleep,
 Although the slough had never been so deep. *mud*
 Then had your talè all been told in vain.
- 3990 For certainly, as that these clerkès sayn, *scholars*
 Where as a man may have no audience,
 Nought helpeth it to tellen his sentence.¹ *story, opinion*
 And well I wot the substance is in me, *I know*
 If anything shall well reported be.
- 3995 Sir, say somewhat of hunting, I you pray."
 "Nay," quod this Monk, "I have no lust to play. *no desire / be amusing*
 Now let another tell as I have told."

The Host turns to the Prioress's chaplain

Then spoke our Host with rudè speech and bold *rough speech*
 And said unto the Nunnè's Priest anon:

¹ *Where as ... reported be:* "There is no point in telling your story when no one is listening. I do know a good story when I hear one.(?)"

- 4000 "Come near, thou Priest, come hither, thou Sir John,¹
 Tell us such thing as may our heartès glad. *gladden*
 Be blithè, though thou ride upon a jade. *Be happy / nag*
 What though thine horse be bothè foul and lean *dirty and skinny*
 If he will serve thee, reckè not a bean. *do not care*
- 4005 Look that thine heart be merry evermo."
 "Yes, sir," quod he, "yes, Host, so may I go,
 But I be merry, y-wis I will be blamed." *Unless I'm m., indeed*
 And right anon his tale he has attamed, *started*
 And thus he said unto us every one,
- 4010 This sweetè priest, this goodly man, Sir John.

THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

The contented life of a poor country widow

- A poorè widow somedeal stape in age *somewhat advanced*
 Was whilom dwelling in a narrow cottàge, *once upon a time*
 Beside a grovè, standing in a dale.
 This widow, of which I tellè you my tale,
 4015 Since thilkè day that she was last a wife, *that day*
 In patience led a full simple life,
 For little was her chattel and her rent. *property & income*
 By husbandry of such as God her sent *by thrift*
 She found herself, and eke her daughters two. *supported / & also*
- 4020 Three largè sowès had she, and no mo', *more*
 Three kine, and eke a sheep that hightè Mall. *cows / was called*
 Full sooty was her bower, and eke her hall, *bedroom / and also*
 In which she ate full many a slender meal.
 Of poignant sauce her needed never a deal. *sharp / not at all*
- 4025 No dainty morsel passèd through her throat;
 Her diet was accordant to her cote. *coat (or cottage)*

¹ "Sir John" is not a title of knighthood, but a way of designating a priest, rather contemptuous according to Baugh. The priest's job as chaplain to the Prioress is not important enough to evoke the innkeeper's respect.

	Repletion ne made her never sick;	<i>Gluttony</i>
	A temperate diet was all her physic,	<i>her medicine</i>
	And exercise, and heartè's suffisance.	<i>peace of mind</i>
4030	The goutè let her nothing for to dance,	<i>did not hinder from</i>
	No apoplexy shentè not her head.	<i>gave her headaches</i>
	No wine ne drank she, neither white nor red.	
	Her board was servèd most with white and black —	<i>table</i>
	Milk and brown bread — in which she found no lack,	
4035	Seynd bacon, and sometime an egg or tway;	<i>smoked bacon / or 2</i>
	For she was as it were a manner dey.	<i>kind of dairy-woman ?</i>

One of the animals in her yard was a splendid rooster, Chanticleer

	A yard she had, enclosed all about	
	With sticks, and a dry ditch without,	<i>outside</i>
	In which she had a cock hight Chanticleer,	<i>rooster called</i>
4040	In all the land of crowing n'as his peer.	<i>he had no equal</i>
	His voice was merrier than the merry organ,	
	On massè days that in the churchè gon.	<i>goes, plays</i>
	Well sikerer was his crowing in his lodge,	<i>More dependable</i>
	Than is a clock, or any abbey orloge.	<i>abbey bell</i>
4045	By nature he knew each ascension	
	Of the equinoctial in thilkè town; ¹	
	For when degrees fifteenè were ascended,	
	Then crew he, that it might not be amended.	<i>improved</i>
	His comb was redder than the fine coral,	
4050	And battled, as it were a castle wall.	
	His bill was black, and as the jet it shone;	
	Like azure were his leggès and his tone;	<i>toes</i>
	His nails whiter than the lily flower,	
	And like the burnèd gold was his colour. ²	

¹ *By nature ... amended:* He knew the exact time of day from observing the sun in the sky above him." He kept exact clock time; 15 degrees of equinoctial measure was one hour (See North, 117). Chaucer is inordinately fond of this kind of astro-jargon.

² *His comb ... colour:* In their edition of the tale Coghill and Tolkien assure us that this is a good description of a cock of the Golden Spangled Hamburg breed.

The cock's favorite wife, Pertelote

- 4055 This gentle cock had in his governance
 Seven hens, for to do all his pleasance, *his pleasure*
 Which were his sisters and his paramours, *lovers*
 And wonder like to him, as of colours.
 Of which the fairest-hued on her throat, *prettiest-colored*
 4060 Was clepéd fairè Damoiselle Pertelote.¹ *was called*
 Courteous she was, discreet, and debonair, *gracious*
 And compaignable, and bore herself so fair, *sociable, & conducted*
 Since thilkè day that she was sevensights old *a week*
 That truly she has the heart in hold
 4065 Of Chanticleer, lockèd in every lith. *limb*
 He loved her so, that well was him therewith. *he was totally happy*
 But such a joy it was to hear them sing,
 When that the brightè sun began to spring,
 In sweet accord, "My lief is fare in land." *My love has gone away*
 4070 For thilkè time, as I have understand *at that time*
 Beastès and birdès couldè speak and sing.

