

The Nun's Priest's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale

"Ho, good sir, no more of this," said the Knight. "What you have told is enough, in truth, and much more, for a little sorrow goes a long way with most people, I believe. As for me, it is a great distress to hear of the sudden fall of people who have been in great wealth and ease. Alas! And the contrary is joy and delight, as when a man who has been in a low station climbs up and becomes prosperous and remains there. Such a thing is joyful and pleasant to speak of." 2579

"Yes, by St. Paul's bell," said our Host, "you tell the truth. This monk mouth rings loudly; he told about how Fortune 'covered with a cloud' I don't know what. And you also heard right now of a 'tragedy,' and yet it does not help, by God, to bewail or complain of what is past. And also it is grievous, as you have said, to hear of such sorrow. Sir Monk, no more of this, for the love of heaven. Your tale distresses this whole party. Such talk is not worth a butterfly, for there is no joviality or sport in it. 2591

Therefore, Sir Monk, or, by your name, Sir Peter, tell us something else, I pray you heartily; for in truth, were it not for the clinking of your bells, hanging over all your bridle, by heaven's king, I would have fallen from this horse into slumber by now, even if the mud is not very comfortable or deep. Then your tale would have been told in vain, for truly, as these scholars say, 'Whenever a man can find no audience, it does no good to offer one's opinions.' I know how to understand a good tale well told, I believe. Sir, tell something about hunting, I ask you." 2805

"No," said the Monk, "I do not wish to make sport. Let another tell, as I have told." 2807

Then our Host, with rough and bold speech, said without delay to the Nun's Priest, "Come nearer, you priest, Sir John¹, come here and tell of something to gladden our hearts. Be cheerful, even though you ride upon a nag. What does it matter that your horse is

¹ Sir John. Usually a name of contempt for a priest, but apparently his real name.

foul and lean! If he serves you, don't care a bean about it. See that your heart will always be merry. 2815

"Yes, sir," he said, "yes, Host, in faith if I am not merry, you may rebuke me well." And without delay he began his tale and spoke thus to us all, this goodly man, this sweet priest, Sir John. 2820

Here ends the prologue.

Here begins the Nun's Priest's Tale of the Cock and the Hen, Chanticleer and Pertelote.

A widow, poor and somewhat advanced in years, dwelt once in a little cottage that stood in a dale beside a grove. Since the day she was last a wife, this widow of whom I tell this tale had lived patiently and simply; for her goods and earnings were small. By managing carefully what God sent, she provided for herself and her two daughters; she had three large sows and no more, three cows and a sheep named Molly. Her bedroom and living area, where she ate many slender meals, were rather sooty; she never needed a bit of pungent sauce, nor did a dainty morsel ever pass her throat; her diet was in keeping with her livestock shed. Overeating never was the cause of any sickness; her only treatment was a temperate diet, with exercise and heart's content. The gout never kept her from dancing, nor did the apoplexy bother her head. She drank neither red wine nor white; her table was served for the most part with white and black--milk and brown bread, of which she found no lack, with broiled bacon and at times an egg or two, for she was a kind of dairy woman. 2846

She had a yard enclosed all around with sticks and a dry ditch, and in it she had a cock, who was called Chanticleer. In all the land there was no match for his crowing; his voice was merrier than the merry organ that goes in church on mass-days. More trusty was his crowing in his yard than a clock or an abbey timepiece; he knew by nature each coming of the hour in that place for when each fifteen degrees were ascended², then he crowed so well that it could not be bettered. His comb was redder than fine coral and crenellated like a castle-wall. His black bill shone like jet; his legs and toes were like azure; his nails, whiter than the lily flower; and his hue, like burnished gold. To do all his pleasure, this noble cock had in his governance seven hens, his sisters and paramours, and very much like him in their

² Fifteen degrees were ascended. The time was measured by the movement of the sun, each of the twenty four hours being fifteen degrees.

markings; of these the one with the fairest hue on her throat was named lovely Mademoiselle Pertelote. 2870

She was courteous, discreet, generous and sociable, and bore herself so fairly since she was seven nights old that truly she held the heart of Chanticleer completely locked, and she bore the key. He loved her so that he was full of happiness. But such a joy as it was to hear them sing in sweet accord when the bright sun began to rise, "My love has gone to the country"³--for at that time, as I have learned, beasts and birds could sing and speak. 2881

