

Introduction

The exuberance and humanity of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* make it one of the favourite narratives in *The Canterbury Tales*. So many facets of a popular subject converge in this single poem, offering so many ideas and appealing at so many levels that readers at every stage of sophistication find a good deal to their taste. Few modern readers will abandon it as dull, though many may find that certain patches of it confound with their obscurity what they might have clarified. There is a certain mystique in the poem which reveals itself only gradually and which calls for comment. On the other hand, there is a ready-made fascination for all humans about animal doings. When an animal is introduced onto a stage, human actors might as well be silent. Ponies, lionesses and otters have all contributed largely to their modern owners' incomes when their foibles have been exploited in book form. So too in the Middle Ages. Chaucer relished bird fables especially. In *The Parliament of Fowls* he assembled all species of birds and made them talk; in *The House of Fame* he allowed himself to be carried off by a large eagle which was capable of lecturing him and wafting him into the blue in spite of his weight. That eagle put him down in another world to study the subjects of all literary inspiration gathered into a single house. *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, considerably later than these, returns to the house of birds for inspiration.

Fables of the fox and birds were especially popular in medieval Europe. Those people who could not read would have heard the stories from minstrels or other members of minstrels' audiences, and so the tales travelled from one to another, barely needing the permanent record of script. We have below two examples of such stories, told by Aesop and translated and printed by William Caxton in 1484. It is the raw material of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* which is some 600 lines longer. The first example tells of a raven eating a piece of cheese which is coveted by the hungry fox:

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They that be glad and joyefull of the praysynge of flaterers oftyme repent them therof, whereof Esope reherceth to us such a fable. A Raven which was upon a tree and held with his bylle a chese, the which chese the Fox desyred moche to have. Wherefore the Foxe wente and preysed hym by suche wordes as folowen: 'O gentyll Raven, thou art the fayrest byrd of all other byrdes. For thy fethers ben so fayr, so bright and so resplendysshynge, and can also so wel synge. Yf thow haddest the voys clere and small, thow sholdest be the moost happy of all other byrdes'. And the foole which herd the flaterynge wordes of the Foxe beganne to open hyr bylle for to synge. And then the chese fyll to the grounde and the Fox toke and ete hit. And when the Raven sawe that for his vayn glorye he was deceyved, waxed hevy sorowfull and repented hym of that he had byleved the Foxe.

There is another version of this fable in which the victim is a partridge. What must be the earliest extant working of this subject in England is represented in the great Bayeux Tapestry. The chief purpose of that work was to portray the landing of the Normans on English soil in 1066, but directly underneath the battle scenes are smaller pictures which add decoration and amusement. A bird in a tree losing a piece of cheese to a fox below is easy to pick out. This pleasant device of matching a heroic tale with an unrelated comic one was familiar to those who copied manuscripts in the Middle Ages, and we shall have occasion to return to this theme. When a biblical text had led the eye to the bottom of a page, a group of animals or birds, or a cluster of flowers and foliage would take it back up the margin to the top once more, making the whole page a thing of beauty and not leaving white spaces if invention could fill and enrich them.

The second Aesop fable has the correct animal types:

Of tyme moche talkyng letteth¹ as appiereth by this fable of a Foxe, which came toward a Cokke and sayd to hym: 'I would fayne wete² yf thou canst as wel synge as thy fader dyde.' And thenne the Cokke shutte his eyen and beganne to crye and synge. And thenne the Fox toke and bare hym away. And the peple of the towne cryed: 'The Fox bereth away the Cok.' And thenne the Cokke sayd thus to the Foxe: 'My Lord, understandeth thou not what the peple sayth, that thou berest away theyr Cok. Telle to them that it is thyn and not theirs.' And the Fox said, 'Hit is not yours, but it is myn.' The Cok scaped fro the Foxe mouthe and flogh upon a tree. And thenne the Cok sayd to the Fox: 'Thow lyst. For I am theirs and not thyn.' And thenne the Foxe beganne to hytte erthe both with his mouthe and heed sayenge: 'Mouthe thou has spoken to moche, thou sholdest have eten the Cok, had not be³ thyn over-many wordes.' And therfor over moche talkyng letteth and to moch crowyng smarteth.⁴

These closely related stories weave together both a comic tale and a clear moral purpose. Few can imagine that it is a story confined in interest and meaning to chickens and foxes: it is so clearly a general moral truth that comes cloaked in feathers and fur.