Chanticleer has a terrible dream

- And so befell, that in a dawening *At dawn*
 As Chanticleer among his wivès all
 Sat on his perchè that was in the hall,
 4075 And next him sat this fairè Pertelote;
 This Chanticleer gan groanen in his throat,
 As man that in his dream is dretchéd sore *much troubled*
 And when that Pertelote thus heard him roar,
 She was aghast, and said: "O heartè dear, *afraid*
 4080 What aileth you to groan in this mannér?
 You be a very sleeper, fie for shame!"
 And he answered and saidè thus: "Madame,
 I pray you that you take it not a-grief. *badly*
 By God, me mett I was in such mischief *I dreamt / such trouble*

1

Damoiselle should probably be pronounced "damsel".

4085 Right now, that yet mine heart is sore affright.
 Now God," quod he, "my sweven rede aright,¹
 And keep my body out of foul prisoún.
 Me mett how that I roaméd up and down *I dreamed*
 Within our yard, where as I saw a beast,
 4090 Was like a hound, and would have made arrest
 Upon my body, and have had me dead.
 His colour was betwixtè yellow and red;
 And tippéd was his tail, and both his ears
 With black, unlike the remnant of his hairs.
 4095 His snoutè small, with glowing eyen tway. *eyes two*
 Yet of his look for fear almost I die.
 This causéd me my groaning doubtéless."

Pertelote is shocked and disappointed

"Avoy!" quod she, "fie on you, heartless.² *Oy vey! / faintheart*
 Alas!" quod she, "for by that God above
 4100 Now have you lost my heart and all my love;
 I cannot love a coward, by my faith.
 For certès, what so any woman saith, *no matter what*
 We all desiren, if it mightè be,
 To havè husbands, hardy, wise, and free, *brave, wise, generous*
 4105 And secret, and no niggard nor no fool, *discreet & no skinflint*
 Nor him that is aghast of every tool,
 Nor no avaunter, by that God above. *no boaster*
 How durst you say for shame unto your love *How dare you*
 That anything might maken you afeared?
 4110 Have you no man's heart, and have a beard?

Her diagnosis and prescription of home remedies

¹ *Now God ... aright*: "May God make my dream come out the right way." *Me mette ...* is the impersonal use of the obsolete verb, meaning literally "it was dreamed to me," or "I dreamt". It is also used with the usual modern order: *he mette*. *Dream* is used as both verb and noun, but *sweven* only as noun.

² *Avoy* and *fie* both mean something like *Shame!*

- Alas! and can you be aghast of swevenès? *afraid of dreams*
 Nothing, God wot, but vanity in sweven is. *God knows / nonsense*
 "Swevens engender of repletions,¹
 And oft of fumes and of complexions
 4115 When humours be too abundant in a wight.² *in a person*
 Certès this dream, which you have mett to-night, *Certainly / dreamt*
 Comes of the greatè superfluity
 Of yourè reddè cholerè, pardee, *red bile, by God*
 Which causeth folk to dreaden in their dreams
 4120 Of arrows, and of fire with reddè lemes, *red light*
 Of reddè beastès, that they will them bite,
 Of conteke, and of whelpès great and lite; *fighting / dogs / little*
 Right as the humour of meláncholy³
 Causeth full many a man in sleep to cry,
 4125 For fear of blackè bears or bullès black
 Or else that blackè devils will them take.
 Of other humours could I tell also,
 That worken many a man in sleep full woe,
 But I will pass, as lightly as I can.
 4130 Lo Cato, which that was so wise a man,⁴
 Said he not thus: `Ne do no force of dreams"? *Pay no heed*
 Now, Sir," quod she, "when we fly from the beams,
 For Godè's love, as take some laxative.
 On peril of my soul, and of my life,
 4135 I counsel you the best, I will not lie,
 That both of choler, and of meláncholy

¹ 4113: "Dreams are caused by excess" (of eating and drinking). There was a good deal of speculation and theorizing about dreams before and during the Middle Ages. Chaucer himself was especially interested in the subject.

² 4115: See Select Glossary under "Humor" for explanation of "humor" and "complexion," the forces in the body that were supposed to account for sickness, health, good or bad disposition.

³ Melancholy was supposed to be cause by black bile.

⁴ 4130: Cato was the supposed author of "Distichs," a book of Latin maxims commonly used in schools.

