THE 'MURIE TALE OF CHAUNTECLEER'

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The amusing tale of the vain cock and the deceitful fox is narrated by one of the 'Preestes thre' in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.

Chaucer gives us no further information about this character. The only thing we learn about him at this stage is that he is accompanying the Prioress on the pilgrimage to Canterbury. Yet he comes to life when the Host turns to "This sweete preest, this goodly man, Sir John" and urges him to narrate a merry tale that would cheer up the whole company of pilgrims.

The Host demands a light-hearted mood because the previous story-teller, the Monk, has been boring his audience with his seemingly interminable account of human tragedies. As a matter of fact, the courteous Knight interrupts him after his seventeenth tragedy and points out how distressing it is to hear of the downfall of men that once stood "in heigh degree". As the Monk's Tale is concerned with a one-sided view of the reversals of Fortune, it would certainly be more cheerful to hear about those of poor estate who grow more fortunate and consequently enjoy prosperity. The not-so-courteous Host is only too ready to agree with the Knight's objection but his blunt criticism offends the Monk who refuses to relate another story in a different vein. At this point, the Host turns to the Nun's Priest. Addressing him "with rude speche and boold" and encouraging him to be cheerful, he tells him to relate a tale that would gladden the hearts of the pilgrims and the good-humoured cleric is willing to comply with his wishes.

The story he relates is a simple one in itself. It is about an extremely conceited cock who, despite a prophetic dream, is easily deceived by the flattery of a sly fox when the latter pretends to admire his crowing. However, the fox turns out to be so vain about his own villainy that he is soon beguiled by the cock's flattery. The moral at the end of the tale is likewise simple. The Nun's Priest duly warns his audience not to trust flatterers.

> Lo, swich it is for to be recchelees
> And necligent, and truste on flaterye. (670-1)

But Sir John's narrative is more than a simple tale with a simple moral.

The Nun's Priest's story of the cock and the fox is a mock-heroic beast fable which takes us to a make-believe world where once upon a

time 'Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge' — a world in which animals are given human qualities. Consequently, they are made to behave like human beings and their behaviour ultimately leads to the moral of the story. Such beast fables were popular in medieval Europe and served as illustrative anecdotes for sermons. Perhaps the most popular character of all was Reynard the Fox, the hero of the well-known beast epic, the *Roman de Renart*, which includes an episode that is analogous with the Nun's Priest's Tale. Though Chaucer may have derived his story from this source, or from versions of it, he effects considerable changes in his handling of the narrative and turns the fable into a comic masterpiece.

Chaucer's vivid account of the cock's adventure is a fine piece of mock-heroic writing as he treats a trivial subject in the heroic manner which is usually reserved for epic poetry to enhance the qualities and achievements of heroes. However, mock-heroic is not intended to praise but to ridicule and in the process of doing so it gives rise to comedy. The humour results from the incongruity that exists between a subject matter that is so commonplace and a style that is so grand. A farmyard is an unlikely place for such a lofty form of expression! Yet this is the domain where the princelike hero, Chauntecleer, exercises his "governaunce".

The Nun's Priest starts his tale by sketching the details that form the background of the story. As a matter of fact, the introductory lines are devoted to the "povre wydwe" who lives in a small cottage with her two daughters. She represents a picture of plain humble life that must have been the experience of many a poor widow. Her way of living is indeed simple and modest; her possessions are limited; her daily sustenance is meagre. Yet she is healthy and happy. Her poor living conditions are clearly conveyed when the narrator contrasts her meals with the diet of a wealthier class of people. The widow needs "no poynaunt sauce" to flavour her "sclendre meel" since "No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte". She drinks no wine "neither whit ne reed" because she can only afford to have milk with her food. As a result, she does not suffer from the gout and apoplexy. For being poor makes her eat moderately and this prevents her from becoming ill. We are not told the name of this widow as she is not intended to be the protagonist of the tale. In fact the first name we come across is that of the sheep "that highte Malle" since this mark of individuality is a characteristic of the cock, the hen and the fox who have a significant role in the story.