Now it so came to pass, one day at dawn, as Chanticleer sat on his perch among his wives in the hall, and next to this fair Pertelote, that he began to groan in his throat as a man grievously troubled in his dream. When Pertelote heard him roar this way, she was aghast, and said: "Oh dear heart, what ails you to groan so? A fine sleeper you are; fie, for shame!" 2891

And he answered, "Madame, don't take it the wrong way, I pray you. It is God's truth, I dreamed right now that I was in such trouble that my heart is still sorely frightened. Now may God" he said, "let my dream be interpreted favorably, and keep my body from foul prison! I dreamed how I roamed up and down within our yard, and saw there a beast like a hound, who wished to seize my body and kill me. He was between yellow and red in color, his tail and ears tipped with black, unlike the rest of his coat; his snout was slender and his two eyes glowing. For fear of his looks I almost die, even now. This caused my groaning, without a doubt." 2907

"Shame!" she said. "Fie upon you, heartless coward! Alas! For by that God above you have now lost my heart and all my love. In faith, surely, I cannot love a coward. Regardless of what any woman will say, all of us desire to have husbands bold, wise, and noble, and trusty with secrets, not a miser nor a fool, nor afraid of every weapon, nor yet a boaster, by God above! How dare you, for shame, say to your love that anything could make you afraid? Have you not a

³ My love has gone to the country. A popular song of Chaucer's time:

My love has gone to the country;
Alas! Why is she gone!
And I am so sorely bound,
I may not go to her.
She has my heart in her hold
Wherever she rides or walks,
With true love a thousand-fold.

man's heart, though you have a beard! Alas, can you be afraid of dreams? 2921

"There is nothing in dreams but vanity, God knows. Dreams are engendered by excess and often by vapors⁴ and by people's temperaments, when their humors are too abundant in a creature⁵. Truly this dream that you have dreamed comes from an excess of your red choler. This causes people in their dreams to have fear of arrows and of fire with red blazes, of huge beasts (that they will bite them), of fighting, and great and small dogs; just as the melancholy humor causes many people to cry out in sleep for fear of black bears or black bull, or else that black devils will seize him as well. I could tell also of other humors that cause woe to many men in sleep, but I will pass on as lightly as I can. Lo, Cato⁶, who was so wise, did he not say this: 'Take no heed of dreams'? 2941

"Now sir," she said, "for the love of heaven, when we fly down from these rafters, please take some laxative. On peril of my life and soul, I do not lie, and I counsel you for the best, that you should purge yourself both of choler and of melancholy, And since you should not delay, and because there is no apothecary in this town, I will myself direct you to herbs that shall be for your health and wellbeing; and I shall find the herbs in our yard that have the natural property to purge you both beneath and above. Do not forget this, for God's own love! You are completely choleric in your temperament. Beware, lest the sun as he climbs up should find you full of hot humors. And if he does, I dare lay a wager that you will have a tertian fever⁷, or an ague that may be the death of you. For a day or two you shall have a light diet of worms before you take your laxatives--

⁴ Vapors. Vapors rising from the humors in the stomach to the head.

⁵ In medieval medicine, one's health depended upon the balance of the four humors, or fluids, of the body. The correspondences between the humors and the physical and psychological dispositions of humans are outlined below.

Red Bile Blood	Yellow Bile	White Bile Phlegm	Black Bile
Air	Fire	Water	Earth
Hot & Moist	Hot & Dry	Cold & Moist	Cold & Dry
Sanguine	Choleric	Phlegmatic	Melancholic
Amorous, Happy, Generous	Violent, Vengeful	Dull, Pale, Cowardly	Gluttonous, Lazy, Sentimental

⁶ Cato.

⁷ Tertian fever. A fever that recurs every five years.

your spurge, laurel, centaury, and fumitory, or hellebore, that grows there, your caper-spurge or buck-thorn berries, or herb-ivy growing in our yard, and pleasant to take. Peck them right up as they grow and eat them up. By your father's soul, husband, be merry and fear no dreams. I can say nothing else." 2969

"Madame," he said, "God have mercy, for your advice! But nevertheless, as to Sir Cato, who has such a name for wisdom, though he instructed to fear no dreams, by God, one may read in old books of many of more authority than ever Cato had, who say the complete reverse of Cato's opinion, and have well found by experience that dreams are significant both in the joys and the tribulations that people endure in this present life. There is no need for argument in this; experience itself shows it. 2983