- You purgè you; and for you shall not tarry,
 Though in this town is no apothecary,
 I shall myself to herbès teachen you,
 4140 That shall be for your health, and for your prow;
 And in our yard those herbès shall I find,
 The which have of their property by kind
 To purgen you beneath, and eke above.
 Forget not this for Godè's ownè love.
 4145 You be full choleric of complexïon.
 Beware the sun in his ascension
 Ne find you not replete of humours hot,
 And if it do, I dare well lay a groat,
 That you shall have a fever tertiane,¹
 4150 Or an ague that may be your bane.
 A day or two you shall have digestives
 Of wormès, ere you take your laxatives,
 Of laureole, centaury, and fumetere,
 Or else of hellebore that groweth there,
 4155 Of catapuce, or of gaitre-berries,
 Or herb ivy growing in our yard, there merry 'tis
 Pick them right up as they grow, and eat them in.
 Be merry, husband, for your father's kin.
 Dreadeth no dream. I can say you no more."

purge yourself / delay
pharmacist
about herbs
profit,

natural properties

noonday sun
full of
bet a dollar

illness / death

medicinal herbs

more herbs

for goodness sake

Chanticleer's justification of the value of dreams

- 4160 "Madame," quod he, "gramercy of your lore.
 But natheless, as touching Daun Catoun.
 That has of wisdom such a great renown,
 Though that he bade no dreamès for to dread,
 By God, men may in olden bookès read,
 4165 Of many a man, more of authority
 Than ever Cato was, so may I thee,
 That all the reverse say of this senténce,
 And have well founden by experience,
 That dreames be signífications

thanks for advice
Cato

so may I thrive
opinion

¹ *fever tertiane* : A fever that peaked every third day, or every other day by our reckoning.

4170 As well of joy as tribulations
 That folk endure in this life present.
 There needeth make of this no argument;

An anecdote that proves the importance of dreams

	The very proofè showeth it indeed.	<i>actual experience</i>
	One of the greatest authors that men read,	
4175	Says thus: that whilom two fellows went	<i>that once 2 comrades</i>
	On pilgrimage in a full good intent;	<i>On a journey</i>
	And happened so, they came into a town,	
	Where as there was such congregation	<i>such a crowd</i>
	Of people, and eke so strait of herbergage,	<i>shortage of rooms</i>
4180	That they ne found as much as one cottáge,	
	In which they mightè both y-lodgèd be.	
	Wherefore they mustè—of necessity,	
	As for that night—departen company;	<i>part company</i>
	And each of them goes to his hostelry,	
4185	And took his lodging as it wouldè fall.	<i>he could get it</i>
	That one of them was lodgèd in a stall,	<i>stable</i>
	Far in a yard, with oxen of the plough;	
	That other man was lodgèd well enow,	<i>enough</i>
	As was his áventure, or his fortúne	
4190	That us govèrneth all, as in commune.	<i>all together</i>
	And so befell, that, long ere it were day,	
	This man mett in his bed, there as he lay,	
	How that his fellow gan upon him call,	<i>his companion</i>
	And said: `Alas! for in an ox's stall	
4195	This night shall I be murdered, where I lie,	
	Now help me, dearè brother, or I die;	
	In allè hastè come to me,' he said.	
	This man out of his sleep for fear abraid,	<i>awoke</i>
	But when that he was wakened of his sleep,	
4200	He turned him, and took of this no keep;	<i>turned over / no heed</i>
	Him thought his dream was but a vanity.	<i>a delusion</i>
	Thus twicè in his sleeping dreamèd he.	
	And at the thirdè time yet his fellow	
	Came, as him thought, and said, `I am now slaw.	<i>slain</i>

- 4205 Behold my bloody woundès, deep and wide.
 Arise up early, in the morrow tide, *in the morning*
 And at the west gate of the town,' quod he,
 `A cartè full of dung there shalt thou see,
 In which my body is hid full privily. *secretly*
- 4210 Do thilkè cart arresten boldèly.¹
 My goldè causèd my murder, sooth to sayn.' *truth to say*
 And told him every point how he was slain
 With a full piteous facè, pale of hue. *of color*
 And trusteth well, his dream he found full true;
- 4215 For on the morrow, as soon as it was day,
 To his fellow's inn he took the way,
 And when that he came to this ox's stall,
 After his fellow he began to call. *For his companion*
 The hosteler answerèd him anon, *hotel owner*
- 4220 And saidè: `Sir, your fellow is agone;
 As soon as day he went out of the town.'
 This man gan fallen in suspiciõn,
 Remembering on his dreamès that he mett, *dreamed*
 And forth he goes, no longer would he let, *delay*
- 4225 Unto the west gate of the town, and found
 A dung cart — as it were to dung the land —
 That was arrayèd in that samè wise
 As you have heard the deadè man devise. *tell*
 And with a hardy heart he gan to cry *he demanded*
- 4230 Vengeance and justice of this felony:
 `My fellow murdered is this samè night,
 And in this cart he lies, gaping upright.
 I cry out on the ministers,' quod he, *officials*
 `That shouldè keep and rulen this city. *administer*
- 4235 Harrow! Alas! here lies my fellow slain.' *(Cries of dismay)*
 What should I more unto this talè sayn?
 The people out start, and cast the cart to ground,
 And in the middle of the dung they found
 The deadè man, that murdered was all new. *recently*

¹ *Do thilke ...*: "Have this cart stopped."

Exclamatio!

- 4240 O blissful God! that art so just and true,
 Lo, how that thou bewrayest murder alway. *revealest*
 Murder will out, that see we day by day.
 Murder is so wlatson and abominable *nasty*
 To God, that is so just and reasonable,
 4245 That he ne will not suffer it helèd be. *allow to be hid*
 Though it abide a year, or two, or three,
 Murder will out, this is my conclusion.¹
 And right anon, the ministers of the town
 Have hent the carter, and so sore him pined, *tortured*
 4250 And eke the hosteler so sore engined, *racked*
 That they beknew their wickedness anon, *confessed*
 And were a-hangèd by the neckè bone.