CHAUNTECLEER

Against this background, Chauntecleer stands out as a dazzling picture of magnificent colours. The striking contrast is immediately obvious for his owner's modesty and humility are a foil to his splendour

and vanity. Whereas the narrator used negatives to describe the poor widow, he now uses comparatives to introduce the hero of his tale:

> His voys was murier than the murie orgon
> On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.
> Wel sikerer was his crowyng in his logge
> Than is a clokke, or an abbey orlogge: (85-88)

His very name "Chauntecleer" is significant of his outstanding quality — he is a 'clear singer' whose crowing is unsurpassed. This emphasis on his ability to crow suggests that the cook is both conscious and proud of his talent. So much so, it is this pride which eventually and inevitably leads to his fall when he succumbs to the flattery of daun Russell.

Having stressed this point, the Nun's Priest goes on to portray Chauntecleer's appearance. Following the rules of rhetoric, he describes the cock from the top of his head to his toe-nails, using similes that evoke an image of precious beauty. The comic effect is achieved through the use of the mock-heroic style since the description is deliberately inflated to create humour. The portrayal of "this gentil cok" suggests the valour of epic heroes and recalls a world that is so remote from an ordinary farmyard. Even his incomparable red comb reminds one of "a castel wal"!

However, we are not intended to forget that he is but a barnyard fowl. Chauntecleer's crowing, his comb and his bill characterize him as such. And if he is so clever as to sing a duet with his beloved Pertelote it is because, as the Nun's Priest explains to his audience,

> thilke tyme, as I have understonde,
> Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge (114 - 5)

From time to time, the narrator refers to Chauntecleer's daily habits which reveal his avian nature and which make the conceited cock seem all the more ridiculous. An example of this is when, after overwhelming his concerned spouse with his erudite references, he flies down from the beam with the other hens,

> And with a 'chuk' he gan hem for to calle,
> For he hadde found a corn, lay in the yard (408 - 9).

For all his regal bearing he is merely a cock!

Chaucer's feathered hero asserts his position by exercising his dominance over seven hens "which were his sustres and his paramours". The fairest of these is his favourite wife, the "faire damoysele Pertelote". She too seems to emerge from the heroic world of chivalry as she is endowed with the qualities of a courtly lady "Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire" — truly worthy of the love of "this gentil cok". But Pertelote's role in the Nun's Priest's Tale is significant because of the part she plays in the scene that is staged between cock and hen soon after Chauntecleer has his dream.

DREAM-LORE

Chauntecleer's dream and the ensuing discussion he has with Pertelote as regards the origin and significance of dreams occupy a considerable part of the tale. However, even though the action is temporarily suspended, the reader becomes interested in the respective points of view presented by husband and wife, perhaps to the extent of taking sides. The situation is indeed familiar and, despite the passage of time, of perennial interest. For a man's authoritative position may be jeopardised by a woman's interference in his affairs and this must have been all the more significant in medieval times when it was considered a husband's prerogative to exercise his supremacy over his wife. Chauntecleer is no exception! His dream does not merely serve to introduce the "beest" that instils fear in this cock of heroic stature, it also reveals Chaucer's understanding of human nature especially where the relation of the sexes is concerned, setting the scene for the interesting dispute between husband and wife.

Chauntecleer's dream disturbs his sleeps so much that it arouses his wife's concern. She asks him

> Herte deere,
> What eyleth yow, to grone in this manere?
> Ye been a verray sleper; fy, for shame! (123 - 5)

From his vivid description of the "beest" that looks "lyk an hound" we gather that he has never seen anything like it but we recognise it as a fox. Though Chauntecleer may feel that his groaning is justified he gets no sympathy from Pertelote who accuses him of cowardice. Realising that he is not the brave hero she has thought him to be, she describes the virtues of the perfect husband as desired by courtly ladies. Chauntecleer may have a beard but he certainly has "no mannes herte". Consequently she declares "I kan nat love a coward, by my feith!" She then proceeds to give her interpretation of his dream and to prescribe an efficacious remedy.

