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 nunné with her haddê she
That was her chapelain, and priestês 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. What you have said, is right enough y-wis, And muchel more. For little heaviness

Is right enough to muchel folk, I guess.

I say for me, it is a great dis-ease, 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,

As when a man has been in poor estate, And climbeth up, and waxeth fortunate, And there abideth in prosperity.

Such thing is gladsome, as it thinketh me, And of such thing were goodly for to tell."
"Yea," quod our Host, "by Saintè Paulè's bell
You say right sooth; this monk he clappeth loud
He spoke how Fortune covered with a cloud
I n'ot never what, and also of tragedy
Right now you heard; and, pardee, no remedy

It is for to bewail, nor to complain
That that is done, and also 'tis a pain,
As you have said, to hear of heaviness.
Sir Monk, no more of this, so God you bless.
Your tale annoyeth all this company;

Such talking is not worth a butterfly,
For therein is there no desport nor game.
Wherefore, Sir Monk, Daun Piers by your name,
I pray you heartily, tell us somewhat else,
For sikerly, n'ere clinking of your bells,

That on your bridle hang on every side,
By heaven's king, that for us alle died,
I should ere this have fallen down for sleep,
Although the slough had never been so deep.
Then had your talè all been told in vain.

For certainly, as that these clerkès sayn,
Where as a man may have no audience,
Nought helpeth it to tellen his sentence.¹
And well I wot the substance is in me,
If anything shall well reported be.

Sir, say somewhat of hunting, I you pray."
"Nay," quod this Monk, "I have no lust to play.
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
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.(?)"
"Come near, thou Priest, come hither, thou Sir John,\(^1\)
Tell us such thing as may our heartès glad.
Be blithè, though thou ride upon a jade.
What though thine horse be bothè foul and lean
If he will serve thee, reckè not a bean.
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."
And right anon his tale he has attamed,
And thus he said unto us every one,
This sweeté priest, this goodly man, Sir John.

\(4000\)

"The Nun's Priest's Tale"

The contented life of a poor country widow

A poorè widow somedeal stape in age
Was whilom dwelling in a narrow cottage,
Beside a grovè, standing in a dale.
This widow, of which I tellè you my tale,
Since thilkè day that she was last a wife,
In patience led a full simple life,
For little was her chattel and her rent.
By husbandry of such as God her sent
She found herself, and eke her daughters two.
Three largè sowès had she, and no mo',
Three kine, and eke a sheep that hightè Mall.
Full sooty was her bower, and eke her hall,
In which she ate full many a slender meal.
Of poignant sauce her needed never a deal.
No dainty morsel passèd through her throat;
Her diet was accordant to her cote.

\(4015\)

\(4020\)

\(4025\)

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\(^1\) "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.
NUN’S PRIEST’S TALE

Repletion ne made her never sick; A temperate diet was all her physic, And exercise, and hearté’s suffisance.

The gouté let her nothing for to dance, No apoplexy shenté not her head. No wine ne drank she, neither white nor red. Her board was servéd most with white and black — Milk and brown bread — in which she found no lack.

Seynd bacon, and sometime an egg or tway; For she was as it were a manner dey.

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

A yard she had, encloséd all about With sticks, and a dry dich without, In which she had a cock hight Chanticleer, In all the land of crowing n’as his peer.

His voice was merrier than the merry organ, On massé days that in the churché gon. Well sikerer was his crowing in his lodge, Than is a clock, or any abbey orloge.

By nature he knew each ascensïon Of the equinoctial in thilké town;¹ For when degrees fifteen were ascended, Then crew he, that it might not be amended.

His comb was redder than the fine coral, And battled, as it were a castle wall. His bill was black, and as the jet it shone; Like azure were his leggés and his tone; His nails whiter than the lily flower, And like the burnéd gold was his colóúr.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.
This gentle cock had in his governance
Seven hens, for to do all his pleasânce,
Which were his sisters and his paramours,
And wonder like to him, as of coloûrs.
Of which the fairest-huéd on her throat,
Was clepéd fairè Damoiselle Pertelote.\footnote{Damoiselle should probably be pronounced "damsel".}
Courteous she was, discreet, and debonair,
And compaignable, and bore herself so fair,
Since thilk day that she was sevennights old
That truly she has the heart in hold
Of Chanticleer, lockèd in every lith.
He loved her so, that well was him therewith.
But such a joy it was to hear them sing,
When that the brighté sun began to spring,
In sweet accord, "My lief is fare in land."
For thilkè time, as I have understand
Beastès and birdès couldè speak and sing.