Another anecdote about dreams

- Here may men see that dreamès be to dread. *to be feared*
 And certès in the samè book I read,
 4255 Right in the nextè chapter after this,
 (I gabbè not, so have I joy and bliss),
 Two men that would have passèd o'er the sea
 For certain cause, into a far country,
 If that the wind ne had been contrary,
 4260 That made them in a city for to tarry,
 That stood full merry upon an haven side. *near the harbor*
 But on a day, against the eventide, *towards evening*
 The wind gan change, and blew right as them lest. *as they wanted*
 Jolly and glad they went unto their rest,
 4265 And casten them full early for to sail. *planned*
 But to that one man fell a great marvail. *marvel*

¹ *O blissful God ... conclusion:* This passage sounds a great deal more like a preacher than a rooster. Some medieval scribe wrote in the margin "Auctor" (Author), i.e. he saw that the narrator (the priest) rather than the rooster was bursting through the already thin fiction and delivering the kind of exclamation expected of an "auctoritee," someone who made sententious statements.

- That one of them in sleeping as he lay,
 Him mett a wonder dream, against the day: *dreamt / near dawn*
 Him thought a man stood by his beddè's side
 4270 And him commanded that he should abide, *stay*
 And said him thus: `If thou to-morrow wend, *go, travel*
 Thou shalt be drowned; my tale is at an end.'
 He woke, and told his fellow what he mett, *dreamt*
 And prayèd him his voyage for to let, *to delay*
 4275 As for that day, he prayed him to abide.
 His fellow, that lay by his beddè's side,
 Gan for to laugh, and scornèd him full fast.
 `No dream,' quod he, `may so my heart aghast, *terrify*
 That I will letten for to do my things. *delay*
 4280 I settè not a straw by thy dreamings,
 For swevens be but vanities and japes. *dreams / nonsense*
 Men dream all day of owlès and of apes, *every day*
 And eke of many a mazè therewithal; *fantastic things*
 Men dream of thing that never was, nor shall.
 4285 But since I see that thou wilt here abide,
 And thus forslothen wilfully thy tide, *deliberately waste time*
 God wot it rueth me, and have good day.'
 God knows, I'm sorry
 And thus he took his leave, and went his way.
 But ere that he had half his course y-sailed,
 4290 N'ot I not why, nor what mischance it ailed, *I don't know*
 But casually the ship's bottom rent, *by chance / tore*
 And ship and man under the water went
 In sight of other shippès it beside
 That with them sailèd at the samè tide. *time*

Chanticleer's triumphant conclusion from these examples

- 4295 And therefore, fairè Pertelote so dear,
 By such examples old yet mayst thou lere *learn*
 That no man shouldè be too reckèless *contemptuous*
 Of dreams, for I say thee doubtèless,
 That many a dream full sore is for to dread.

Another briefer anecdote

- 4300 Lo, in the life of Saint Kenélm I read,
 That was Kenulphus' son, the noble king
 Of Mercenrike, how Kénélm mett a thing. ¹ *dreamt*
 A little ere he were murdered on a day,
 His murder in his vision he say. *saw*
- 4305 His nurse to him expounded every deal *every bit*
 His sweven, and bade him for to keep him well *guard himself*
 From treason. But he n'as but seven years old, *was only*
 And therefore little talè has he told *attention he paid*
 Of any dream, so holy was his heart.
- 4310 By God, I haddè lever than my shirt, *I had rather*
 That you had read his legend, as have I. *his biography*
 Dame Pertelote, I say you truly,
 Macrobius, that wrote the vision *dream*
 In Afric' of the worthy Scipion,²
- 4315 Affirmeth dreams, and sayeth that they be
 Warning of thingès that men after see.

A series of shorter examples of dreams that foretold disaster

- And furthermore, I pray you looketh well
 In the Old Testament, of Daniel, *Book of Daniel*
 If he held dreams of any vanity.³
- 4320 Read eke of Joseph, and there shall you see
 Whether dreams be sometimes (I say not all)
 Warning of thingès that shall after fall.
 Look of Egypt the king, Daun Pharaoh,
 His baker and his butler also,

¹ *Lo ... Mercenrike*: The syntax here is awkward: "I read in the life of St. Kenelm, the son of Kenulph who was the noble king of Mercia" Notice that the name Kenelm is stressed differently on one line than one the other. Mercia was a part of England in the days when it was still divided into a number of kingdoms.

² Macrobius wrote a book well known in the Middle Ages, a *Commentary* on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, i.e. the Scipio known as Scipio Africanus because of his defeat of Hannibal in Africa. Macrobius was the source of much medieval theory about dreams.

³ "If he considered dreams to be just nonsense or delusion."

