

The Priest and the Fox:  
Tricksters in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*

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The nefarious escapades of the trickster Reynard the Fox emerged from the beast fable genre in the twelfth-century Latin poem *Ysengris*, a direct antecedent of the French *Roman de Renart* and ancestor of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Chaucer appropriates the low comedy *humour gaulois* and "pithy moralizing," typical of fabliaux, "a racy and often cynical comedy, savoring sex and violence, though not without subtler moments" (Owen ix), but puts his own "tongue-in-cheek" spin on the French Branch II tale of the clever fox and the duped cock.

Although the figure of Reynard is prevalent in trickster lore, the primary trickster at play in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* may be not the fox but the teller of the tale, the Nun's Priest himself who travels the road to Canterbury. Both share trickster's capacity for slippery rhetoric. Indeed, the Nun's Priest crosses and re-crosses his trail of meaning as effectively as a smooth-talking fox tricks a bemused rooster into closing his eyes. His use of "ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox" are, thus, indicative of the presence of trickster (Hyde 7).

Like Chauntecleer struggling to interpret the fox's meaning, the Nun's Priest's fellow pilgrims (and by extension the reader) are entirely responsible for interpretation- the responsibility to effectively separate the "chaff" from the "fruyt." This is a tricky proposition, however. The Nun's Priest tests his fellow pilgrims' ability to discern the deeper meaning of his deceptively simple and entertaining tale told as *exempla*. He obliquely challenges them to find the balance between the mutually dependent themes of "sentence" (the moral) and "solas" (the entertaining) in his tale and "al that writen is" (*NPT* 3441).

The Nun's Priest and the fox share the trickster's ability to challenge their listeners through doubleness of language, speaking that which is ambivalently true and/or untrue depending on the listener's interpretation. For example, the fox tells an ambiguous truth, if he has eaten Chauntecleer's mother and father, when he tells Chauntecleer that

My lord youre fader - - God his soul blesse - -  
And eek youre mooder, of hire gentilesse,  
Han in myn hous ybeen to my greet ese.  
And certes, sire, ful fayn wolde I yow plese. (*NPT* 3295-98)

The fox's language takes on the overtones of a fairytale riddle: What is his house? His den or his belly? As in fairytale, deciphering the correct meaning is a matter of life or death for Chauntecleer, and by extension –the listener. Language, whether spoken by human or fox, therefore, becomes a trap.

The previous example is analogous to the Nun's Priest's reminders to his listeners that "My tale is of a cok" (*NPT* 3252) – a simple truth imbedded in misleading high rhetoric pertaining to complex human issues such as free will and predestination. "Those [hidden] truths may not be clearly discernable, or their seriousness may be or may seem to be subverted by

comic possibilities,” as Saul Nathaniel Brody argues, “but as in the case of Chauntecleer, the very salvation of the pilgrims may depend upon their ability to interpret what they hear” (44). The listener, like Chauntecleer, should be cautious, therefore, not to take language literally – especially when it’s a smooth-talking trickster telling them not to.

The fox, like the Nun’s Priest, also exhibits a penchant for referring to outside authorities to lend credence to his points. For example, he states that “I have wel rad in *Daun Burnel the Asse*” (NPT 3291-94) as a further means of enticing Chauntecleer to close his eyes. This impresses the rooster enough that, to his detriment, he complies and ends up trapped in the fox’s mouth. Similarly, the Nun’s Priest’s reference to “Phisiologus” is used to authenticate a simile in which Chauntecleer “so free/ Soong murier than the mermayde in the see” (NPT 3269-70). The listener is casually encouraged to accept the odd comparison between a cock and a mermaid because of the credibility afforded by a well-respected outside source.

Yet the listener is simultaneously warned not to accept the simile too blithely. According to Friedman, “A medieval audience would have known, from ‘Physiologus,’ and a variety of other sources, that the mermaid [. . .] was a figure for the deceiver who lulls his victim with sweet words” (263). Friedman goes on to point out that

Such a view of the siren-mermaid is offered by *De Naturis Rerum* of Thomas of Cantimpre, the thirteenth-century Dominican who compiled his encyclopedia as an exempla collection for preachers, so that when they noticed the attention of their listeners flagging they could make use of “the natures and properties of created things [. . .] to allure the ears of the sluggish in a new manner.” (263-64)

Who is singing like the mermaid then? Chauntecleer or the Nun’s Priest? The Nun’s Priest is giving the aware a hint as to his rhetorical technique by luring us to take his words at face value and pointing out the potential dangers simultaneously. A tricky situation indeed.

The Nun’s Priest’s ability to argue “both sides at once” (Cooper 351) creates contradiction and ambiguity – the hallmarks of trickster. This forces the listener to engage in a textual world full of humorous paradoxes – an epic in a chicken’s yard. The inference is that “where there is real ambivalence [. . .] the loser is that person who chooses a single side of the contradiction” (Hyde 274). In other words, the individual who chooses, or is capable of appreciating only the “sentence” or the “solas” of the tale ends up losing the game.