Chanticleer has a terrible dream

And so befell, that in a dawening
As Chanticleer among his wivès all
Sat on his perchè that was in the hall,
And next him sat this fairè Pertelote;
This Chanticleer gan groanen in his throat,
As man that in his dream is dretchèd sore
And when that Pertelote thus heard him roar,
She was aghast, and said: "O heartè dear,
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.
By God, me mett I was in such mischief
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
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 betwixt yellow and red;
And tippéd was his tail, and both his ears
With black, unlike the remnant of his hairs.
4095 His snouté small, with glowing eyen tway.
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
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 certés, what so any woman saith,
We all desiren, if it might be,
To havé husbands, hardy, wise, and free,
4105 And secret, and no niggard nor no fool,
Nor him that is aghast of every tool,
Nor no avaunter, by that God above.
How durst you say for shame unto your love
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 swevenës?
Nothing, God wot, but vanity in sweven is.
"Swevens engender of repletions,\(^1\)
And oft of fumes and of complexions

4115 When humours be too abundant in a wight.\(^2\)
   Certës this dream, which you have mett to-night,
   Comes of the greatë superfluity
   Of yourë reddë cholerë, pardee,
Which causeth folk to dreaden in their dreams

4120 Of arrows, and of fire with reddë lemes,
   Of reddë beastës, that they will them bite,
   Of conteke, and of whelpës great and lite;
   Right as the humour of melânholy \(^3\)
   Causeth full many a man in sleep to cry,

4125 For fear of blackë bears or bullës black
   Or else that blackë 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'?\(^5\)
Now, Sir," quod she, "when we fly from the beams,
For Godë'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 melânholy

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\(^{1}\) 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, purge yourself / delay
Though in this town is no apothecary, pharmacist
I shall myself to herbès teachen you, about herbs
4140 That shall be for your health, and for your prow;
profit,
And in our yard those herbès shall I find,
natural properties
The which have of their property by kind
To purgen you beneath, and eke above.
Forget not this for Godé's owné love.

You be full choleric of complexïon.
Beware the sun in his ascension noonday sun
Ne find you not replete of humours hot, full of
And if it do, I dare well lay a groat, bet a dollar
That you shall have a fever tertïane,¹

4150 Or an ague that may be your bane.
ilness / death
A day or two you shall have digestives
Of wormès, ere you take your laxatives,
Of laureole, centaury, and fumetere,
medicinal herbs
Or else of hellebore that groweth there,
Of catapuce, or of gaitre-berries,
more herbs
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.
for goodness sake
Dreadeth no dream. I can say you no more."

Chanticleer’s justification of the value of dreams

4160 "Madame," quod he, "gramercy of your lore. thanks for advice
But natheless, as touching Daun Catoun.
Cato
That has of wisdom such a great renown,
Though that he bade no dreamès for to dread,
By God, men may in olden bookés read,

4165 Of many a man, more of authority
so may I thrive
Than ever Cato was, so may I thee,
opinion
That all the reverse say of this senténce,
And have well founden by experience,
That dreames be significations

¹ fever tertiane: A fever that peaked every third day, or every other day by our reckoning.
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 proof showeth it indeed.
One of the greatest authors that men read,

Says thus: that whilom two fellows went
On pilgrimage in a full good intent;
And happened so, they came into a town,
Where as there was such congregatiōn
Of people, and eke so strait of herbergage,

That they ne found as much as one cottāge,
In which they might both y-lodgēd be.
Wherefore they mustē—of necessity,
As for that night—departēn company;
And each of them goes to his hostelry,

And took his lodging as it wouldē fall.
That one of them was lodgēd in a stall,
Far in a yard, with oxen of the plough;
That other man was lodgēd well enow,
As was his āventure, or his fortūne

That us govérneth all, as in commune.
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,
And said: `Alas! for in an ox's stall

This night shall I be murdered, where I lie,
Now help me, dearē brother, or I die;
In allē hastē come to me,' he said.
This man out of his sleep for fear afraid,
But when that he was wakened of his sleep,

He turnēd him, and took of this no keep;
Him thought his dream was but a vanity.
Thus twicē in his sleeping dreamēd he.
And at the thirdē time yet his fellow
Came, as him thought, and said, `I am now slaw.
Behold my bloody woundes, deep and wide. 
Arise up early, in the morning
And at the west gate of the town,' quod he,
`A cart full of dung there shalt thou see,
In which my body is hid full privily.

