

## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The Knight interrupts the Monk, saying that he dislikes stories of bad fortune and prefers to hear of people who are successful. The Host joins in, dismissing The Monk's Tale as mere 'hevenesse' and requesting something better from the Nun's Priest.*

'Hoo,' quod the Knight, 'good sire, namoore of this!  
 That ye han seyde is right ynough, ywis,  
 And muchel moore; for litel hevinesse  
 Is right ynough to mucche folk, I gesse.  
 I seye for me, it is a greet disese, 5  
 Whereas men han been in greet welthe and ese,  
 To heeren of hire sodeyn fal, allas,  
 And the contrarie is joye and greet solas,  
 As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,  
 And climbeth up and wexeth fortunat, 10  
 And there abideth in prosperitee.  
 Swich thing is gladsom, as it thinketh me,  
 And of swich thing were goodly for to telle.'  
 'Ye,' quod oure Hooste, 'by Seint Poules belle,  
 Ye seye right sooth; this Monk he clappeth lowde. 15  
 He spak how "Fortune covered with a clowde"  
 I noot nevere what; and als of a "tragedie"  
 Right now ye herde, and, pardee, no remedie  
 It is for to biwaille ne compleyne  
 That that is doon, and als it is a peyne, 20  
 As ye han seyde, to heere of hevinesse.  
 Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse,  
 Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye.  
 Swich talking is nat worth a boterflye,  
 For therinne is ther no desport ne game. 25

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-316-61552-2 — The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale  
 Geoffrey Chaucer, Edited by Elizabeth Huddleston, Valerie Allen, David Kirkham  
 Excerpt  
[More Information](#)

## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

In *The General Prologue* (ll. 165–207) we learn that the Monk is an 'outrider' who visits the outlying cells of his monastery. He obviously relishes life outside the mother-house, where rules are not observed so strictly, and he enjoys riding and hunting. His food and his appearance are important to him, and there is even a hint that he enjoys other earthly pleasures, for to fasten his hood he has a gold pin with a 'love-knotte'. The Host attacks the Monk very strongly, showing his disappointment at the contrast between the cheerful teller and his depressing tale.

- Reread lines 22–4. Who is speaking here? What light do you think these three lines throw on lines 44–51?
- As you read through *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, make notes so that you can decide how far the Priest has satisfied the demands of the Knight and of the Host in his story.



▲ The Nun's Priest as depicted in the Ellesmere manuscript. This was written and decorated in the fifteenth century but reproduced the style of dress of the 1380s.

- 26 **Daun Piers** Sir Peter [In *The Monk's Prologue* the Host says he does not know the Monk's name, and suggests calling him John, Thomas or Alban.]
- 27 **hertely** sincerely
- 28 **sikerly** surely
- nere** were it not for [ne were]
- 30–2 **By hevene king ... so deep** by the King of Heaven [Jesus Christ] who died for all of us, I should have fallen down asleep however deep the muddy holes in the road were
- 34 **clerkes** scholars
- 35–6 **Whereas ... his sentence** if a man has no one listening to him, there is no point in speaking on his subject matter
- 37–8 **And wel ... reported be** I can take in the essence of what I hear; if it is well told [This is rather ironic, since the Host often misunderstands what he hears.]
- 40 **no lust to pleye** no inclination to amuse
- 43 **anon** immediately
- 44 **neer** closer
- 46 **blithe** happy
- jade** nag, worn-out horse
- 48 **rekke nat a bene** don't care a bean [a more commonplace comparison than l. 24]
- 50–1 **'Yis, sir; ... be blamed'** 'Yes sir,' he said. 'Yes Host. As I hope to live – unless I am merry, I will certainly be blamed.' [The Nun's Priest seems intimidated by what he has just heard.]
- 52 **attamed** begun
- 54 **Sir John** [John was a common name for a priest and may not be this man's real name. 'Sir' was often used as a title for a priest. It does not mean that he has been knighted.]

## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The Host says that The Monk's Tale has been so boring that he was kept awake only by the noise of all the bells hanging from a bridle on the Monk's horse (as mentioned in The General Prologue). He suggests a tale about hunting but the Monk refuses, so he asks the Nun's Priest for a cheerful story. The Priest agrees.*