Pertelote's explanation distinguishes her as a typically practical housewife who is solicitous for the welfare of her dear husband. Like any wife she knows what is best for him and feels sure that she can deal with his problems. So she reveals her knowledge of dreams and medicine substantiating her argument with her learned reference to Dionysius Cato "which that was so wys a man". After all, she too can quote an authoritative source to advise her frightened husband that he should attach no importance to dreams. It is obvious that Pertelote is trying to assume control of the situation by showing Chauntecleer that she can handle the matter without any difficulty. She is not even bothered by the fact that there is no apothecary in that town for, she tells the troubled cock,

> I shall myself to herbes techen yow
> That shal been for youre hele and for youre prow; (183 - 4)

— and she provides him with a list of medicinal herbs found in the farmyard.

Pertelote's interpretation of Chauntecleer's dream is interesting in itself. Speaking like a scientist this knowledgeable hen presents the medical viewpoint which accounts for the terrifying dream that has upset her husband. She bases her explanation on the medieval theory of the four humours known as blood , phlegm, choler and melancholy. It was believed that these four vital fluids were blended in the human body so that the predominant humour determined a man's complexion or temperament. However, an excess of any humour produced some disturbance in the person's complexion and resulted in illness. Pertelote follows this theory when she diagnoses Chauntecleer's ailment. She states that dreams are a result of an imballance of the humours in the body. In short, they come from physical disorder. She also knows that humours have their distinctive colours and this accounts for the description of the "beest" in the cock's dream:

> His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,
> And tipped was his tayl and both his eeris
> With blak, (136 - 8).

There is no doubt that Chauntecleer is suffering from an excess of choler and melancholy!

Eager to show her profound knowledge of the subject she goes on to prescribe the remedy to cure her husband's ailment. One can just imagine how Chauntecleer's ego is deflated when he is told by his caring wife that all he needs is a laxative that would purge him "bynethe and eek above". She is medically correct in recommending the digestives of worms which he must take before administering the purgatives. Besides, what better diet can she prescribe for a cock? Furthermore, her fears are justified when she warns him to keep his hot humours out of the sunshine lest he may develop some illness that will be the death of him:

> Ware the sonne in his ascencioun
> Ne fynde yow nat repleet of humours hoote (190 - 1)

Once she feels so certain that red choler is the cause of all his troubles, she concludes that he may develop tertian fever "or an agu that may be youre bane". So if he follows her instructions he need fear no dream.

Despite Pertelote's learned "loore" Chauntecleer is not ready to take her advice so easily. As far as he is concerned she may think she knows what is best for him but he definitely knows better. In any case, he is too self-centred to accept that he can soon forget his fears by taking a laxative. And the last thing he wants to be is a henpecked husband! Thus he proceeds to give his own view regarding dreams and to show that he is better read than his wife. His masculine vanity makes it essential for him to assert her intellectual superiority and

to prove his point of view he can refer to many a man who is "moore of auctoritee / Than ever Caton was." It is his prerogative to overwhelm Pertelote by showing off his own learned eloquence to illustrate that "no man sholde been to recchelees / Of dremes" and that he has good reason to regard his own dream as a warning.

Chauntecleer speaks like a scholar and a philosopher. It is his conceit which leads him to the conclusion that, whatever Pertelote may think, his dream is an "avisioun", a prophetic one which he should heed. He does not rank himself with ordinary men who have meaningless dreams; on the other hand, he speaks of distinguished characters who have foreseen their future in their sleep. Why shouldn't this dream be such a prophetic vision warning him of the fate that lies in store for him? However, this vain cock does not argue profoundly about the psychology of dreams. Instead he tries to impress Pertelote by narrating lengthy stories and referring to authoritative sources to support his viewpoint. The vivid anecdotes he relates end tragically as he feels so convinced that his dream is a premonition. In the light of this, it is comic that he does not take any heed of the warning so that after arguing at length about the prophetic nature of his dream, he rapidly overcomes the initial fear he senses in the presence of the fox.