Do thilké cart arresten boldély.¹
My goldé causéd my murder, sooth to sayn.'
And told him every point how he was slain
With a full piteous facé, pale of hue.
And trusteth well, his dream he found full true;

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.

The hosteler answéréd him anon,
And saidé: `Sir, your fellow is agone;
As soon as day he went out of the town.'
This man gan fallen in suspicïón,
Remembering on his dreamés that he mett,
And forth he goes, no longer would he let,

Unto the west gate of the town, and found
A dung cart — as it were to dung the land —
That was arrayéd in that samé wise
As you have heard the deadé man devise.
And with a hardy heart he gan to cry

Vengeance and justice of this felony:
`My fellow murdered is this samé night,
And in this cart he lies, gaping upright.
I cry out on the ministers,' quod he,
`That shouldé keep and rulen this city.
Harow! Alas! here lies my fellow slain.'
What should I more unto this talé sayn?
The people out start, and cast the cart to ground,
And in the middle of the dung they found
The deadé man, that murdered was all new.

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. \(\text{revealest}\)
Murder will out, that see we day by day.
Murder is so watsom and abominable \(\text{nasty}\)
To God, that is so just and reasonable,

4245 That he ne will not suffer it helèd be. \(\text{allow to be hid}\)
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,

4250 And eke the hosteler so sore engíned, \(\text{tortured}\)
That they beknew their wickedness anon,
And were a-hangèd by the neckè bone.

Another anecdote about dreams

Here may men see that dreamès be to dread. \(\text{to be feared}\)
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'èr 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. \(\text{near the harbor}\)
But on a day, against the eventide, \(\text{towards evening}\)
The wind gan change, and blew right as them lest. \(\text{as they wanted}\)
Jolly and glad they went unto their rest,

4265 And casten them full early for to sail. \(\text{planned}\)
But to that one man fell a great marvail. \(\text{marvel}\)

\(^1\) *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 bedde'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.
go, travel
His fellow, that lay by his bedde's side,
Gan for to laugh, and scornèd him full fast.
dreamt
`No dream,' quod he, `may so my heart aghast,
That I will letten for to do my things.
terrify

4280 I settè not a straw by thy dreamings,
dreams / nonsense
For swevens be but vanities and japes.
every day
Men dream all day of owlès and of apes,
fantastic things
And eke of many a mazè therewithal;

4285 But since I see that thou wilt here abide,
deliberately waste time
And thus forslothen wilfully thy tide,

  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, faire Pertelote so dear,
learn
By such examples old yet mayst thou lere
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
Lo, in the life of Saint Kenélm I read,
That was Kenulphus' son, the noble king
Of Mercenrike, how Kénelm mett a thing. ¹
A little ere he were murdered on a day,
His murder in his visïon he say.

His nurse to him expounded every deal
His sweven, and bade him for to keep him well
From treason. But he n'as but seven years old,
And therefore little talè has he told
Of any dream, so holy was his heart.

By God, I haddè lever than my shirt,
That you had read his legend, as have I.
Dame Pertelote, I say you truly,
Macrobius, that wrote the vision
In Afric' of the worthy Scipion,²

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, ³
If he held dreams of any vanity.

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."
### NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

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

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<th>Line</th>
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<td>4325</td>
<td>Whether they ne felté no effect in dreams.</td>
<td><em>Gen 37 to 41 realms</em></td>
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<td>4330</td>
<td>Which signified he should a-hangéd be?</td>
<td><em>dreamt</em></td>
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<td>4335</td>
<td>If thilké day he went into battail.</td>
<td><em>battle</em></td>
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<td>4340</td>
<td>And eke it is nigh day, I may not dwell.</td>
<td><em>near day / go on</em></td>
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<td>4345</td>
<td>For they be venomous, I wot it well.</td>
<td><em>killed by A.</em></td>
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<td>4350</td>
<td>Now let us speak of mirth, and stint all this.</td>
<td><em>and stop</em></td>
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<td>4355</td>
<td>Madame Pertelote, so have I bliss,</td>
<td><em>love them never a deal.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4360</td>
<td>For when I see the beauty of your face,</td>
<td><em>eyes</em></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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1. *In principio* are the first words of St. John's gospel: *In the beginning was the word...*
(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!
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,
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,
And trod her eke as oft ere it was prime.
He looketh as it were a grim lion;
And on his toes he roameth up and down,
Him deignèd not to set his feet to ground.
He chucketh, when he has a corn y-found,
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,
Leave I this Chanticleer in his pastūre;
And after will I tell his aventure. 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
Since March be gone, thirty days and two, ended / i.e. on May 3

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 wivés walking by his side
Cast up his eyen to the brighte sun,
That in the sign of Taurus had y-run

Twenty degrees and one, and somewhat more
He knew by kind, and by none other lore,
That it was prime, and crew with blissful steven:
"The sun," he said, "is clomben up on heaven
Forty degrees and one, and more y-wis.