By using contradictions, the Nun’s Priest tests the individual whose cunning allows him or her to see both sides – the cunning to appreciate the dual qualities of the moral and the entertainment as well as truth and fiction. It is difficult, however, to discern them. His contradictions are as seemingly innocuous as his description of Chauntecleer as a cock who “knew by kynde and by noon oother lore/ That it was pryme” (NPT 3196-97), and yet is also able to determine that “The sonne [. . .] is clomben up on hevene/ Fourty degrees and oon” (NPT 3198-99). The trickster’s gambit is subtly executed with a verbal sleight of hand.

The contradictions also range to the complex. For example, Chaucer’s change of Reynard from the mock-heroic protagonist of the *Roman de Renart* to the antagonist of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* engenders the first of the undeveloped biblical allegories contradicted by the text. The Nun’s Priest compares the fox to Judas Iscariot. This has obvious biblical implications and is intensified by the standard medieval analogy of the cock as “The bird that heralds day” and “Christ, the awaker of our souls” (qtd. in Miller 305). Through the allusions, the fox’s character radically changes from the Branch II rascal who “goes there [into the garden] to amuse himself”

(*Reynard* 51) to that of a “false mordour, lurkyng in the den” (*NPT* 3226) and perhaps the betrayer of Christ himself.

While the implied biblical allegory works in the context of the fox as an antagonist, it is contradicted by Chauntecleer as a protagonist. The cock is married to “his wyves alle” (*NPT* 2883) and has a tendency to “trad” his hens in the service of Venus “Moore for delit than world to multiplie” (*NPT* 3345). None of this, however, is pointed out by the Nun’s Priest. Instead, the ironic portrayal of the cock as a Christ-like figure that enjoys sex with his many wives indicates the Nun’s Priest shares the tendency for irreverence typical of the diverse poets of the trickster tales of the *Roman de Renart*.

“We should not,” however, according to Owen, “think of the poets as intent on ridiculing religion itself or its honest ministers; they found anything and anyone good for a laugh, and not least of their natural enemies, those lacking a sense of humor but full of their own importance” (xii). It may well be that the listener who unquestioningly accepts the Nun’s Priest’s identification of the fox with Judas and the cock with Christ without appreciating its inherent humor is the victim of his indirect ridicule.

Another more complex contradiction is at issue in lines 3230-66, which dramatizes the Nun’s Priest’s abilities to affect his listeners through presentation as well as words. The Nun’s Priest raises the question of free will and predestination when he apostrophizes:

O Chauntecleer, accursed be that morwe  
That thou into that yerd flaugh from the bemes!  
Thou were ful ywarned by thy dremes  
That thilke day was perilous to thee. (*NPT* 3230-33)

In the next line, however, he undercuts his lamentation: “but what that God forwoot moot medes be” (*NPT* 3234). The contrast between the emotionally heightened tone of lines 3230-33 and the simplicity of line 3234 is striking, and is indicative of his tendency for “undercutting [ . . . ] high style with a reminder that it is empty noise” (Cooper 355). Too, the credulous listener may very well be tricked into forgetting that the lamentation is not for a human but a rooster because of the Nun’s Priest’s dramatic use of heightened rhetoric. Still, the bathetic reminder quickly brings back the realization that this is all a cock-n-rooster story, if not cock-n-bull.

Funnily enough, after raising the argument of free will and predestination, that admittedly inflames scholars to “greet altercacioun” (*NPT* 3237), the Nun’s Priest drops the issue altogether: “I will nat han to do of swich materre” (*NPT* 3251). This, in essence, can lead the gullible to search for a definite answer to an insoluble question which is raised by an enigmatic narrator to begin with.

Too, the Nun’s Priest’s deliberate use of tortuous rhetoric to ponder the dense argument has a dizzying effect:

Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng  
Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thing - -  
“Nedely” clepe I simply necessitee - -  
Or elles if free choys be graunted me  
To do that same thing or do it noght  
Though God forwoot it er that it was wrought;  
Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel

But by necessitee condicioneel. (*NPT* 3243-50)

The opinions of Boethius, St. Augustine, and Bradwardine are looped together in a knotty passage. This trickster's trap of bafflement potentially disables the listener's ability to separate the wheat from the chaff, particularly if the listener has been gulled into forgetting that the philosophical argument pertains in this context not to humankind, but to roosterkind.

However, the Nun's Priest again neglects to point the paradox out. Instead of determining if Chauntecleer's decision to "walken in the yerd upon that morwe" (*NPT* 3254) was an issue of predestination or free will, he suggests rather a "Wommennes conseil" is responsible.

Chauntecleer's dismissive wife, the hen Pertelote, misinterprets her husband's ominous dream of being eaten. According to the Nun's Priest, this leads to Chauntecleer's fateful decision to leave the safety of the roost despite his forebodings of danger. Female culpability for the paradoxical "fortunate fall" brings about another set of tantalizing, though unfulfilled, allegorical resonances which are contradicted by the text. These too can be easily missed because of the Nun's Priest's clever use of the beast fable tradition.