"It is told by one of the greatest authors⁸ that one may read that once two companions went with very good intentions on a pilgrimage, and it so happened that they came into a town so full of people and so scant of lodgings that they found not so much as one cottage where they could both be lodged. Therefore they had to part company for that night, and each went to his quarters as it would happen. One was lodged in a stall far off in a yard, with plow-oxen; the other was well enough housed, as was his chance or his fortune, which governs all of us. 3000

"It so happened that long before dawn this man dreamed, as he lay in his bed, that his friend began to call upon him, saying, 'Alas! For I shall be murdered in an ox's stall this night. Now help me, brother dear, before I die! Come to me in all haste!'" This man started out of his sleep for fear, but when he had waked he turned over and took no heed of this, thinking his dream was only vanity. Thus he dreamed twice in his sleep. And at the third time his fellow seemed to come to him and say, 'I am now slain. Behold my wounds, deep, wide, and bloody. Arise early in the morning, and at the west gate of the town you shall see a dung-cart in which my body is secretly hidden; stop that cart boldly. In truth, my gold caused my murder.' And with a pale pitiful face he told him every point of how he was slain. 3023

"And trust well, his friend found the dream entirely true, for in the morning, at earliest day, he took himself to his friend's lodging, and when he reached the ox-stall, he began to shout after him. The inn-

⁸ One of the greatest authors. Either Cicero, who wrote *De divinatione*, or Valerius Maximus, who wrote *Facta et dicta memorabilia*. Both contain the following two stories.

keeper answered directly, 'Sir, your friend is gone. At daybreak he left the town.' This man began to become suspicious, remembering his dream, and he went forth without delay to the west gate of the town and found a dung-cart, ready to fertilize a field, and in such condition as you have heard the dead man say. And with a bold heart he began to call for vengeance and justice upon this felony. 'My friend is murdered this very night and lies face upward and mouth open in this cart on his back. I cry out upon the magistrates who should rule and watch over the city. Help! Alas! Here my friend lies slain! 3842

"What more should I tell of this tale? The people rushed out, cast the dung-cart over, and in the middle of the dung they found the dead man, freshly murdered. O blessed God, faithful and just! Lo, how You always reveal murder! Murder will be found out--we see that daily. Murder is so horrible and abominable to the God of justice and reason that He will not permit it to be covered up. Though it may lie hidden for years, murder will be found out: this is my conclusion. And right away the magistrates seized the carter and tortured him so sorely, and the inn-keeper as well, on the rack, that they soon acknowledged their wickedness and were hanged by the neck. 3063

"We may see by this that dreams are to be feared. And surely I read in the same book⁹ in the very next chapter (I do not lie, as I hope to be saved) about two men that for a certain cause wished to pass over the sea into a distant land, if the wind had not been adverse and made them to wait in a city standing pleasantly on the shore of a haven. But shortly before dawn, in the evening, the wind changed and blew just as they wished. Merry and glad they went to rest, and planned to sail early. 3075

"But a great marvel came to one man as he lay asleep, who dreamed toward day a wondrous dream. He thought a man stood beside his bed and ordered him to wait; 'if you go, tomorrow, you shall be drowned; my tale is done.' He woke and told his friend his dream, and prayed him to give up his journey. His friend, who lay on the other side of the bed, began to laugh and sorely mocked him. "No dream can so frighten my heart that I will stop my business; I would not give a straw for your dreams, for dreams are but vanity and tricks. People are always dreaming of owls or apes and of many other bewildering things; they dream of things that never were nor shall be. But since I see that you intend to stay here and thus by your free will lose your chance

⁹ In the same book. In either Cicero or Valerius, as noted previously.

through sloth, God knows, it will grieve me. But may you have a good-day!" 3097

"Thus he took his leave and departed. But before he had voyaged over half his journey, I do not know why, or how that misfortune arose, but by some mishap the ship's bottom was torn open, and ship and man went down in sight of other ships that had sailed at the same time. 3104

"Therefore, fair Pertelote so dear, you may learn by such old examples that no person should think too lightly of dreams, for I tell you that without doubt many dreams are to be sorely feared. 3109

"Lo, I read in the life of St. Kenelm¹⁰ the son of Kenulph, the noble king of Mercia, how he dreamed a dream; one day a little before he was murdered, he saw his murder in a vision. His nurse expounded his entire dream and warned him to beware of treason; but he was no more than seven years old and paid little heed to any dream, so holy he was in spirit. By God, I would give up my shirt to have you read his legend, as I have! I tell you truly, Madame Pertelote, that Macrobius¹¹, who wrote the vision of the noble Scipio in Africa, affirms dreams to be forewarnings of things that men see afterward. 3126

