

## Aspects of comedy: Text overview – *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

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What follows is an explanation of some of the ways this text can be considered in relation to the genre of comedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of comedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. It is hoped this will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail.

### Overview

On a simple comedic level, *The Nun's Priest's Tale* operates as a beast fable (so popular in medieval literature and art), relaying the story of Chanticleer, the hubristic cockerel, who is beguiled and captured by Russell, the flattering fox, but who is ultimately saved by his own wit and cunning. However, Chaucer's tale is more complex in its range than a simple medieval bestiary since there are layers to the narrative and many different voices which contribute to the overarching story and the comedy.

The comedic nature of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is set up in the narrative frame, when the host, tired of the solemn stories he has just heard, demands that the nun's priest "Telle us swich thing as may oure hertes glade". The nun's priest knows that if he does not tell a merry story he will be castigated so he duly obliges with a jolly tale by deliberately counterpointing the tragic and sombre story delivered by the monk, whom the nun's priest subtly mocks, with his own tale of farmyard chaos. At the end of the nun's priest's tale, the host shows his delighted appreciation: "Iblissed be thy breche, and every stoon!/This was a murye tale of Chauntecleer". Although Chaucer suggests that the host does not fully comprehend the tale's satirical nature or didactic purpose (which is another layer to the comedy), the host has enjoyed the fun of the nun's priest's tale and shows his approval, heightening the comedy with his bawdy riposte: "But, by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,/Thou woldest ben a tredefoul aright" needing more hens than "sevene times seventene".

### Comedy in terms of the wider narrative

Apart from the obvious mockery of the host immediately before and after the nun's priest's tale, there are other human targets for Chaucer's satire which are embedded in the tale's fabric. In order to tease these out, it is important to bear in mind the context of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. The poet is writing a much longer narrative poem, of which this is just a part, for performance to entertain his

courtly audience. *The Canterbury Tales* centres on twenty nine pilgrims, of various stations in society, who each tell their own stories while on a pilgrimage and who are listeners to the stories of others. Each storyteller is aware of his or her audience and the storytellers often stab, directly or otherwise, at other pilgrims. The opportunities for comedy are therefore rich and the nun's priest is used for this purpose.

## Parody and satire of the Church and the Prioress

At the opening of his tale, it could be argued that the nun's priest subtly mocks his employer. The description of the poor widow who leads "a ful simple lif", who works hard, drinks no wine and eats no "deintee morsel", seems to directly expose the Prioress, who is described earlier in the general prologue, who despite her religious role and apparent 'simple life', indulges in rich food and alcohol and adopts all the manners of an indolent courtly lady. Likewise, it could be argued that Pertelote is intended to parody the Prioress – a superior hen who lords it over a stable of other women and one rooster and gives free reign to her desires – thus also satirising church corruption and materialism.

## Debunking of scholastic teaching

Chauntecleer's lengthy digression on the value of dreams and the way in which they reveal much truth could be seen as Chaucer's way of parodying scholastic teaching. Chauntecleer is pompous, full of self-importance. He comically and unconsciously inflates the subject by listing an array of biblical, mythical and academic sources from "Andromacha, Ectores wif" to Macrobeus and the King of Egypt. However, his rhetoric is immediately deflated by his conclusion when he rounds on Pertelote (who had earlier suggested he takes laxatives as a cure for his dreams) by very humanly refusing them because they are "venimes" and he loves them "never a del!". The comic deflation is intensified when he then says that his sexual desire for her makes him forget his fear of dreams. Here we are reminded that he is a rooster, and the scholarly value in his words is undermined. The fact that his sexual desires lead him to "deffye bothe swevene and dreem" paints him as a figure of fun: for all his academic bluster and claims to knowledge, he undercuts his own argument by lusting after his wife.

## Ridiculing rhetoric

Through the tale of animals and birds, rhetoric itself is also lampooned. Both the fox and Chauntecleer use persuasive rhetoric in order to beguile the other, the fox in his capture of Chauntecleer and the cockerel in his release. Russell tells Chauntecleer that his song has "in musik moore feelinge/ Than hadde Boece, or any that kan singe" and Chauntecleer in mock praise of the fox says that if he were him he would celebrate his cockerel prize by boasting to his pursuers, telling them to give up the chase: "'Turneth again, ye proude cherles alle!/ A verray pestilence upon yow falle!'" Such elevated rhetorical language placed in the mouths of animals immediately suggests Chaucer is parodying it. Moreover,

the fact that in both cases it is a means of deception suggests that no matter how impressive it sounds, it is to an extent, untrustworthy.

## Mockery of the genres of tragedy and courtly romance

Following on from *The Monk's Tale*, which provides a series of tragic vignettes in the de casibus tradition (where great figures tragically fall when "Fortune turneth sodeinly"), *The Nun's Priest's Tale* counters and mocks this genre as melodramatic and ridiculous. Chauntecleer's fate, when he is captured by the fox, is recounted with mock tragic despair: "O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed! Allas, that Chauntecler fleigh fro the bemes!" The moment is hyperbolised and lifted to tragic proportions when the nun's priest compares it to "whan thy worthy king Richard was slain" and the wailing of his hens is likened to the cries made by the women of Troy or the senators' wives when Nero burned the city. Such melodramatic comparisons undercut the seriousness of the hero's predicament and the tragic genre itself is mocked through the constant reminders that we are dealing with animals and not humans. Thus the sense of tragic crisis on which the primary narrative is built is utterly deflated. So, instead of empathising with and focusing on the victim, Chaucer invites us to laugh at writers who use rhetorical devices to recount tragic experience.