Once a reader has matured and can follow Chaucer in the original language, there are still a few passages that must inevitably prove to be stumbling-blocks. The rhetorical passages and the digressions were intended for a sophisticated audience of medieval courtiers, and to bridge the gap between their culture and ours

¹ 'is a disadvantage'.

² 'know'.

³ 'but for'.

⁴ 'causes pain'.

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demands a conscious effort. But underneath it all there still stands the oldest and most popular type of narrative, the animal fable. When we realise the richness of the tale we may well wonder where it will stop with its learned subjects and its homespun philosophising, its dream tales and its general hullabaloo.

Before any aspect of the poem is discussed in greater detail it may be useful to give a brief summary of the contents so that it can be seen at a glance how much of the text is given to narrative and how much to the different digressions and divergences, each of which tells us more about the tale or its teller, the period which produced it or the way in which it would have been interpreted.

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This list may make the tale look absurdly fragmented. This is not the case. It is left to the individual reader to decide whether there is not a relevance among so many irrelevances, a consistency within so many apparent inconsistencies. Insofar as they refer to human problems and predicaments they may be allowed to enhance the tale rather than to distract from it. The most important elements in this list will be studied in the following pages.

The teller of the tale: The Nun's Priest

Dominating all three parts of the present Chaucer text is its alleged narrator: the Nun's Priest. We know nothing in advance about him: he is barely introduced to us in *The General Prologue*, being seen only as a satellite of the celebrated Prioress:

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Another Nonne with hire hadde she,
That was hir chapeleyne, and preestes thre.

It is commonly allowed that the other two priests were added for the sake of the rhyme and are little more than an oversight on the author's part. This one priest, however, comes alive as the entire poem unfolds, almost as if Chaucer were apologising for having overlooked him earlier.

As we read *The Canterbury Tales* we are really progressing through two different sorts of poem. The first is the 'foundation' or 'framework' poem, which consists of all the introductory material throughout the entire sequence and includes the link passages which help us, if we wish, to plot the movements of the pilgrims from Southwark down through Kent. The other type of poem is the individual tale. Here again there are numerous subdivisions: the comic, the saint legend, the romance, the miracle, the sermon and the fable. The Nun's Priest, who hardly emerges in *The General Prologue*, assumes distinct imaginative form in his own prologue and epilogue, and in his tale as well. There seems to be a projection of the Priest in all three sections which enables us to tell why, when he was asked to entertain the company, he chose an animal fable with human overtones instead of a more overtly serious morality or saintly life. It is possible, having regard to all these clues, to answer one of the demands that are always made by commentators on these tales: Does the given tale suit its teller? It has usually been assumed that no such criterion applied to this tale since so little was known in advance about the Priest.

Many readers, it must be admitted, have failed to build up any picture of the narrator from Chaucer's words. In fact, some young ones have thought that a Nun's Priest might be a woman – a surmise almost encouraged by the picture of him given in the celebrated portrait in the Ellesmere manuscript of Chaucer. The function of a Nun's Priest could never have been performed by a

woman. He had to say mass daily; he had to administer the sacraments of penance, communion and the extreme unction of the dying; he had to preach. If a priest could not be engaged to live in the convent permanently, then the services of a member of the local parish clergy had to be sought instead. At the present time, this situation still holds. It is not unknown, either, for a modern priest to find living in a convent surrounded by religious women an irksome form of seclusion from the world at large. The element of irritation with such a life is relevant to our understanding of Chaucer's pilgrim.

It ought to be put on record, however, that a number of modern commentators have disagreed with this interpretation of the work of this celebrated priest. On the evidence of comments upon his muscular nature and his bluff manner it has been suggested that he was only a bodyguard hired to hustle highwaymen out of the path:

See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest. (689)

It can also be said that his horse, 'foule and lene', reflects no credit upon the convent stables if it is a permanent occupant and under the ultimate responsibility of that great animal lover, Madame Eglentine. Chaucer makes the Host show a lack of respect towards a man in holy orders, though he comes later to accept him as a 'manly man', a man after his own heart, by the time the tale is over. This might support the view that Sir John was only a temporary escort, the 'tough' needed if the ladies were to join the pilgrims at all.