"Furthermore, I pray you look well in the Old Testament and see if Daniel¹² held dreams to be in vain. Read about Joseph¹³ also, and there you will find whether dreams be sometimes (I say not always) warnings of future things. Look at the king of Egypt, Sir Pharaoh, and at his baker and his butler, and see if they felt no virtue in dreams! Whosoever wishes to

¹⁰ St. Kenelm. According to the legend, in 821, Kenulph, only seven years of age, succeeded his father to the throne of the Mersions. In a dream he foresaw his own death, which was instigated by his own aunt; his body was afterward revealed by a heavenly light. A verse narrative of his life is one of the standard works of Middle English.

¹¹ Macrobius. Late roman author (fl. c.400) who wrote a commentary on the *Dream of Scipio* (*Somnium Scipionis*) by Cicero, which is included in his *Republic*. The story is retold in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* 29-84.

¹² Daniel. Biblical figure who interpreted the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and his son Belshazzar. See Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* 2143-82 and 2183-2246, his *Man of Law's Tale* 471-78 (for other information on Daniel), and, of course, the Biblical Book of Daniel.

¹³ Joseph. Biblical figure who interpreted the dream of the Egyptian Pharaoh and was subsequently given much favor. In Genesis 41:1-36, the Pharaoh's dream of seven fatted cows followed by seven emaciated cows is interpreted by Joseph to be seven years of good harvest followed by seven years of famine.

turn to the chronicles of various realms may read many wondrous things about them. 3137

"Lo, Croesus¹⁴, once king of Lydia! Did he not dream that he sat upon a tree, which signified that he would be hanged? Lo, Andromache, Hector's wife¹⁵! She dreamed the very night before the life of Hector should be lost if he went that day into battle; she warned him, but it did not matter, for he went nonetheless to fight, and soon after was slain by Achilles. 3148

"But that tale would be entirely too long to tell, and I must not delay, for it is nearly day. In short, I conclude that I shall have adversity after this vision; and I say, moreover, I put no confidence in laxatives. I know well that they are poison; I defy them; I like them not a bit. Now let us speak of mirth, and stop all this. God has greatly blessed me in one thing, Madame Pertelote, and thus I have joy; for when I see how scarlet-red you are about your eyes, and the beauty of your face, all my fear dies away. For as true as the Gospel of John says, "*Mulier est hominis confusio*"¹⁶; Madame, the meaning of this Latin is that "Woman is all of man's bliss and joy"¹⁷!" 3166

"For when I feel your soft side at night--albeit I cannot ride on you, because our perch is so narrow, alas--I am so full of joy and comfort that I defy all dreams and visions." 3171

And with that, down he flew from the rafter, and with him all his hens, for it was day. He began to call them all with a cluck, for he had found a grain of corn lying in the yard. He was royal, and he was afraid no longer; twenty times before prime¹⁸ he clasped Pertelote in his wings, and he coupled with her just as often. He looked as if he were a grim lion, and roamed up and down on his toes, he chose not to set his foot to ground. He clucked when he came upon a grain of corn, and his wives ran to him. Thus royal, like a prince in his hall, I will leave this

¹⁴ Croesus. King of Lydia who saw his own death in a dream but did not recognize it. His daughter interpreted it correctly, but this fact made no difference. See Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* 2727-66.

¹⁵ Hector's wife. Andromache's dream was included in Dares' account of the Trojan War (*De excidio Trojae Historia*), but not in most other accounts.

¹⁶ *Mulier est hominis confusio*. Woman is the ruin of man.

¹⁷ Man's bliss and joy. Of course, Chaucer's translation is incorrect. Why it is incorrect, from the perspectives of both Chaucer and Chaucer, is the subject of much speculation.

¹⁸ Prime. 9 am.

