The Nun's Priest's Tale

The *Nun's Priest's Tale:* Entertainment versus Education

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An essay chapter from *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales* (September 2017)

Introduction

The tension between entertainment and education is established from the outset of the *Canterbury Tales* in the terms of the storytelling contest, which awards the prize to the teller of tales who best mixes learning [*sentence*] with pleasure [*solaas*] (GP 798). Yet, this seems like an impossible task when we are warned not to take seriously the saucy tale of the drunken Miller (MilP 3186). Instead, Chaucer challenges us to choose our tales wisely, selecting those that address "gentillesse," "moralitee" and "hoolynesse" (3179-80), if we want to learn something valuable. Within these guidelines, entertainment and education seem at odds, suggesting that learning cannot be playful. Later in the pilgrimage, however, the Knight and the Host put a stop to the *Monk's Tale* because it is too serious (NPP 2791). The Host, therefore, challenges the Nun's Priest to tell a story that makes "oure hertes glade" (2811), a tale that might strike some balance between the Monk's earnestness and the Miller's frivolousness.

The Nun's Priest responds appropriately with an animal fable, a genre designed to entertain *and* educate. Attributed to the Greek poet Aesop (circa 6th century BCE), these clever tales of speaking animals are accompanied by simple lessons. For example, the well known fable, "The City Mouse and the Country Mouse,"—in which a rural, self-sufficient mouse nearly perishes in his attempt to acquire the tasty, urban fare of the city mouse—ends with an uncomplicated moral: it is better to live in the security of poverty than in the worries of wealth. In contrast to the Monk's long-windedness, we might also assume that a fable would satisfy an appetite for brevity, providing a concise moral that readers can readily devour. Within the schools of Chaucer's day, Aesop was a canonical classroom author whose fables were put to a number of uses from grammatical analysis to writing instruction to allegorical interpretation. As the Greek Aesop was largely unknown to medieval schoolmasters, a twelfth-century Latin fable series known as the *elegiac Romulus* became the Aesop that students (like Chaucer) and their teachers paraphrased and expanded through extensive glosses that accumulated in manuscripts and early printed books. In contrast to its more recent legacy as a short tale with a digestible moral, the medieval fable was often associated with elaborate interpretation and suspicious fabrication. Medieval fabulists, such as Marie de France (circa 1155-1215) and Robert Henryson (circa 1425-1505), caution their readers against the lying deceptions of fables while at the same time emphasizing their capacity to entertain, a characteristic highlighted in the opening lines of the

prologue to the *elegiac Romulus (*my translation): "This present work ventures to be pleasurable and useful; serious things are more alluring when they are embellished with sport" (Busdraghi 1-2). Yet, when we mix this sentiment with the Host's pressure to present a "myrie" tale (NPP 2817) and the expandable possibilities of the classroom Aesop, we encounter a Chaucerian fable full of playful embellishments that do not seem to address any serious thing at all.

Tools

The absence of a clear moral has led generations of readers to place this tale squarely within the "entertainment" category, even inspiring Derek Pearsall to declare, "the fact that the tale has no point is the point of the tale" (12). While we might be attracted to such an easy way out, we should remember that the Nun's Priest does indeed provide at least three morals at the end of the tale: be vigilant (NPT 3430-33); don't talk too much (3434-35); and don't trust flatterers (3436-37). This multiplication of morals has caused other readers, such as Jill Mann, to suggest that this tale is not as Aesopic as we would assume (250-61). Anticipating resistant readers, like Mann and Pearsall, the Nun's Priest offers the following suggestion for interpretation:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralite, goode men.
For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (NPT 3438-43)

By invoking the agricultural process of separating the grain [*fruyt*] from the husks [*chaf*], the Nun's Priest offers what an Aesopic reader might expect: an identifiable and digestible moral. Yet, when we consider the fact that the tale itself (the "fruit") takes up only 175 lines (2882-907; 3157-86; 3252-324; 3331-37; 3375-402; 3405-35) and the accompanying dream debate and rhetorical digressions (the "chaff") take up 521 lines (2821-81; 2908-3156; 3187-251; 3325-30; 3338-74; 3403-4; 3436-46), we should question the Nun's Priest's encouragement for readers to consume the "fruit" like chickens. This lopsided ratio between the tale and its commentary might even lead us to Talbot Donaldson's conclusion: "the fruit of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is its chaff" (150). To interrogate the fruitfulness of the chaff and its entertainment and educational value, I offer the following three contexts as potential tools for analysis: "Thinking with Animals," "Farmyard Violence," and "Disputing Women."