Even these facts can bear a different interpretation. The Prioress has been shown living in a world of fantasy, paying more attention to dogs than to mankind. She would not realise that she was showing disrespect to the Priest by not giving him a better mount when he was riding in her company. Even though she knew him well, she was not a person with the moral

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discrimination to understand what was happening inside him. A sense of injustice at his social position – the only man in a company of women and probably the only scholar – might prompt him to speak as he does. This is the motive Chaucer offers.

As a subordinate in a nunnery he is also open to the possibly quite unjust charge of immorality which the Host makes at the close:

Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright. (685)

This line suddely sheds light back upon our recollection of all that had gone before in the narration. The Host's remark may be meant as no more than a coarse compliment, but it could also offend. It is not possible for the Priest to refute it in public, and he is either sufficiently pure to resent the charge or sufficiently sensitive to want to avoid an open statement of it. His revenge – and this is what we notice as we read the tale once more or ponder on it more deeply – takes the form of an animal fable of one male surrounded by seven females, the chief of whom is shown to be practical but stupid. Chaucer developed similar situations when he arranged that the Miller, the Reeve, the Summoner, the Friar and the Canon's Yeoman should all be paying off old and new scores in the tales they told. If we accept it, this aspect of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* gives it new life, and creates a character behind it rather than the mere mouthpiece for the poet which is all that is normally understood to exist.

The suggestive line quoted from the Host would mean that the Priest has made one or more of the nuns his mistress, so that we catch an echo of line 101:

Whiche were his sustres and his paramours.

In its context the line refers to the natural morality of the barnyard, but if we look a little more closely it yields a further

interpretation. The 'sustres' might even be identifiable under such names as Sister Mary, Sister Elizabeth or Sister Genevieve rather than Pertelote, Pinte or any other name associated with real or legendary medieval hens. Such a reference to the speaker's domestic circumstances, once followed, cannot be blotted out. The cock at once becomes a figure akin to the Priest, a projection of him, and if the tale is not a hint of his own sexual practices, it may be a revelation of his suppressed desires, or at the very least an exasperated comment on an irritating situation. Undeniably it is a tale of a clever male surrounded by stupid females, and the teller would know how to apply it to the unspecified convent whose Prioress spoke only the French of a suburb of London.

Yet more substance is given to this interpretation if the portrait of the Prioress herself in *The General Prologue* is studied once more. Everybody familiar with it will recall the account of her table manners:

Ne wette hir fingres in hir *sauce* depe.

This comes back to mind when the meal table of the anonymous widow in the Priest's narrative is described:

Of poynant *sauce* hir neded never a deel. (68)

On that cottage table the fare is of the plainest with *broun breed*, which has the connotations of poverty sometimes associated today with black bread. The Prioress, on the other hand, used the best white bread, called *wastel*, as a dog food. The widow suffers real poverty:

litel was hir catel and hir rente (61)

where the Prioress can be described as 'wedded to poverty' only by a pious old fiction of the Church.

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Such contrasts point to a possible plan operative outside the foundation poem and the individual tale, which allows the reader to find the satire out for himself. In this way it seems very likely that Chaucer was repairing his early omission in a subtle manner, allowing us to relate the teller to the tale if we wish and providing a consistency which stands up to our inspection.

The tale of the teller: *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

The pilgrims had been nearing Rochester and were about halfway to Canterbury when the Monk began his tale. It had been assumed, from the look of the man, that he would tell a jovial story, possibly one about horses and hounds. In fact, his contribution was a series of short stories from classical, biblical and other sources which confirmed the seriousness of human problems and proved the truth of his opening definition of tragedy:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
 As olde bookes maken us memorie,
 Of him that stood in greet prosperitee,
 And is yfallen out of heigh degree
 Into miseries, and endeth wrecchedly.

The listeners were growing restless because there seemed to be no end to his examples and no unity in them other than the moral, which served only to depress them. More to their taste had been the comic view of life of the Wife of Bath. She had shirked some of the regrets in her existence but she placed beside them a radiant acceptance of the joys of life:

But Lord Crist, whan it remembreth me
 Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,