Wherefore, sire Monk, or Daun Piers by youre name,  
 I pray yow hertely telle us somewhat elles;  
 For sikerly, nere clinking of youre belles,  
 That on your bridel hange on every side,  
 By hevene king, that for us alle dyde, 30  
 I sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep,  
 Although the slough had never been so deep;  
 Thanne hadde your tale al be toold in veyn.  
 For certainly, as that thise clerkes seyn,  
 Whereas a man may have noon audience, 35  
 Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence.  
 And wel I woot the substance is in me,  
 If any thing shal wel reported be.  
 Sir, sey somewhat of hunting, I yow preye.'  
 'Nay,' quod this Monk, 'I have no lust to pleye. 40  
 Now lat another telle, as I have toold.'  
 Thanne spakoure Hoost with rude speche and boold,  
 And seyde unto the Nonnes Preest anon,  
 'Com neer, thou preest, com hider, thou Sir John,  
 Telle us swich thing as mayoure hertes glade. 45  
 Be blithe, though thou ride upon a jade.  
 What thogh thyn hors be bothe foul and lene?  
 If he wol serve thee, rekke nat a bene.  
 Looke that thyn herte be murie everemo.'  
 'Yis, sir,' quod he, 'yis, Hoost, so moot I go, 50  
 But I be myrie, ywis I wol be blamed.'  
 And right anon his tale he hath attamed,  
 And thus he seyde unto us everichon,  
 This sweete preest, this goodly man, Sir John.

 THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

- Look at the description of the Prioress from *The General Prologue* (pp. 22–5). Make a list of points of comparison between her and the widow to see how the Prioress is being satirised for her inability to live the simple life of a nun. What do you think is the effect of the phrase 'ful simple' in each description?
- As you study the tale, watch out for further indications of the attitude of the Nun's Priest to the Prioress and to women in general.
- This opening passage is one of the most poetic and certainly one of the most detailed in *The Canterbury Tales*. The sometimes conversational nature of the phrasing – for example, 'as it were' (l. 80) – suggests a calm and confident speaker. Try reading it aloud before studying the language. Words such as 'narwe' and 'slendre' show the poverty of the widow's lifestyle. Consider why the grand terms 'halle' and 'bour' are used to describe the widow's main room and bedroom in her humble cottage.



▲ 'Beside a grove, stondinge in a dale.'

- 55 **somdeel stape in age** somewhat advanced in age
- 56 **whilom** once upon a time
- narwe** small [literally: narrow]
- 59 **Sin thilke ... wyf** since that day she became a widow
- 61 **litel ... rente** her property and income were small
- 62 **housbondrie** economical housekeeping
- 63 **foond** provided for
- 65 **keen** cows
- highte** was called
- 66 **bour** bedroom
- 68 **poynaunt** spicy
- never a deel** none at all
- 70 **accordant to hir cote** on the same level of simplicity as her cottage
- 71 **repleccioun** overeating
- 72 **attempree** moderate
- phisik** medicine
- 73 **hertes suffisaunce** a contented heart
- 74–5 **The goute ... hir heed** Gout never prevented her from dancing and apoplexy never harmed her head. [Medieval doctors believed that plain food, eaten in moderation, was the key to good health. The illness apoplexy is caused by blood rushing to the head – perhaps the result of a rich and excessive diet. Gout can be caused by eating too much meat.]
- 77 **bord** table
- 78 **foond** found
- 79 **seynd** grilled
- ey** egg
- 80 **a maner deye** a sort of dairy maid

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-316-61552-2 — The Nun's Priest's Prologue and Tale  
 Geoffrey Chaucer, Edited by Elizabeth Huddleston, Valerie Allen, David Kirkham  
 Excerpt  
[More Information](#)

## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*A poor widow and her two daughters live a simple life. She has a small cottage and owns a few animals. She eats a plain diet and works as a dairy maid to supplement her income.*

A povre widwe, somdeel stape in age	55
Was whilom dwelling in a narwe cotage, Biside a grove, standinge in a dale. This widwe, of which I telle yow my tale, Sin thilke day that she was last a wyf, In pacience ladde a ful simple lyf,	60
For litel was hir catel and hir rente. By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two. Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo, Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.	65
Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle, In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel. Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel. No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte; Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.	70
Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik; Attempree diete was al hir phisik, And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce. The goute lette hire nothing for to daunce, N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.	75
No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed; Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak, – Milk and broun breed, in which she foond no lak, Seynd bacoun, and sometime an ey or tweye; For she was, as it were, a maner deye.	80



## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The colours chosen for Chauntecleer are taken from heraldry, and some are also liturgical colours used in church services – red altar coverings, for example, are used from Palm Sunday until the day before Good Friday. Chauntecleer thus appears as a high-status figure.

- The description of Chauntecleer follows the rules of rhetoric (see *Styles of Writing*). The characterisation of Chauntecleer and Pertelote is in accordance with ideas of nobility and chivalry. Make a note of the vocabulary used to describe both birds to emphasise their 'gentil' status.
- What point is Chaucer making by the strong contrast between the magnificence of Chauntecleer and the poverty and modesty of his widowed owner? Use this approach – and some of the techniques of rhetoric – to write your own description of two contrasting figures whose paths cross. Perhaps a politician and Mother Teresa meet at a conference, or a member of a royal family visits a daycare centre for senior citizens.