In the tale, Chaucer also mocks the popular genre of courtly love, a style he has himself used in *The Knight's Tale*. In *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, he parodies the idea of love in the description of Pertelote who has loved Chauntecleer since she was "seven night oold" and Chauntecleer, who reciprocates that love. Their happiness is so complete that every morning they sing "in swete acord" a medieval love song: "My leef is faren in londe" Chauntecleer is also given regal descriptions and is compared to Lancelot. Moreover, this parodying is accentuated not merely by the fact that this is a rooster and hen, but also the manner in which the romantic ideal is swiftly debased when, after Chauntecleer's fearful dream of his being caught by a fox, Pertelote attacks him for his cowardice "fy on yow, hertelees! ...Now han ye lost min herte and al my love!".

## Satirising men, women and marriage

A key aspect of comedy is the mockery of gender. Men and women and the relationships between them are the butt of comedy in this tale just as they are in comedic drama. Perhaps as a jibe against *The Wife of Bath's* feminist discourse, the narrative repeatedly mocks women, offering several anti-feminist statements and jokes at their expense. Despite her presentation as an ideal of courtly love (Pertelote is described as "curteis ... discreet, and debonaire"), she is also a representation of a nagging wife who attacks her husband's masculinity, asking "Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" in order to get what she desires. She bullies him into ignoring his dreams and insists he "taak som laxatif!" "To purge yow binethe and eek above." She thus assumes the role of a shrewish spouse whilst Chauntecleer, for all his strutting, becomes little more than a hen-pecked husband gulled into forgetting his foreboding dream in favour of sexual gratification.

Moreover, at least part of the blame for Chauntecleer's near downfall is placed upon his wife. The nun's priest (perhaps expressing his own resentment at being under the control of women, but never able to satisfy his sexual desires with them), claims "Wommens conseils ben ful ofte colde;/ Wommanes conseil broghte us first to wo,". Although he later retracts this in claiming, "Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat mine," nonetheless, in its subtle dig against the female participants of the pilgrimage, its mocking nature generates an element of humour.

## The comedy of animals adopting human behaviour

The shift in form, style and focus from the realistic opening description of the "narwe cotage...standing in a dale." to the presentation of the barnyard scene where the noble Chauntecleer lauds himself over his harem of hens, creates an explosion of comedy. Moreover, the way in which the creatures are humanised and given voices and behaviours in keeping with the "beast fable" tradition is comedic. However, perhaps the most potent source of comedy lies in the fact that Chaucer uses animals to continually mock human behaviour, from Chauntecleer's hubris (he struts like a lord amongst his concubines "in al his pride,"), to the sexual dynamics between Pertelote and her husband. Chauntecleer's susceptibility to the flattery of the fox shows human behaviour at its most ridiculous. He is so "ravisshed with his flaterye," (a humorous verb that implies he gains almost sexual pleasure from the fox's compliments) that he succumbs to the fox's suggestion. There is perhaps a sense of schadenfreude at the downfall of this figure as he is taken at the height of his arrogance just at the moment he "gan to crowe loude".

Russell, the fox could be read as a stock comic villain. He assumes the role of the trickster whose nefarious deeds place the protagonist of this comic story in danger. He is hyperbolically compared to "homicides alle/ That in await ligen to mordre men" and even given the appellation "newe Scariot". He is ridiculously inflated to sinister betrayer despite the fact he is lying only "in a bed of wortes". Russell's manipulation of Chauntecleer is a source of comedy in itself when he informs Chauntecleer that both his parents "Han in min hous yben, to me greet ese", suggesting that he has eaten them both. The fact that Chauntecleer fails to recognise the truth of this statement, and indeed takes it as further flattery, creates further humour and shows the seemingly superior intelligence and wit of this wily creature. However, the villain is ultimately defeated and hoisted by his own petard. By the end of the tale Chaucer inverts the traditional clever fox fable and the fox loses his meal. There is pleasure to be had at his downfall and a moral lesson for all: "God yeve him meschaunce/ That is so undiscreet of governaunce/ That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees!".

## The use of farce and the comedic interplay of humans and animals

When Chauntecleer is captured by the fox, Chaucer creates a farcical scene of wild comedy. As Russell runs off with Chauntecleer there is a manic chase through the woods not merely by the widow but also by “many another man”, virtually the entire farmyard and even ducks, geese and a swarm of bees, all making a “hidous” noise. The ludicrous portrayal of such a motley assortment of men and beasts careering through the undergrowth screaming with staves “as fendes doon in helle;” is humorous given the minor source of their uprising. Furthermore, in comparing their behaviour to “Jakke Straw and his meinee” (a reference to the 1381 *Peasants’ Revolt*), Chaucer is effectively mocking the lower classes and their disordered, rebellious behaviour.

## The comedic conclusion

The ending of the narrative in which Chauntecleer, the hero, survives a near death encounter, with the villain defeated, and the cock presumably restored to both the widow and his wives, is in keeping with the happy resolution we expect from a comedic tale. This is then substantiated by the speaker’s light-hearted final moralising, where he insists the listeners “Taketh the fruit, and lat the chaf be stille.” (comically therefore dismissing elements of his own narrative). He then delivers a positive moral in keeping with a comedic tale before we are returned to the jovial voice of the host, creating a satisfying circular structure and a sense of resolution commensurate with the comedic genre.