Madámé Pertelote, my worldé's bliss,
Hearkeneth these blissful birdès — how they sing!
And see the freshé flowers — how they spring!
Full is mine heart of revel, and soláce."

But ...

But suddenly him fell a sorrowful case,
For ever the latter end of joy is woe.
God wot that worldly joy is soon ago,
And if a rhetor couldé fair endite,
He in a chronicle safely might it write,
As for a sovereign notability.

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 senténce.

A crafty but wicked creature has stolen into this Paradise

A coal fox, full of sly iniquity,
That in the grove had wonèd yearès three,
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 same night throughout the hedges brast
Into the yard where Chanticleer the fair
Was wont, and eke his wivës, to repair;
And in a bed of wortës still he lay,
Till it was passèd undern of the day,
Waiting his time on Chanticleer to fall,
As gladly do these homicidës all,
That in awaitë 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!

O Chanticleer! accursed be that morrow
That thou into that yard flew from the beams.
Thou wert full well y-warnëd by thy dreams,
That thilkë day was perilous to thee.

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

But what that God forewot must needës be,
After the opinion of certain clerkës.
Witness on him that any perfect clerk is,
That in school is great altercatïon

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.
1 NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

In this matter, and great disputation,
And has been of an hundred thousand men.

4430 But I ne cannot bolt it to the bren,
As can the holy doctor Augustine,
Or Boece, or the bishop Bradwardine,
Whether that God's worthy forewitting
Straineth me needfully to do a thing,

(Needly clepe I simple necessity)
Or elsé if free choice be granted me
To do that samé thing, or do it not,
Though God forewot it ere that it was wrought
Or if his witting straineth never a deal,

4440 But by necessity conditional.
I will not have to do of such matter. ¹
My tale is of a cock, as you may hear,
That took his counsel of his wife with sorrow
To walken in the yard upon that morrow

4445 That he had mett that dream that I of told.
Women's counsels be full often cold;
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,
If I counsel of women wouldé blame,
Pass over, for I said it in my game.
Read authors, where they treat of such matter,
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
Sang merrier than the mermaid in the sea,
For Physiologus says sikerly,
How that they singen well and merrily.¹
And so befell that as he cast his eye
Among the wortes on a butterfly,
He was 'ware of this fox that lay full low.
Nothing ne list him then for to crow,
But cried anon "Cock! cock!" and up he start,
As man that was affrayèd in his heart.
For naturally a beast desireth flee
From his contráry, if he may it see,
Though he ne'er erst had seen it with his eye.

The fo x'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? do
Be you afraid of me that am your friend?
Now certés, I were worsé than any fiend,
If I to you would harm or villainy.
I am not come your counsel for to spy

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
Was only for to hearken how you sing,
For truly you have as merry a steven.
As any angel has that is in heaven;
Therewith you have in music more feeling,
Than had Boece, or any that can sing.\(^1\)

My lord your father (God his soule bless)
And eke your mother of her gentleness
Have in mine house y-been, to my great ease:\(^2\)
And certê, Sir, full fain would I you please.
But for men speak of singing, I will say, \(^3\)

So may I brooken well mine eyen tway,
Save you, ne heard I never man yet sing
As did you father in the morwening.
Certês it was of heart all that he sung.
And for to make his voice the morê strong,
He would so pain him, that with both his eyen
He mustê wink, so loudê would he crien,
And standen on his tiptoes therewithal,
And stretchen forth his neckê long and small.
And eke he was of such discretion,

That there was no man in no region,
That him in song or wisdom might surpass.

I have well read in Daun Burnel the ass
Among his verse, how that there was a cock,
For that a priestê's son gave him a knock

Upon his leg, while he was young and nice,
He made him for to lose his benefice.\(^4\)

---

\(^1\) 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 discretion
Of your father, and of his subtlety.