Chanticleer in his feeding-ground, and afterward I will say what happened to him. 3184

When March, the month in which the world was made, and when God first created mankind, was complete, and there had passed thirty-two days since March began, it happened that Chanticleer in all his glory, with his seven wives walking beside him, cast his eyes to the bright sun, which had sped through twenty-one degrees and somewhat more in the sign of Taurus. By nature and not education he knew that it was prime, and he crowed with joyous voice. "The sun," he said, "has climbed through the heavens forty-one degrees and more. Madame Pertelote, my world's bliss, listen to how the happy birds sing, and see the fresh flowers springing up; my heart is full of revelry and joy." 3203

But suddenly a sorrowful event occurred. For the latter end of joy is always woe, God knows. The joy of this world is soon gone, and if an orator could compose beautifully, he could confidently write it in a chronicle as a notable fact. Now let every wise man listen; this story is every bit as true, I dare swear, as the book of Lancelot of the Lake¹⁹, whom women hold in great reverence. Now I will return to my text. 3214

A coal-fox²⁰, sly and unrighteous, who had dwelt three years in the grove, by decree of almighty Providence burst through the hedges that same night into the yard where stately Chanticleer was accustomed to stroll with his wives. And there the fox lay quietly in a bed of cabbage until it was past eleven o'clock, awaiting his time to fall upon Chanticleer, as do all these homicides that lie in wait to murder men are glad to do. 3225

False murderer, lurking in your lair! You new Iscariot²¹, new Ganelon²², false deceiver, just like the Greek Sinon that brought Troy utterly to woe²³! May that morning be accursed, O Chanticleer, on which you flew from your rafter into the yard! Well you were warned by your dreams that this day was perilous to you. But what God foresees must come to

¹⁹ Lancelot of the Lake, Famed Arthurian knight, lover of Queen Guinevere, both of whom fell from grace when their affair was made public.

²⁰ Coal-fox. A fox with black markings, as made with coal.

²¹ Iscariot. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus Christ.

²² Ganelon. Betrayed Roland in *Song of Roland*. See Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* 2389 and *Shipman's Tale* 194.

²³ Sinon . . . woe. Deceived the Troys into accepting the Trojan Horse, in which the Greeks were hidden. See Vergil's *Aeneid* 2.57-267, and Chaucer's *House of Fame* 152-56 and *Squire's Tale* 209-10.

pass, according to certain scholars. You may witness it from any perfect scholar that there is great difference of opinion in the schools and great disputation about this matter, and there always has been among a hundred thousand people. 3239

But I cannot sift the wheat from the chaff²⁴, as can the holy doctor Augustine or Boethius or Bishop Bradwardine²⁵; whether God's glorious foreknowledge compels me by necessity to do a thing (by necessity I mean absolute necessity), or if I am granted free choice to do or not that same thing, though God foreknew it long before; or whether His knowing does not constrains at all except by a conditional necessity. With such matters I will not concern myself. 3251

My tale is all about a cock, as you may hear, who took his wife's counsel, to his sorrow, to walk in the yard that morning, after he had dreamed his dream of which I told you. Women's pieces of advice are often fatal. Woman's advice brought us first to woe and made Adam depart from Paradise where he was merry and at ease. But because I know not whom I might disturb if I should insult women's advice, let us pass it over, for I said it only in sport. Read what authors, who treat such matters, say of women. These are the cock's words and not mine; I cannot imagine harm by any woman. 3266

Pertelote lay fairly in the sunshine with all her sisters nearby, bathing herself merrily in the sand, and the gallant Chanticleer sang more merrily than the mermaid in the sea; for Physiologus in truth says that they sing merrily and well²⁶. And it so happened, as

²⁴ Chaff. The non-essential matter. Chaucer often distinguishes the kernel or fruit of the wheat (or corn), the essential matter, from the chaff, the full description (perhaps non-essential) of the matter.

²⁵ Augustine . . . Bradwardine. The original controversy over the relations between the divine and human will, and the related concepts of foreknowledge and free will, was in the Fourth Century between St. Augustine, who maintained that man was born in original sin and could be saved only by divine grace, and Pelagius, who maintained that man was born innocent and had the free will to do good or evil. Boethius tried to reconcile the Augustinian and Pelagian positions. In Chaucer's own time, Thomas Bradwardine, Oxford professor and at the time of the death Archbishop of Canterbury (1349), showed that the controversy was still very much alive by writing a major theological treatise *De causa Dei contra Pelagium et de virtute causarum* (The cause of God versus Pelagian and concerning the nature of causation [in the world]). (JHF)

²⁶ Physiologus. Author of the very popular *Bestiary*, which described real and imaginary animals and attributed to them moral qualities.