Thinking with Animals

Fables are about animals and *not* about animals. Since they are the protagonists and their amusing actions and cautionary consequences are central to the meaning, fables seem to be obsessed with animals. Yet, the fable animals often do not act like animals at all—they speak like humans; they help their predators; and they even deny themselves food. Most importantly, the ultimate payoff of the fable, the moral, is designed to improve the lives of humans, not animals.

Yet, when the animals of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* are introduced, we are given an extraordinary amount of detail about their appearance and behavior. Chauntecleer, in particular, receives extensive attention, especially his physical features, which are described at such length as to match the legs, nails, and plumage of a Golden Spangled Hamburg (Boone 78-81). We can even visualize his movement and behavior as he struts throughout the farmyard, calling his hens with a cluck, searching out corn, and even feathering and copulating with his prize hen Pertelote (NPT 3174-78). In contrast to their limited descriptions in most fables, the Nun's Priest's portraits of animals are charmingly complete, which suggests an interest in animals as animals.

On the other hand, the relentless succession of examples of human error within the dream debates and rhetorical digressions make it easy to forget that we are in the animals' habitat. Both Chauntecleer and Pertelote neglect their avian natures as they engage in academic argument, citing textual authorities such as Macrobius (c. 399-422) to persuade each other about the significance of dreams and medical remedies. This focus on cautionary dreams also indicates that one of Chaucer's central sources was the twelfth-century French "beast epic" known as the *Roman de Renart*, which details the exploits of Reynard the fox and his attempts to outwit a wolf and other animals. In addition to including realistic descriptions of animals, the *Roman* also stages a vigorous dream debate, though the positions of the rooster and the hen are reversed (Mann 25-61). This promiscuous use of animals for human concerns should make us wonder whether they obtain value as animals within these literary traditions at all. Is their presence merely a captivating substitute for the conventional authorities who would regularly take sides in such debates?

Farmyard Violence

As enthralling as such avian shenanigans are, most fables end in violence, usually with a cautionary killing of an animal who makes a fatal mistake. While the interpretation of a fable's moral relies on the reader's ability to transfer a lesson of animal catastrophe to human life, one moment in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* asks us to transfer a lesson of human catastrophe to animal life. In this case, the human catastrophe was the killing of Flemish weavers during the 1381 Rising, a revolt led by John Ball, Wat Tyler, and Jack Straw in protest to King Richard II's collection of unpaid poll taxes. This event is directly compared to the mayhem in the farmyard caused by Chauntecleer's capture and seemingly imminent death, inciting the hens to shriek, the dogs to bark, and even the bees to swarm. In this unique instance of contemporary political reflection, the Nun's Priest exclaims,

So hydous was the noyse—a, benedicitee!—
Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
As thilke day was maad upon the fox (NPT 33939-7)

While this comparison accentuates the humorous melodrama of the scene, it also inserts a buzz-killing moment of seriousness, in which the apparent frivolousness of the fable is called into question. At least since 1331, when Edward III had supported efforts to improve the English cloth trade by importing Flemish weavers, immigrant Flemings had become an object of hatred

and fear. Envied and resented for their financial success, the Flemings were often relegated to ghettos and subject to violence, especially in the aftermath of the 1381 revolts, in which they quickly became scapegoats (Barker 265-66). By comparing the farm animal chase of Russell the fox to the xenophobic hunting of Flemings, the Nun's Priest reverses the direction of fable interpretation, obscuring clear distinctions between animal and human.

The blurring of this boundary compels us to question the seriousness of this historical reference. It is, on the one hand, amusing to imagine farm animals as English rebels, attempting to reclaim their champion, Chauntecleer, who seems to represent, illogically, their resistance against the crown's heavy taxation of the people. Given the earlier lament of the untimely death of King Richard I (1157-1199), however, the Nun's Priest reflects little hostility towards monarchical power (NPT 3347-52). Moreover, the reference to Jack Straw is far from sympathetic, even implying that the rebels acted like frenzied animals, which might suggest a critique of such fear mongering about the Flemish Other. On the other hand, we might consider David Wallace's somber observation: "It is the naturalized complacency of these lines that makes them so disturbing; their accommodating of targeted homicide within the familiar confines of classroom exercise or barnyard fable" (117). The notion that such a lighthearted tale of a rooster, a hen, and a fox could play host to xenophobic violence might challenge our very assumptions of the tale's capacity to entertain and to educate.