4510 Now singeth, Sir, for Sainté 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,
That pleasen you well moré, by my faith,
Than he that soothfastness unto you saith.
Readeth Ecclesiast of flattery,

4520 Beware, you lوردé, 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,
And Daun Russel the fox starts up at once

4525 And by the gargat henté Chanticleer,
And on his back toward the wood him bare,
For yet ne was there no man that him sued.

Exclamatio!

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

4530 Alas, his wife ne raughté not of dreams!
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 pleasânce,
Since that thy servant was this Chanticleer,
And in thy service did all his powér,

More for delight, than world to multiply,
Why wilt thou suffer him on thy day to die?^
O Gaufrid, deare master sovereign;^2
That, when thy worthy king Richard was slain
With shot, complainedest his death so sore,

Why n'ad I now thy sentence and thy lore
The Friday for to chiden, as did ye?
(For on a Friday soothly slain was he),
Then would I show you how that I could 'plain
For Chanticleer's dread, and for his pain.

Epic comparisons with Troy, Rome and Carthage

Certês such cry, nor lamentatiôn
Was never of ladies made, when Ilion
Was won, and Pyrrhus with his straighté sword
When he had hent king Priam by the beard,
And slain him (as saith us Eneidos),

As maden all the hennès in the close,
When they had seen of Chanticleer the sight.^

But sovereignly Dame Parteloté shright,

---

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 Hasdrubal’s wife,
When that her husband had y-lost his life,
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 herselfe with a steadfast heart.
O woful hens! right so cryden ye,
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 chace.

Now will I turn unto my tale again.
The sely widow, and her daughters two,
Heard these hennès cry and maken woe,
And out at doorés starten they anon,
And saw the fox toward the grové gone,
And bore upon his back the cock away;
And criéd out: "Harrow" and "Welaway!
Aha! the fox!" — and after him they ran,
And eke with staves many another man;
Ran Coll our dog, and Talbot, and Garland,
And Malkin, with a distaff in her hand.
Ran cow and calf; and eke the very hogs
So fearéd for the barking of the dogs,
And shouting of the men and women eke,
They rannen so, them thought their heartès break.
They yelléden as fiendés do in hell.
The ducks cried as if men would them quell,
These geese for fearé flewen o'er the trees,
Out of the hive came the swarm of bees.
So hideous was the noise, ah, ben'citee!
Certès he Jack Straw and his menie,¹

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
NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

Ne made never shoutés half so shrill,  
When that they wouldé any Fleming kill,  
As thilké 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  
And therewithal they shriekéd and they whooped,  
It seeméd as that heaven shouldé fall.

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

The cock's quick thinking secures a reversal of Fortune

This cock that lay upon the fox's back,  
In all his dread, unto the fox he spak,  
And saidé: "Sir, if that I were as ye,  
Yet would I say, (as wise God helpé me):  
`Turneth again, you proudé churlés all.  
wretches  
A very pestilence upon you fall.  
Now am I come unto the woodé'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."

And as he spoke that word, all suddenly  
The cock broke from his mouth delivery,  
defitly, quickly  
And high upon a tree he flew anon.

Undaunted, the fox tries flattery again, unsuccessfully this time

And when the foxé saw that he was gone:  
"Alas!" quod he, "O Chanticleer, alas!  
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

references.
Come down, and I shall tell you what I meant.

4615 I shall say sooth to you, God help me so."
        "Nay then," quod he, "I shrew us bothè two.
        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 wiken with mine eye.

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."
"Nay," quod the fox, "but God give him mischance
That is so indiscreet of governance,
4625 That jangleth when that he should hold his peace."  

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,
To our doctrine it is y-writ y-wis.¹
Taketh the fruit, and let the chaff be still.
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 Nunnë's Priest," our Hostë said anon,
"Y-blesséd be thy breech and every stone;
This was a merry tale of Chanticleer.

But by my truth, if thou were secular,
Thou wouldest be a treadé fowl aright.
For if thou have couráge as thou hast might,
Thee were need of hennés, as I ween,
Yea, more than seven timës seventeen.

See which brawnë hath this gentle priest
So great a neck, and such a largé breast!
He looketh as a sparrowhawk with his eye.
Him needeth not his colour for to dye
With brasil, nor with grain of Portingale.

Now, Sir, fair fall you for your tale."

thy sexual equipment?
a layman
a real henrider
sexual prowess
You'd need, I think
See what muscle
Red dyes
bless you for