- 4325 Whether they ne feltè no effect in dreams. *Gen 37 to 41*
 Whoso will seeken acts of sundry reams, *realms*
 May read of dreamès many a wonder thing.
 Lo Croesus, which that was of Lydia king, *who was king of L.*
 Mett he not that he sat upon a tree, *Dreamt*
- 4330 Which signified he should a-hangèd be?
 Lo here, Andromache, Hector's wife, *H., hero of Troy*
 That day that Hector shouldè lose his life,
 She dreamèd on the samè night befor,
 How that the life of Hector should be lorn,
- 4335 If thilkè day he went into battail. *battle*
 She warnèd him, but it might not avail;
 He wentè for to fightè natheless,
 And was y-slain anon of Achilles. *killed by A.*
- 4340 And eke it is nigh day, I may not dwell. *near day / go on*
 Shortly I say, as for conclusion,
 That I shall have of this avision
 Adversity; and I say furthermore,
 That I ne tell of laxatives no store, *have no time for*
- 4345 For they be venomous, I wot it well. *I know*
 I them defy, I love them never a deal.

*But let us think of more pleasurable things -- and **do** them*

- Now let us speak of mirth, and stint all this. *and stop*
 Madame Pertelote, so have I bliss,
 Of one thing God has sent me largè grace,
 4350 For when I see the beauty of your face,
 You be so scarlet red about your eyen, *eyes*
 It maketh all my dreadè for to dien,
 For, all so siker as "In principio," *sure as Gospel*
*Mulier est hominis confusio.*¹

¹ *In principio* are the first words of St. John's gospel: *In the beginning was the word ...* The phrase was used either as a blessing or for something like "the gospel truth." *Mulier est hominis confusio* means "Woman is man's ruination," but it is deliberately mistranslated, as a little male insiders' joke. The priest (and perhaps Chanyicleer) know Latin, and know that

4355 (Madam, the sentence of this Latin is, *the meaning, sense*
 Woman is man's joy and all his bliss).
 For when I feel a-night your softè side,
 Albeit that I may not on you ride,
 For that our perch is made so narrow, alas!
 4360 I am so full of joy and of soláce,
 That I defy bothè sweven and dream." ¹

*He finds a better remedy for fear than laxatives
 and he struts confidently about his yard*

And with that word he flew down from the beam;
 For it was day, and eke his hennès all;
 And with a chuck he gan them for to call,
 4365 For he had found a corn lay in the yard.
 Royal he was, he was no more afeared. *R = like a king*
 He feathered Partelotè twenty time, *mounted*
 And trod her eke as oft ere it was prime. *rode / also / 9 a.m.*
 He looketh as it were a grim lion;
 4370 And on his toes he roameth up and down,
 Him deignéð not to set his feet to ground.
 He chucketh, when he has a corn y-found, *clucks*
 And to him runnen then his wivès all.

The sun's in the heavens; all's right with his world

Thus royal, as a prince is in his hall,
 4375 Leave I this Chanticleer in his pastúre;
 And after will I tell his áventure. *what happened*
 When that the month in which the world began,
 That hightè March, when God first makèd man, *[a medieval belief]*
 Was complete, and passèd were also
 4380 Since March be gone, thirty days and two, *ended / i.e. on May 3*

Pertelote and the Prioress do not. Priest and rooster want to have their joke *and* keep their jobs, as servants either of Venus or of Diana.

¹ Some difference between "sweven" and "dream" seems to be intended, but it is not clear what.

Befell that Chanticleer in all his pride,
 His seven wivès walking by his side
 Cast up his eyen to the brighte sun,
 That in the sign of Taurus had y-run
 4385 Twenty degrees and one, and somewhat more
 He knew by kind, and by none other lore, *by instinct / learning*
 That it was prime, and crew with blissful steven: *9 a.m. / voice*
 "The sun," he said, "is clomben up on heaven *has climbed*
 Forty degrees and one, and more y-wis. *Indeed*
 4390 Madámè Pertelote, my worldè's bliss,
 Hearkeneth these blissful birdès — how they sing!
 And see the freshè flowers — how they spring!
 Full is mine heart of revel, and soláce."

But ...

But suddenly him fell a sorrowful case, *to him happened*
 4395 For ever the latter end of joy is woe.
 God wot that worldly joy is soon ago, *God knows / gone*
 And if a rhetor couldè fair endite, *rhetorician / write*
 He in a chronicle safely might it write,
 As for a sovereign notability. *basic principle*
 4400 Now every wise man let him hearken me.
 This story is as true, I undertake
 As is the book of Launcelot du Lake,
 That women hold in full great reverence.¹
 Now will I turn again to my sentéce. *story, sermon*

A crafty but wicked creature has stolen into this Paradise

4405 A coal fox, full of sly iniquity,
 That in the grove had wonèd yearès three, *had lived*
 By high imagination forecast,²

¹ Lancelot of the Lake was a prominent hero of Arthurian legend, a great warrior, and a great lover—of Queen Guinevere. This rather sarcastic statement is possibly another jab at his employer.

² *By high ...*: This line presumably means to suggest that the fox breaking through the

The samè night throughout the hedges brast *burst*
 Into the yard where Chanticleer the fair
 4410 Was wont, and eke his wivès, to repair; *accustomed / to go*
 And in a bed of wortès still he lay, *cabbages or weeds*
 Till it was passèd undern of the day, *mid-morning*
 Waiting his time on Chanticleer to fall,
 As gladly do these homicidès all,
 4415 That in awaitè lie to murder men.

Exclamatio !

O false murderer! lurking in thy den!
 O new Iscariot, new Ganelon!
 O false dissimuler, O Greek Sinon,
 That broughtest Troy all utterly to sorrow!¹
 4420 O Chanticleer! accursed be that morrow
 That thou into that yard flew from the beams.
 Thou wert full well y-warnèd by thy dreams,
 That thilkè day was perilous to thee.