he cast his eye upon a butterfly among the cabbages, that he noticed this fox who lay hidden. He had no mind then to crow, but cried at once, "Cok! cok!" and started up like a man frightened in his heart. For by instinct a beast is glad to flee from his natural enemy if he should see it, even if he had never seen it with his eye before. 3281

This Chanticleer, when he first detected him, would have fled, except that the fox immediately spoke, "Alas, gentle sir, where do you want to go? Are you afraid of me, your own friend? Now surely I would be worse than a fiend if I desired harm or indignity to you. I have not come to spy upon your privacy, but in truth only to listen how you sing. For truly you have as merry a voice as any angel in heaven, and more feeling in music than Boethius²⁷ had, or any singer. My lord your father (may God rest his soul), and your mother too, by her courtesy, have been in my house, to my great content; and you, sir, I would gladly please, surely. And speaking of singing, I must say, may I be struck blind if I ever heard anyone, except you, sing as did your father in the morning. 3302

"Surely, all that he sung was from the heart. And to make his voice stronger he took such pains that he had to shut both his eyes, he cried so loud, standing on tip-toe as well and stretching forth his long, slender neck. And he was also of such discretion that there was no man in any land who could surpass him in song or wisdom. 3311

"I have indeed read in the life of Burnel the Ass²⁸, among the verses, about a cock, who, because a priest's son, when he was young and foolish, gave him a rap on his leg, in after years made him to lose his estate. But certainly there is no comparison between his wisdom and subtlety and discretion and your father's. Now sing, sir, for sweet charity's sake. Let's see--can you imitate your father?" 3321

Chanticleer began to flap his wings, like one who could not detect his treachery, so ravished he was by the flattery. Alas! You lords, in your courts are many

²⁷ Boethius. Late Roman philosopher (c.475-525), best-known for his *Consolation of Philosophy*, but also the author of the standard treatise on music in the Middle Ages, *De Musica*.

²⁸ Burnel the Ass. *Speculu, Stultorum* (Mirror of Fools), a popular Latin satire of the donkey who was dissatisfied with the length of his tail. Most of the medieval universities and religious orders are satirized in connection with his travels seeking to get his tail lengthened. In the *Speculum*, the boy had hit a cock with a stick; years later when the boy was about to be ordained as a priest, the cock failed to crow causing him to oversleep and lose his benefice. (JHF)

false flatterers and parasites, who please you more, in faith, than he who tells you the truth. Read about flatterers in Ecclesiasticus²⁹, and beware of their treachery. 3330

Chanticleer stood high on his toes, stretching his neck and shutting his eyes, and began to crow loudly. Up started Sir Russel the fox at once, seized Chanticleer by the throat and bore him away on his back toward the wood, for as yet nobody gave chase. 3337

O destiny that may not be eluded! Alas that Chanticleer flew down from the rafters and that his wife did not care about dreams! And all this bad fortune fell on a Friday! O Venus, goddess of pleasure, why would Chanticleer, who was your servant and did all within his might in your service (more for delight than to multiply the world), endure to die upon your day? 3346

O Geoffrey de Vinsauf³⁰, dear sovereign master, who when your noble king Richard was slain by shot did mourn his death so sorely, why do I not have your learning and your pen now to reproach Friday as you did! (For truly it was on a Friday he was slain.) Then I would show you how I could mourn Chanticleer's dread and torment. Not since Ilium³¹ was won and Pyrrhus had seized King Priam by the beard and slain him with his drawn sword, as the *Aeneid*³² says, was ever such cry and lamentation made by ladies as by the hens in the yard, when they saw this sight of Chanticleer. 3361

Above all Madame Pertelote shrieked, louder than Hasdrubal's wife³³ when her husband perished and the Romans had burned Carthage; she was so full of torment and frenzy that she leapt into the fire and burned herself with a steadfast heart. O woeful hens, even so you cried as did the senators' wives when

²⁹ Ecclesiasticus. Biblical book that reflects this thought often.

³⁰ Geoffrey of Vinsauf. Author of the *Poetria Nova*, an early thirteenth-century treatise on the art of poetry, who had considerable influence on Chaucer's early poetry. Geoffrey of Vinsauf offered a model lament on the death of Richard I (d. 1199), which Chaucer, in a sense, burlesques in the following passage. (ACC & JHF)

³¹ Ilium. The walled city of Troy.

³² *Aeneid*. Vergil's epic poem, which describes the end of the Trojan war (including the death of Priam, 2. 469ff.) and Aeneas' search and fight for the land that will eventually become Rome.