Once he has made his point about his dream, Chauntecleer scorns the remedies suggested by Pertelote and refuses to take the laxatives she has prescribed. He even pokes fun at her when he mistranslates the Latin tag "Mulier est hominis confusio" which really means that woman is man's ruin, a statement typical of the wave of anti-feminism that was widely current in medieval times. By saying that it means the opposite he is once more asserting his authority over her. At this point he feels sure that his interpretation of the dream has put his concerned wife in her place and that he is master of the situation. However, he is blinded by his love for the fair Pertelote and is ready to put aside all his fear when he looks upon the beauty of her face. He resorts to flattery and, fearing he may lose her love, he defies any dream though he has been so badly shaken by his vision of the "beest". Instead he assumes a regal attitude which helps him restore his self-confidence and which emphasises the pride that goes before the fall.

Thus the scene is set and Chauntecleer "in al his pryde" is soon to become an easy prey for the sly fox that awaits the propitious moment. The happiness that is inspired within him by the vernal beauty of the month of May cannot last for long,

> For evere the latter ende of joye is wo
> God woot that worldly joye is soon eago! (439 - 40)

The comedy is heightened by the rhetorical outburst of the narrator when he compares the deception of the cunning fox to three famous betrayals, including that of Christ by Judas. The incongruity is obvious, especially as this leads to the philosophical problem of whether man's

actions are predestined or whether man has free will — a problem that had caused "greet altercaioun" and given rise to "greet disputisoun" among scholars. The ensuing events of the tale seem to indicate that Chauntecleer's dream has truly been a prophetic one. Is he guilty of not heeding the warning or is his fate inevitable? If a dream can foretell what is to happen does it mean that the future has been foreordained? Have we got free will or are we constrained to do what has been predestined? Although he introduces this serious topic, the narrator does not come to any conclusion. It is evidently inappropriate to connect the fate of a silly cock with such a philosophic argument. So he dismisses the whole matter by blaming Pertelote for Chauntecleer's misfortune.

ANTI-FEMINISM

It is interesting to note at this point how the Nun's Priest makes use of the situation to air his own anti-feminist views even though his words may displease the few female members of the pilgrimage. He attributes Chauntecleer's near tragedy to Pertelote's misleading advice when he states that this tale is that of a cock "That took his conseil of his wyf with sorwe". Such misogynous sentiments, as the ones he reveals, are intended to blame women for the misery of mankind. He even illustrates his point by referring to Eve as the archetype of woman's wicked influence on man:

> Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
> Wommannes conseils broghte us first to wo,
> And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
> Ther as he was ful myrie and wel ot ese. (490 - 3).

But the Nun's Priest knows that he must be careful in his position for he is travelling in the service of the Prioress, and this makes him subordinate to a woman. Consequently, he tries to withdraw what he has just stated since, contrary to what he says, he knows "whom it myght displese". Still, he does not change the subject. He says that he is travelling in the service of the Prioress, and this makes him suto "Rede auctors" and what they have to say about women. Then he washes his hands of the matter by dismissing his anti-feminist views as those of the cock:

> Thise been the cokkes wordes and nat myne;
> I kan noon harm of no womman divyne. (499-500).

Though this may be meant to put the blame on Pertelote there is no doubt that the cock's vanity plays an important part in his downfall. From the narrator's first description of the conceited cock we get the impression that Chauntecleer takes great pride in his song. And this makes it easy for the crafty fox to execute his plan.