A theological question? Do we have Free Will or not?

But what that God forewot must needès be, *foresees has to be*
 4425 After the opiniõn of certain clerkès.²
 Witness on him that any perfect clerk is, *any good scholar*
 That in school is great altercatiõn *argument*

fence was something foreseen by the *high imagination* of God himself.

¹ Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus Christ; Ganelon was a French traitor in *The Song of Roland*; Sinon betrayed Troy. The absurdly inflated comparisons in the impassioned exclamation are meant to mock the practice of some preachers and the recommendations of some rhetoricians like Geoffrey of Vinsauf.

³ *After the opinion ...*: "According to the opinion of certain scholars what God forsees must come to pass." The thorny question of reconciling man's free will and God's omniscience had been dealt with famously by St Augustine of Hippo, by Boethius in *The Consolations of Philosophy*, and by Bishop Bradwardine, an English scholar.

- In this mattér, and great disputation,
 And has been of an hundred thousand men.
- 4430 But I ne cannot bolt it to the bren, *sift it / bran*
 As can the holy doctor Augustine, *teacher St. Augustine*
 Or Boece, or the bishop Bradwardine, *Boethius*
 Whether that Godé's worthy forewitting *foreknowledge*
 Straineth me needfully to do a thing, *Compels me of necessity*
- 4435 (Needly clepe I simple necessity)
 Or elsé if free choice be granted me
 To do that samè thing, or do it not,
 Though God forewot it ere that it was wrought *knew before / done*
 Or if his witting straineth never a deal, *knowing compels not*
- 4440 But by necessity conditional.
 I will not have to do of such mattér.¹
 My tale is of a cock, as you may hear,
 That took his counsel of his wife with sorrow *advice / unfortunately*
 To walken in the yard upon that morrow
- 4445 That he had mett that dream that I of told. *dreamt*
 Women's counsels be full often cold; *women's advice*
 Woman's counsel brought us first to woe,
 And made Adam out of Paradise to go,
 There as he was full merry, and well at ease.

But this is too abstruse

- 4450 But for I n'ot to whom it might displease, *because I know not*
 If I counsel of women wouldé blame,
 Pass over, for I said it in my game. *as a joke*
 Read authors, where they treat of such mattér,
 And what they say of woman you may hear.
- 4455 These be the cocké's wordés, and not mine;
 I can no harm of no woman divine.²

¹ 4441: The NP says that he will have nothing to do with such abstruse matters, although he has touched on them in such a way as to indicate that he knows a good deal about them, distinguishing, for example, between "simple necessity" and "necessity conditional," terms devised by Boethius in his philosophical argument.

² "I can discover no harm in women"; *divine* is a verb meaning something like "discover,"

Back from these abstractions to the story. Chanticleer suddenly sees the enemy.

	Fair in the sand, to bathe her merrily,	
	Lies Pertelote, and all her sisters by,	
	Against the sun, and Chanticleer so free	<i>In the sun</i>
4460	Sang merrier than the mermaid in the sea,	
	For Physiologus says sikerly,	<i>certainly</i>
	How that they singen well and merrily. ¹	
	And so befell that as he cast his eye	
	Among the wortes on a butterfly,	<i>cabbages, weeds</i>
4465	He was 'ware of this fox that lay full low.	
	Nothing ne list him then for to crow,	<i>Not at all inclined</i>
	But cried anon "Cock! cock!" and up he start,	
	As man that was affrayed in his heart.	<i>frightened</i>
	For naturally a beast desireth flee	
4470	From his contráry, if he may it see,	
	Though he ne'er erst had seen it with his eye.	<i>never before</i>

*The fox's smooth seduction tactic:
he praises the singing of Chanticleer and his father*

	This Chanticleer, when he gan him espy,	
	He would have fled, but that the fox anon	
	Said: "Gentle Sir, alas! what will you don?"	<i>do</i>
4475	Be you afraid of me that am your friend?	
	Now certès, I were worsè than any fiend,	<i>any devil</i>
	If I to you would harm or villainy.	<i>wished</i>
	I am not come your counsel for to spy	<i>y. secrets</i>

find"; but there might be wordplay on *divine*, an adjective coming after its noun, and meaning "religious woman," like the Prioress, his employer. The whole second half of the passage beginning *But for I n'ot* ... seems to be the Priest's scramble to undo the effect of his lapse into the common medieval preacher's anti feminist charge in the preceding lines.

¹ *Physiologus* is a bestiary, a book about Natural History giving information, much of it very fanciful, about animals. *Sikerly* is not a good word to describe the science displayed in bestiaries.