Disputing Women

If we restrict our focus to the tumultuous conflict between a fox and a rooster, we risk ignoring an earlier moral to the tale: "*Mulier est hominis confusio*" ["Woman is man's ruin"] (NPT 3164). This message is easy to miss, not only because it is superseded by the flattery moral later in the fable, but also because it appears in Latin and is mistranslated by Chauntecleer as "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis" (3166). While this kind of contrarian translation is evident in other Middle English lyrics, such as "Abuse of Women" (Salisbury), the apparent mismatch between the misogyny of the Latin and Chauntecleer's praise of women reflects the mismatch that has just taken place: an academic debate between a man and a woman.

Chauntecleer and Pertelote have just concluded an argument about the significance of dreams, using a particular form of debate called a "disputation" that was commonplace within medieval classrooms. After the twelfth century, disputation became the primary pedagogical strategy in the universities because of their emphasis on dialectic, the ancient method of establishing the "truth" through dialogue. This technique became an entertaining role-playing exercise, in which a schoolmaster would propose topics for debate, requiring one student to play the "opponent" and the other to play the "respondent." The disputation became so popular in the thirteenth century that it burst out of the universities into many areas of public life, manifesting itself in debates performed openly in the square and in literary genres such as the debate poem and prose dialogue (Novikoff 133-71). Yet, it is in these same venues that we witness the masculinized heritage of medieval disputation, which largely excluded women, either through direct disenfranchisement or through silent indifference. Women were not simply denied education in the universities—their exclusion is also demonstrated through the topics that men would dispute, which ranged from the superiority of theologians over canon lawyers to the sin of assaulting a woman publicly,

the lack of consent not being an issue (Karras 83-95). As Chauntecleer's Latin conclusion confirms, the content of disputation was often hostile to women.

It is remarkable, then, that this disputation about the significance of dreams is performed between a man and a woman. Chauntecleer appears to win the debate, or at least he thinks so, despite Pertelote's learned arguments about herbal remedies and dream interpretation (NPT 3151-6). Yet, he is persuaded by her "beautee" (3160) and her "softe syde" (3167) that he should ignore his fear about flying from the beams into the farmyard. Pertelote claims a short-lived victory until the fearsome fox appears, just as the dream had warned, prompting the Nun's Priest to insert his own antifeminist moral: "Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo" (3257). This is a closer translation to Chauntecleer's earlier Latin lesson, "*Mulier est hominis confusio*," but the Nun's Priest hastily qualifies his interjection in three ways: first, by suggesting that this comment was only said in "game" (3262); second, by urging his audience to consult written authorities (3263); and third, by claiming that "Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne; / I kan noon harm of no womman divyne" (3265-6). Despite the ambiguity of "womman divyne," which can be read in a number of different ways, the Nun's Priest attempts to distance himself from this critique of women, using tactics common in disputation, role-playing both sides of the issue and calling attention to its status as an academic "game." We may wonder, then, if this is a progressive attempt to include women within such intellectual debates or if it is an instance of medieval "mansplaining," male attempts to explain women to women. Nevertheless, the prominence of disputation suggests that the educational import of the tale can only be accessed through dialogue, as playful, high-handed, or contentious as it may be.

Text

The three "tools" above—"Thinking with Animals," "Farmyard Violence," and "Disputing Women"—are merely three contexts for analysis of the tension between entertainment and education within the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. They are starting points for more extended explorations of the *Tale*, which should connect with ongoing scholarly conversations related to animal studies, histories of violence, or feminist theory. The following is an extended reading of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* that incorporates elements of these "tools."

Among the many elements of the *Tale* I might discuss, I turn to the role of rhetoric, which was less a mode of persuasion than a dynamic set of guiding principles for the production of spoken and written discourse during the later Middle Ages. Rhetoric accompanied grammar and dialectic in the medieval trivium, the foundational curriculum for the schools and the gateway to the mathematical arts known as the quadrivium—astronomy, arithmetic, music, and geometry. Within the field of rhetoric, schoolmasters largely focused on three genres: the art of poetry, the art of letter-writing, and the art of preaching.