DAUN RUSSELL

The appearance of daun Russell draws us closer to the action of the tale. Chauntecleer's happy mood is short-lived for he becomes aware of the presence of the fox. Though he has never set eyes on the animal before, his first reaction is instinctive. He is so frightened that he crows against his will

> But cride anon, 'cok! cok!' and up he sterte
> Nothyng ne liste hym thanne for to crowe,
> As man that was affrayed in his herte; (510 - 2)

But Russell is quick and witty enough to prevent the flight of the terrified cock. His words are courteous and reassurring, his tone is gentle and soothing. He does not find it difficult to appeal to Chauntecleer's conceit once he knows his weak point. Addressing him as "Gentil sire" he proclaims himself as a devoted admirer of the cock's singing. He speaks very respectfully of Chauntecleer's father — "God his soule blesse!" — and mother who have been to his house, as food not as guests! But the cock is too blind to see through all this flattery and to realise the truth behind the fox's words. Russell's plan is indeed cunning and subtle. He even explains how Chauntecleer's father used "to make his voys the moore strong" by closing both eyes, standing on tip-toes and stretching his neck. The silly cock is so "ravysshed with his flaterie" that he fails to perceive any treachery in the words of his admirer. He stretches his neck, closes his eyes and begins to crow. The fox loses no time in grabbing his prey by the throat and running off with him.

The action is once again suspended and the mock-heroic lament that follows contributes to the humour of the poem. Rhetoric is used to achieve this effect. The narrator apostrophizes destiny and Venus since Chauntecleer, a devoted servant of this goddess of love, has met his fate on a Friday, the day dedicated to the same goddess. Invoking the celebrated rhetorician Geoffrey de Vinsauf, the Nun's Priest regrets that he lacks the skill to convey the lament for Chauntecleer's catastrophe in the proper rhetorical terms of this 'deere maister soverayn". The description of the hens' grief heightens the pathos. The great sorrow of the fallen hero's "sustres" and "paramours" surpasses the grief for great human tragedies. Our attention is particularly focused on Pertelote whose shrieks are louder than those of 'Hasdrubales wyf / Whan that hir housbonde hadde lost his lyf".

The mock-heroic tone is maintained throughout, the humour is increased and the absurdity of the situation is intensified. The noise is so great that it brings the "povre widwe" and her two daughters out of the house. Hearing their cries the neighbours join them in a chase that becomes farcical. The shrieks and cries, the trumpets and confusing noises of dogs, ducks, hogs, geese, cow, calf and bees, create such an uproar in the farmyard that "It semed as that hevene sholde falle!" But Chauntecleer's fortunes are about to change. He proves to be wittier

than the fox who takes such pride in his cunning that he turns out to be just as vulnerable to flattery. As soon as the fox opens his mouth the cock is quick enough to fly to the safety of the nearest tree. Both of them have succumbed to flattery but both have learnt their lesson. Chauntecleer realises that he should have kept his eyes wide open while daun Russell admits that he should have kept his mouth shut. The narrator emphasises the "moralite" of his story and requests his audience not to dismiss the tale simply as an adventure.

> 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. (675 - 7).

— and he appropriately ends his tale with a prayer.

The Nun's Priest's Tale is more than just "a folye / As of a fox, or of a cok and hen" for in retelling the story Chaucer adapts the beast fable to suit his own purposes. His elaboration of the narrative reveals his understanding of human nature and human relationships especially where husband and wife are concerned. The debate on the significance of dreams presents a topic which interested the poet as did the philosophical problem of free will and predestination. However, these themes are brought together to provide humour and we laugh at the absurd behaviour of the birds who are so concerned with concepts and ideas that pertain to the human world. The parody of human behaviour and the use of the mock-heroic style heighten the comic effect and increase the fun. Indeed, we laugh at such absurdities but then we realise that the lesson applies to us and that in reality we may be laughing at ourselves. Nevertheless, the tale is so delightful that we are bound to agree with the Host when he tells Sir John, "This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer".

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