82	<b>withoute</b> outside	96	<b>asure</b> azure, sky blue
83	<b>hight</b> called		<b>toon</b> toes
84	<b>nas his peer</b> he had no equal	98	<b>burned</b> burnished, polished
85–6	<b>His voys ... chirche gon</b> his voice was more tuneful than the merry pleasing organs that are played in church on feast days	99	<b>gentil</b> noble [Gentillesse is a very important concept in medieval culture and is difficult to define briefly. It includes the idea of high worth in birth as well as a character of morality and sensitivity.]
	<b>messe-dayes</b> times when lay people were allowed to attend mass		<b>governance</b> control
	<b>orgon</b> [plural]	100	<b>plesaunce</b> pleasure
87	<b>sikerer</b> more reliable	101	<b>sustres and his paramours</b> sisters and mistresses/lovers
	<b>logge</b> lodgings, his perch		
88	<b>orlogge</b> clock	103	<b>hewed</b> coloured
89–90	<b>By nature ... thilke town</b> [The medieval belief was that cocks crowed every hour. The Priest describes Chauntecleer's ability in astronomical terms. He knew exactly when the sun had moved fifteen degrees, as measured at the equinox.]	104	<b>cleped</b> called
		105–6	<b>Curteys ... so faire</b> she was courteous, wise, pleasant and friendly, and behaved herself so graciously
92	<b>amended</b> bettered, made more accurate	108	<b>in hoold</b> in her possession
94	<b>batailled</b> notched like battlements	109	<b>loken in every lith</b> strongly bound in every limb
95	<b>byle</b> bill, beak	110	<b>He loved ... therwith</b> he loved her so much that he was truly happy
	<b>jeet</b> jet		

## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*The widow's cockerel, Chauntecleer, is described in magnificent detail. (The realism of the description has led to the identification of his breed as possibly the Golden Spangled Hamburg.) He has the companionship of seven hens, of which his favourite is Pertelote.*

A yeerd she hadde, enclosed al aboute  
 With stikkes, and a drye dich withoute,  
 In which she hadde a cok, hight Chauntecleer.  
 In al the land, of crowing nas his peer.  
 His voys was murier than the murie orgon 85  
 On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.  
 Wel sikerer was his crowing in his logge  
 Than is a klokke or an abbey orlogge.  
 By nature he knew ech ascencioun  
 Of the equinoxial in thilke toun; 90  
 For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,  
 Thanne crew he, that it mighte nat been amended.  
 His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,  
 And batailled as it were a castel wal;  
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon; 95  
 Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;  
 His nailes whitter than the lilie flour,  
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour.  
 This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce  
 Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce, 100  
 Whiche were his sustres and his paramours,  
 And wonder lyk to him, as of colours;  
 Of whiche the faireste hewed on hir throte  
 Was cleped faire Damoisele Pertelote.  
 Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire, 105  
 And compaignable, and bar himself so faire,  
 Sin thilke day that she was seven night oold,  
 That trewely she hath the herte in hoold  
 Of Chauntecleer, loken in every lith;  
 He loved hire so that wel was him therwith. 110



## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

Chauntecleer's nightmare is experienced at dawn, a time thought by some medieval scholars to indicate that a dream was prophetic. (See p. 32 for information about types of dream.) He describes the frightening fox in detail but, safe inside the yard, has obviously never seen one in real life. His terror would be unsurprising to Chaucer's audience who believed that an animal's fear of its predators was instinctive, not learned through experience.

Beast fables, in which animals behave in some ways like humans and in some ways like themselves, have been popular in most societies since very early times.

- Compare the relationship between Chauntecleer and Pertelote described in lines 105–110 with that revealed by their exchange in lines 123–41. How would you describe the differences?
- The long digression ending on line 405 includes much discussion about the significance of dreams. What other areas of life are touched on?

111	<b>hem</b> them	127	<b>ye take it nat agrief</b> don't upset yourself
112	<b>gan to springe</b> began to rise		
113	<b>accord</b> harmony	128	<b>me mette I was in swich meschief</b> I dreamed I was in such misfortune
	<b>'My lief is faren in londe!</b> 'My love has gone away' [a popular song of the time]	130	<b>my swevene recche aright</b> interpret my dream favourably [Chaucer often uses the device of dreams, both as a frame for his story – for example, in <i>The Parliament of Fowls</i> – and as a way of advancing the narrative, as in <i>The Wife of Bath's Tale</i> .]
114–15	<b>For thilke . . . and singe</b> For at that time, as I understand it, beasts and birds could speak and sing. [Chaucer suggests that animals and birds share with humans not only this ability but also that of experiencing prophetic dreams.]	132	<b>me mette</b> I dreamed [The impersonal form of the verb is used here, and in l. 128.]
116	<b>bifel</b> it happened	134	<b>wolde han maad areest</b> wanted to lay hold
121	<b>drecched</b> distressed		
	<b>soore</b> severely	137	<b>eeris</b> ears
123	<b>agast</b> frightened	138	<b>smal</b> narrow
124	<b>eyleth</b> ails, upsets		
125	<b>verray</b> fine [Her tone is ironic.]		



## THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



*One morning Chauntecleer screams out because he is having a terrible dream about a hound-like beast, coloured red and yellow and with black-tipped tail and ears. The creature tried to catch and kill the cockerel. The tale proper now starts. This section includes a long digression which does not finish until line 405.*

But swich a joye was it to here hem singe,  
 Whan that the brighte sonne gan to springe,  
 In sweete accord, 'My lief is faren in londe!  
 For thilke time, as I have understonde,  
 Beestes and briddes koude speke and singe. 115  
 And so bifel that in a daweninge,  
 As Chauntecleer among his wives alle  
 Sat on his perche, that was in the halle,  
 And next him sat this faire Pertelote,  
 This Chauntecleer gan gronen in his throte, 120  
 As man that in his dreem is drecched soore.  
 And whan that Pertelote thus herde him roore,  
 She was agast, and seyde, 'Herte deere,  
 What eyleth yow, to grone in this manere?  
 Ye been a verray sleper; fy, for shame.' 125  
 And he answerde, and seyde thus: 'Madame,  
 I pray yow that ye take it nat agrief.  
 By God, me mette I was in swich meschief  
 Right now, that yet myn herte is soore afright.  
 Now God,' quod he, 'my swevene recche aright, 130  
 And kepe my body out of foul prisoun.  
 Me mette how that I romed up and down  
 Withinne our yeerd, wheer as I saugh a beest  
 Was lyk an hound, and wolde han maad areest  
 Upon my body, and wolde han had me deed. 135  
 His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,  
 And tipped was his tail and bothe his eeris  
 With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris;  
 His snowte smal, with glowinge eyen tweye.  
 Yet of his look for feere almost I deye; 140  
 This caused me my groning, doutelees.'

 THE NUN'S PRIEST'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

Medieval doctors believed that health was a matter of balance in the body. All matter depended on two pairs of contraries – hot and cold; dry and moist. In combination these produced the four elements: earth, air, fire and water:

- |                      |                        |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| cold and dry = earth | hot and dry = fire     |
| hot and moist = air  | cold and moist = water |

In the human body the contraries combine to form the humours:

- |                           |                         |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| cold and dry = melancholy | hot and dry = cholera   |
| hot and moist = blood     | cold and moist = phlegm |

The physical characteristics of a person – for example, the colour of hair and face – arose from the balance of elements in the body. Humours were also associated with bodily fluids such as blood. Doctors tried to rebalance any excess or deficiency of a bodily fluid – for example, by bleeding a sick person.

FLUID	ELEMENT	HUMOUR	TEMPERAMENT	DESCRIPTION
black bile	earth	melancholy	melancholic	gloomy, sullen
blood	air	blood	sanguine	brave, hopeful,
red/yellow bile	fire	cholera	choleric	thin, quarrelsome
phlegm	water	phlegm	phlegmatic	calm, dull

- Pertelote has moved from the 'curteys' wife of line 106 to one who can attack her husband at great length. (When she speaks of his lack of a brave and manly heart [l. 154] her reference to his beard is particularly appropriate since cockerels of this breed have a 'beard' of feathers at their necks.) Try various ways of delivering lines 142–73 to a partner, perhaps raging or despairing. Which tone would be the most effective in persuading Chauntecleer to take her advice?

142	<b>Avoy</b> alas <b>herteless</b> coward	perhaps surprising to find this
148	<b>hardy</b> brave	required in a husband, as well as
	<b>free</b> generous [This word is linked	in a lover:]
	to the concept of gentillesse and	152 <b>dorste</b> dare
	implies a lack of selfishness. In an	156 <b>vanitee</b> emptiness, illusion
	earlier sense, the word refers to the	158 <b>fume</b> vapours rising from the
	status of a free man, as opposed	stomach (wind)
	to a serf. There is a certain irony	159 <b>complecciouns</b> temperaments
	in using the word about chickens	[We still use the word complexion
	which are owned by the widow.]	in this sense.]
149	<b>secree</b> discreet <b>no nigard</b> not a miser	164 <b>arwes</b> arrows <b>lemes</b> flames
150	<b>agast</b> frightened	166 <b>contek</b> strife <b>whelpes</b> dogs
	<b>tool</b> weapon	169 <b>blake beres, or boles</b> black bears
151	<b>avauntour</b> boaster ['Secree' and	or bulls
	'avauntour' both remind men in	172 <b>That . . . ful wo</b> that cause many
	the audience to keep quiet about	sleepers great distress
	their female conquests, but it is	173 <b>lightly</b> quickly, easily