The primary author for teaching the art of poetry was Geoffrey of Vinsauf (circa 1200), whose *Poetria Nova* (*The New Poetics*) practiced what it preached, explaining poetic techniques through verse. It should be no surprise, then, that a common classroom genre, the fable, should play host to a common classroom author, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who is invoked directly by the Nun's Priest after Russell the fox snatches Chauntecleer and attempts to flee from the yard (NPT 3347-54). The calling out to "O Gaufred" (3347) is a poetic imitation of Geoffrey's *Apostrophe*

to Eleustria (England), which appears in the *Poetria Nova* as a model of the rhetorical technique of apostrophe, an imaginary address to an absent figure, often preceded by "O." Embedded within a series of apostrophes to destiny, Venus, and Chauntecleer's hens, the Nun's Priest apostrophizes the great apostrophizer, "Gaufred," and, once again, calls attention to the educational import of his tale. This time, however, the learning to be had is not just moral. It is rhetorical.

I want to suggest that this tale—what Rita Copeland aptly calls "an almost impossible experiment in amplification" (138)—produces an open-ended commentary, composed of various rhetorical practices, that ultimately displaces the fable itself. Fables, after all, were primarily utilized in medieval classrooms for reading and writing instruction. Students and teachers would insert interlinear glosses, usually Latin synonyms, to challenge their expanding vocabulary and then rewrite these fables, both in abbreviated and elaborated forms. Most crucially, though, students and teachers appended extensive commentaries to fables in their manuscripts, which regularly occupied more space on the page then the fables themselves. Such an emphasis on textual amplification was exemplified by the well known "Crow and the Water Jar" fable, in which a crow would drop pebbles in a jar to make the water rise and enable the crow to drink. In teaching amplification as a rhetorical technique for expanding a short passage, Geoffrey of Vinsauf encourages his students to pile up words and phrases like this crow (my translation): "And so, from a little water, much water arises" (283). By dropping numerous literary genres—from romance to exemplum to proverb—like pebbles into the tale, the Nun's Priest saturates the fable with commentary that bears the fruit of more commentary. According to Peter Travis, this rhetorical amplification "raises the genre of the Aesopic beast fable to the nth power" (52), parodies classroom exercises (54-74), and ultimately becomes Chaucer's "personal *ars poetica*" (117). The generative power of the fable is so great that it endangers the centrality of the fable itself.

This displacement of the fable also shifts attention to the practice of interpretation, typically understood to be "allegoresis" or the decryption of a fable's message by identifying what the animals' actions represent; these representations range from simple moral lessons to revelations about human nature to biblical characters and events. We witness the Nun's Priest struggling with the allegorical meaning of the fox's arrival, which seems to point to the conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freewill, a complicated theological issue that he finally admits he "ne kan nat bulte it to the bren" (NPT 3240) or cannot separate the kernels from the bran, a variation of the fruit and chaff motif. While this admission of failure immediately leads to his contradictory statements about the advice of women (3256-66), it subsequently opens up the field of interpretation and the possibilities for further amplification, which imitates the classroom practices of Aesopic interpretation. As Edward Wheatley points out, "any fable could be interpreted according to any allegorical form, at the whim of the reader, or perhaps at the behest of the teacher" (91). The interpretive flexibility of the fable led to classroom manuscripts with overwhelming amounts of commentary—the only limit was the room on the page.

Such unmoderated amplification, of course, could lead to states of confusion, which seem to undermine the fable's educational value. When the Nun's Priest encourages his audience to "Taketh the moralite, goode men" (NPT 3440), we may ask: is this an attempt to simplify or amplify the moral? On the one hand, taking the "fruit" may limit our attention to the warning

against flattery. On the other, "taking the moral" may be a transfer of interpretive control to his audience, encouraging them to amplify it further. If it is the latter, then Saint Paul's claim, that "al that writen is, / To oure doctrine it is ywrite" (3441-42), assumes rhetorical power—all writing, not just that of classroom authors, is potentially educational. While such a reading seems to flatten interpretive authority, it also highlights the error-ridden and perplexing process of writing and knowledge acquisition. Even Chauntecleer's mistranslation of "*confusio*" (3164) leads to amplification by the Nun's Priest, as confused as his elaboration turns out to be. According to Christopher Cannon, "If the tale's largest point is that words are just as capable of resolving confusion as of producing it . . . error is the inevitable and necessary predicate to accuracy since success in the employment of language often involves an all-too-deep exploration of confusion" (359). The *Nun's Priest's Tale*, then, obtains an almost endless educational value that will be continually determined by its readers, who are encouraged to embrace confusion, engage in rhetorical play, and amplify the "moralitee" at will.