But truly the cause of my coming
 4480 Was only for to hearken how you sing,
 For truly you have as merry a steven. *voice*
 As any angel has that is in heaven;
 Therewith you have in music more feeling, *Besides*
 Than had Boece, or any that can sing.¹
 4485 My lord your father (God his soulè bless)
 And eke your mother of her gentleness
 Have in mine house y-been, to my great ease:²
 And certès, Sir, full fain would I you please.
 But for men speak of singing, I will say,³
 4490 So may I brooken well mine eyen tway, *as I hope to enjoy*
 Save you, ne heard I never man yet sing *Besides you*
 As did you father in the morwening. *morning*
 Certès it was of heart all that he sung.
 And for to make his voice the morè strong,
 4495 He would so pain him, that with both his eyen *take pains*
 He mustè wink, so loudè would he crien, *shut his eyes*
 And standen on his tiptoes therewithal, *as well*
 And stretchen forth his neckè long and small.
 And eke he was of such discretion,
 4500 That there was no man in no regiõn,
 That him in song or wisdom might surpass.
 I have well read in Daun Burnel the ass *(in the story of)*
 Among his verse, how that there was a cock,
 For that a priestè's son gave him a knock
 4505 Upon his leg, while he was young and nice, *and foolish*
 He made him for to lose his benefice.⁴ *parish*

¹ Boece is Boethius, the philosopher we have heard about already, who also had written on music. See also note to 4424-5 above.

² *your father ... ease*: The implication is that he has eaten both of them.

3

But for men speak ...: "But when it comes to talking about singing, I will say, (I swear by my eyes) that with the exception of yourself, I never heard a better singer than your father in the mornings."

⁴ In the story of Burnell the Ass, a satiric poem, one incident relates how a cock got his

But certain there is no comparison
 Betwixt the wisdom and discretïon
 Of your father, and of his subtlety.
 4510 Now singeth, Sir, for Saintè Charity,
 Let's see, can you your father counterfeit?" *copy*

The fox's flattery works, and he acts quickly

This Chanticleer his wings began to beat,
 As man that could his treason not espy,
 So was he ravished with his flattery.

4515 Alas! you lords, many a false flatterer
 Is in your court, and many a losenger, *liar*
 That pleasen you well morè, by my faith,
 Than he that soothfastness unto you saith. *truth*
 Readeth Ecclesiast of flattery, *a Book of Bible*
 4520 Beware, you lordès, of their treachery.¹

This Chanticleer stood high upon his toes
 Stretching his neck, and held his eyen close,
 And gan to crowen loudly, for the nonce, *occasion*
 And Daun Russel the fox starts up at once

4525 And by the gargat hentè Chanticleer, *by throat caught*
 And on his back toward the wood him bare, *carried*
 For yet ne was there no man that him sued. *followed him*

Exclamatio!

O destiny, that mayst not be eschewed! *avoided*
 Alas, that Chanticleer flew from the beams!

4530 Alas, his wife ne raughtè not of dreams! *cared not*
 And on a Friday fell all this mischance.

revenge on a man who was to be made priest and get a parish (benefice). The cock refused to crow on time, so the man failed to get to the ordination ceremony, and so lost the parish.

¹ In this passage and in the one just below beginning *Oh Destiny* the Nun's Priest comes through strongly as preacher rather than as storyteller.

- O Venus, that art goddess of pleasánce,
 Since that thy servant was this Chanticleer,
 And in thy service did all his powér,
 4535 More for delight, than world to multiply,
 Why wilt thou suffer him on thy day to die?¹ *allow him*
 O Gaufrid, dearè master sovereign,²
 That, when thy worthy king Richard was slain
 With shot, complainedest his death so sore,
 4540 Why n'ad I now thy sentence and thy lore *knowledge & learning*
 The Friday for to chiden, as did ye? *to rebuke*
 (For on a Friday soothly slain was he),
 Then would I show you how that I could 'plain *complain*
 For Chanticleer's dread, and for his pain.

Epic comparisons with Troy, Rome and Carthage

- 4545 Certès such cry, nor lamentation
 Was never of ladies made, when Ilion *by ladies / Troy*
 Was won, and Pyrrhus with his straightè sword *w. sword drawn*
 When he had hent king Priam by the beard, *seized*
 And slain him (as saith us Eneidos), *"The Aeneid" says*
 4550 As maden all the hennès in the close,
 When they had seen of Chanticleer the sight.³
 But sovereignly Dame Partelotè shrighet, *loudest / shrieked*

¹ *Oh Venus ...*: Friday is Venus's day, in Latin "Veneris dies," (in French: vendredi, Italian: venerdì). Venus is the goddess of sexual pleasure. Chanticleer, a devoted follower, makes love often and for sheer pleasure (*delight, pleasance*), not for offspring (*world to multiply*).

² *O Gaufrid...*: "O, Geoffrey, my dear and best master." The praise is, of course, ironic, like the rest of the passage. Gaufrid is Geoffrey de Vinsauf, author of a famous book of rhetoric in which he gave models for writings suitable for different occasions. In one of these he rebuked Friday for being the day on which King Richard the Lionheart was slain.

³ *Certes such cry ...*: The women of Troy never made as much lamentation at the fall of their city as did the hens when Chanticleer was seized! Another set of mocking comparisons between the barnyard and several notable occasions in history: the fall of Troy, including the slaughter of King Priam and many others as told in Virgil's *Aeneid*; the destruction of Carthage, and the burning of Rome. Earlier the deceitful fox was compared to the great traitors of history.

Full louder than did Hasdrubalè's wife,
 When that her husband had y-lost his life,
 4555 And that the Romans hadden burnt Cartháge,
 She was so full of torment and of rage,
 That wilfully into the fire she start,
 And burnt herselfè with a steadfast heart.

O woful hens! right so cryden ye,
 4560 As when that Nero burnèd the city
 Of Romè, cried the senatorès' wives
 For that their husbands losten all their lives;
 Withouten guilt this Nero has them slain.