³³ Hasdrubal's wife. Hasdrubal, King of Carthage, was defeated by the Roman Scipio (Africanus Minor) in 146 BC.

Nero³⁴ burned the city of Rome and their guiltless husbands all perished, slain by this Nero. 3373

But now I return to my tale once more. This poor widow and her two daughters heard these hens cry and lament, and started out the door immediately and saw the fox make toward the wood, bearing the cock away on his back. "Out! Alas! Help!" they cried. "Ho! Ho! The fox!" and after him they ran, and many other people with cudgels. Colle, our dog, ran, and Garland and Talbot³⁵, and Malkin with her distaff³⁶ in hand; the cow and calf ran and the hogs themselves, so afraid were they for the barking of the hounds and the shouting of the men and women; they ran till they thought their hearts would burst. 3388

They yelled like fiends in hell. The ducks quacked as if they were being slaughtered, and the geese in fear flew over the tree-tops. A swarm of bees came out of the hive, so hideous was the noise. Ah God bless! Surely Jack Straw³⁷ and his rabble never made shouts half so shrill when they were slaughtering a Fleming, as were made this day after the fox. They brought horns of brass, of wood, of horn and bone, and blew and bellowed in them, and so shrieked and whooped indeed until it seemed as if the heavens would drop. 3402

Now, good men, I pray you all listen. Lo, how Fortune suddenly overturns the hope and arrogance of her foe! This cock, lying upon the fox's back, in all his fright spoke to the fox and said, "Sir, if I were you, so may God help me, I should say, 'Turn back, all you proud churls! May a true pestilence fall on you! Now that I have come to this wood's edge, the cock shall remain here, in spite of anything you can do. I will eat him, in faith, and do so at once.'" 3413

"In faith, it shall be done," answered the fox. And as he spoke that word, at once the cock broke away nimbly from his mouth and flew immediately high upon a tree. 3418

And when the fox saw the cock was gone, "Alas! Chanticleer!" he said; "alas! I have done you wrong

³⁴ Nero. Decadent Roman emperor who did not care when Rome burned. See Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* 2463-2550.

³⁵ Talbot and Gerland. Also dogs.

³⁶ Distaff. The staff used to hold the wool in the process of spinning.

³⁷ Jack Straw. One of the reported leaders of the Peasants' Revolt in and around London in 1381, in which many of the Flemish (Belgian) merchants and manufacturers were killed because their great success was perceived as the result of unfair competition.

to frighten you, when I seized and brought you out of the yard." 3421

"But, sir, I had no ill intent; come down and I shall tell you what I meant. I shall tell the truth to you, so may God help me!" 3425

"No then," said the cock, "I curse both of us, and first I curse myself, both blood and flesh, if you should trick me more than once. No more shall your flattery make me sing and shut my two eyes. For he who willfully shuts his eyes when he should see, may God let him never thrive!" 3432

"No," said the fox, "but God give him bad fortune who is so indiscreet as to prattle when he should hold his peace!" 3435

Lo, such a thing it is to be negligent and heedless and trust flattery! But you who maintain this tale to be foolishness, about nothing but a fox and a cock and a hen, take the moral, good sirs. For St. Paul says that all that is written is written for our learning, in truth. Take the fruit and leave the chaff³⁸. And now may the good God, if His will be so, as says my lord³⁹, make us all good Christians and bring us to His heavenly bliss. Amen 3446

Here is ended the Nun's Priest's Tale.

[Epilogue]

"Sir Nun's Priest," said our Host, "may your breeches be blessed for this merry tale of Chanticleer! By my word, if you were a secular man, a very hearty fellow you would be with women. See what brawn and what a neck this gentle priest has, and what a chest! He looks with his eyes like a sparrow-hawk. He does not need to dye his color with brasil or Portugal⁴⁰. Now may goodness come to you for your tale, sir! 3460

And after that, with a merry look, he spoke to another as you shall hear. 3462

Translated and Edited by Gerard NeCastro
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Citation. Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. NeCastro, Gerard, ed. and trans. eChaucer: <http://www.umm.maine.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer>

³⁸ Fruit and Chaff. See note above, 3240.

³⁹ My lord. The Ellesmere manuscript includes a note that this is a reference to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but the relevance of the reference is not clear.

⁴⁰ Brasil or Portugal. Red dyes.