If we place rhetoric at the center of this tale, as discussed in the "Tools" section, we are compelled to reexamine the role and significance of animals, violence, and women. On the one hand, we could consider their presence as rhetorical devices in the service of some larger argument, perhaps to emphasize distinctions between humans and animals, natives and foreigners, or men and women. On the other hand, we could see rhetoric as an available means of power for any commentator, who could be Chaucer, Pertelote, Jack Straw, or future readers. As a mode of entertainment and education, rhetoric can be understood either as the chaff that contains, decorates, and preserves the fruit or as the endless producer of chaff, which may accumulate and threaten to exceed the value of the fruit itself. We are left, then, with the following questions: does this tale challenge us to remove the chaff and get past the rhetoric? Or should we embrace the chaff and consider its presence as accumulative and beneficial to the *Tale*'s meaning? Is it even possible to separate the fruit from the chaff at all?

Transformation

Questions:

1. What is the moral of the *Tale*? Is it about the dangers of flattery, recklessness, or talking too much? Or is it a misogynistic warning against women's advice? Is it all of these? Or is it something else?
2. What is the genre of the *Tale*? Is it an animal fable? A beast epic? A disputation? All of these? Or something else?
3. Does this tale succeed in being both entertaining and educational? Or is it one more than the other? How does it compare in entertainment and educational value to other tales, especially those of the Miller and the Monk?
4. What is the role of animals in the *Tale*? Are they valued as animals? Or are they merely "used" as allegorical figures for human concerns? What do they reveal about the boundaries between humans and animals?
5. How should we interpret the historical reference (NPT 3393-97) to the 1381 Rising and the killing of the Flemings? Is this a serious political statement? If so, how is it directed? If not, how does it function in the tale?

6. How does the dream debate affect our understanding of the *Tale*? Who wins the disputation? What is the relationship between the debate and the fable?
7. What is the role of rhetoric in this tale? If the *Tale* is what Copeland calls an "experiment in amplification," what are the results?

Projects:

1. *Aesop in the Medieval Classroom*. Select one of the fables listed on Laura Gibbs' *Aesopica* site (http://www.mythfolklore.net/aesopica/oxford/) and try out one of the following medieval classroom practices:
    1. *Amplification*: Amplify the fable or the fable's moral, introducing additional plot elements or elaborations on the moral.
    2. *Abbreviation*: Abbreviate the fable, eliminating any elements unnecessary for the plot or moral.
    3. *Allegoresis*: Expand/Revise the moral, suggesting possible allegorical meanings for the fable, which could range from representations of human nature to political commentary.
2. *Create Your Own Commentary*. Select passages from the tale that interest you and upload them to an online annotation platform (for example, Genius [http://genius.com]). Add comments to your passage, selecting particular words and phrases that provoke you in some way. Share your commentary with your classmates and invite them to add their own comments, creating a collaborative and expandable commentary on your text.
3. *Entertainment versus Education Visualization*. Create a visualization (for example, a graph) that illustrates the entertainment and educational value of (at least three of) the *Tales*. After creating your visualization, compare it with a visualization of one of your classmates and discuss the similarities and differences between your evaluations of the *Tales*. Based on these visualizations and the discussion, who would win the tale-telling contest?
4. *Chaucerian Animals*. Develop a chart that compares the representations of animals in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* with other *Canterbury Tales* (for example, the *Manciple's Tale*) and/or other Chaucerian works (for example, the *Parliament of Fowls*). How might we characterize the literary significance of Chaucer's animals?
5. *Research the Rising*. Conduct a web search on the 1381 Rising (also known as the Peasants' Revolt). Identify historical accounts/details that provide additional insight for Chaucer's allusion to the event. Next, identify recent events on news sites that address similar issues (for example, taxation, protest, xenophobia). Which connections do you see between these moments in history? Prepare a presentation that shares this historical perspective with your classmates.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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