Back to the barnyard. The widow and the neighbors give chase.

Now will I turn unto my tale again.
 4565 The sely widow, and her daughters two, *poor*
 Heard these hennès cry and maken woe,
 And out at doorès starten they anon,
 And saw the fox toward the grovè gone, *go*
 And bore upon his back the cock away;
 4570 And crièd out: "Harrow" and "Welaway!" *(cries of alarm)*
 Aha! the fox!" — and after him they ran,
 And eke with staves many another man; *sticks*
 Ran Coll our dog, and Talbot, and Garland, *(dogs' names)*
 And Malkin, with a distaff in her hand. *girl's name*
 4575 Ran cow and calf; and eke the very hogs
 So fearèd for the barking of the dogs,
 And shouting of the men and women eke, *also*
 They rannen so, them thought their heartès break. *would break*
 They yellèden as fiendès do in hell. *devils*
 4580 The ducks cried as if men would them quell, *kill*
 These geese for fearè flewèn o'er the trees,
 Out of the hive came the swarm of bees.
 So hideous was the noise, ah, ben'citee! *bless us!*
 Certès he Jack Straw and his menie,¹ *his mob*

¹ Jack Straw was a leader of the Peasant's Revolt (1381) in which a number of Flemings, craftsmen from Flanders, were murdered. This is one of Chaucer's very few political

4585 Ne made never shoutès half so shrill,
 When that they wouldè any Fleming kill,
 As thilkè day was made upon the fox.
 Of brass they broughten beams and of box, *trumpets / of boxwood*
 Of horn and bone, in which they blew and pouped *trumpeted*
 4590 And therewithal they shriekèd and they whooped,
 It seemèd as that heaven shouldè fall.

Now, goodè men, I pray you hearken all.
 Lo, how Fortúnè turneth suddenly
 The hope and pride eke of her enemy.

The cock's quick thinking secures a reversal of Fortune

4595 This cock that lay upon the fox's back,
 In all his dread, unto the fox he spak,
 And saidè: "Sir, if that I were as ye,
 Yet would I say, (as wise God helpè me):
 `Turneth again, you proudè churlès all. *wretches*
 4600 A very pestilence upon you fall.
 Now am I come unto the woodè's side,
 Maugre your head, the cock shall here abide. *In spite of you*
 I will him eat, in faith, and that anon."
 The fox answéred: "In faith, it shall be done."
 4605 And as he spoke that word, all suddenly
 The cock broke from his mouth delivery, *defily, quickly*
 And high upon a tree he flew anon.

Undaunted, the fox tries flattery again, unsuccessfully this time

And when the foxè saw that he was gone:
 "Alas!" quod he, "O Chanticleer, alas!
 4610 I have to you," quod he, "y-done trespáss,
 In as much as I made you afeared, *afraid*
 When I you hent and brought out of the yard. *seized*
 But, Sir, I did it of no wikke intent. *wicked*

Come down, and I shall tell you what I meant.
 4615 I shall say sooth to you, God help me so." *truth*
 "Nay then," quod he, "I shrew us bothè two. *blame*
 And first I shrew myself, both blood and bones,
 If thou beguile me oftener than once.
 Thou shalt no morè through thy flattery
 4620 Do me to sing and winken with mine eye. *Cause me*

The moral of the story, drawn by the protagonists

For he that winketh when that he should see,
 All wilfully, God let him never thee." *never prosper*
 "Nay," quod the fox, "but God give him mischance
 That is so indiscreet of governance, *has so little control*
 4625 That jangleth when that he should hold his peace." *chatters*

The moral drawn by the narrator

Lo, such it is for to be reckèless
 And negligent, and trust in flattery.
 But you that holden this tale a folly,
 As of a fox or of a cock and hen,
 4630 Taketh the morality, good men.
 For Saint Paul says that all that written is, *Romans 15:4*
 To our doctrine it is y-writ y-wis.¹
 Taketh the fruit, and let the chaff be still. *grain / alone*
 Now good God, if that it be thy will,
 4635 As saith my Lord, so make us all good men,
 And bring us thy highè bliss. Amen."

Here is ended the Nun's Priest's Tale

*The Host is delighted at the tale but no more respectful than before.
 He makes crude if approving jokes about the Priest's virility.*

¹ *To our ...*: "Everything that is written is written indeed for our instruction."

	"Sir Nunnè's Priest," our Hostè said anon,	
	"Y-blesséd be thy breech and every stone;	<i>thy sexual equipment?</i>
	This was a merry tale of Chanticleer.	
4640	But by my truth, if thou were secular,	<i>a layman</i>
	Thou wouldest be a treadè fowl aright.	<i>a real henrider</i>
	For if thou have couráge as thou hast might,	<i>sexual prowess</i>
	Thee were need of hennès, as I ween,	<i>You'd need, I think</i>
	Yea, more than seven timès seventeen.	
4645	See which brawnè hath this gentle priest	<i>See what muscle</i>
	So great a neck, and such a largè breast!	
	He looketh as a sparrowhawk with his eye.	
	Him needeth not his colour for to dye	
	With brasil, nor with grain of Portingale.	<i>Red dyes</i>
4650	Now, Sir, fair fall you for your tale."	<i>bless you for</i>