The Nun's Priest states that "Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;/ Wommennes conseil broghte us first to wo/ And made Adam fro Paradyse to go" (*NPT* 3256-58). The allusion to Adam equates Pertelote with Eve, but the allegory is contradicted on a number of levels. First, Pertelote does not tempt Chauntecleer down from the beam, rather, he chooses to fly down because her sexual desirability fills him with joy:

Al be that I may nat on yow ryde  
For thatoure perche is maad so narwe, allas-  
I am so ful of joy and of solas  
That I deffye both swevene and dreem  
And with that word he fleydoun fro the beem. (*NPT* 3168-72)

The dramatic irony can distract the susceptible, however. The listener knows the fox is there, but Chauntecleer doesn't. At this point, the focus is on what's going to happen, not on who's responsible.

Additionally, Chauntecleer and Pertelote are not banished from the Widow's garden, which, by extension, is equated with Eden. Instead, the Widow and her daughters give clamorous chase after the fox has seized the rooster: "It seemed as if that hevne sholde fall" (*NPT* 3401). Hence, the Widow's chase is analogous to Divine attempts to save mankind—a wonderful bit of irony potentially lost in the raucous plot.

Chaucer's change from the male "Constant des Noues, an extremely wealthy peasant" (*Reynard* 53) of the earlier *Reynard* tale with the same plot to the "pore wydwe somdeel stape in age" (*NPT* 2821) ultimately fosters the dominant contradiction to both the issues of women's counsel and foreknowledge. F. Anne Payne points out that "According to the rules of hierarchy in fable, animals move up into the role of men, and men move up into the role of gods; Chauntecleer and his sisters are the human beings" (205-06). The rich irony enabled by the rules of beast fable hierarchy is that a female god presides over the chickens, and the issue of foreknowledge is undermined because the "wydwe" has absolutely no idea that the fox is nearby. However, the trusting listener can be trapped in the jaws of bafflement by the Nun's Priest as easily as the fox traps Chauntecleer.

The implied Adam allegory is further contradicted because Chauntecleer's inferred downfall is averted when he escapes the fox by tricking him into opening his mouth. He then flies back up into a tree to safety. We can question if perhaps the downfall is complete, that it is a salvation cycle – Chauntecleer resurrected so to speak. However, to do so is to forget the cock's duping of the fox and the fox's failure to re-dupe the cock. Is salvation a "tricking" of the devil? Christ as a trickster? Certainly it creates a wonderful bit of *aporia*, "the trap of bafflement invented by a" trickster who is more "cunning than those who think only to travel forward through a transparent world" (Hyde 49). This re-emphasizes the Nun's Priest's slanted warning that all is not as it seems. This is a simple tale about a rooster, isn't it?

The interpretive challenge the Nun's Priest creates through his clever use of contradictions culminates in the three separate morals offered at the end of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The *proverbes au villain*, or folk sayings, are typical of the beast fable genre and Chaucer stays with the convention allowing both the Nun's Priest and Chauntecleer to offer morals at the end of their respective tales (Owen xi). The Nun's Priest states that "swich it is for to be reccheles/ And necligent, and trust on flaterye" (NPT 3436-37), and Chauntecleer declares:

Thou [the fox] shalt namoore thurgh thy flaterye  
Do me to singe and wynke with myn eye;  
For he that wynketh whan he sholde see,  
Al willfully, God lat him nevere thee! (NPT 3429-3432)

These morals tantalize because they too seem to be snares set to entrap the unsuspecting.

If we accept avoiding flattery as the moral of the tale, then it is an odd moral indeed for a beast fable told by a priest as *exempla* on a holy pilgrimage to Canterbury. Too, the point seems to be not to avoid using flattery, but rather to avoid being taken in by flattery. After all, the fox flatters the cock in order to catch him, but the cock flatters the fox in order to escape.

The key then to divining the significance of the moral may well lie in the etymological origin of the word "flattery," which both the Nun's Priest and Chauntecleer use. The *Oxford English Dictionary* denotes a possible origin in the Old French word "*flater*," which means, "to smooth." If the derivation is correct, the morals would then advise against being taken in by anything smooth. This may be precisely the advice the listener needs since the Nun's Priest relies on the recognizable form of the beast fable to "smooth over" the numerous paradoxes and contradictions. The form provides a deceptively smooth surface for the traps in the tale.

The possible derivation also informs the Nun's Priest's subtle warnings against being taken in by his rhetoric. His enigmatic exhortation to remember "For Seint Paul seith that al that written is, / To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis,/ Taketh the fruyt and lat the chaf be stille" (NPT 3441-43) tells the listener to be aware. To listen only to the surface of the tale is to succumb, like the Host, to his masterful storytelling technique. In order to avoid being like the Host, who focuses only on the ribaldry of the tale, the Nun's Priest's listeners should not close their ears, or readers their eyes, to ploys playing with insoluble and contradictory issues expressed in highly entertaining but slippery ways.

In the *Roman de Renart*, Reynard often disguises himself as a clergyman in order to perpetrate a trick. And as Owen points out about Reynard's appearance in medieval art work, "when we come across a fox [. . .] dressed in priest's vestments, we may suspect a knowledge of the *Roman* or a closely related work" (xvi). Therefore, it should perhaps not be surprising that

the Nun's Priest, like the trickster Reynard, spins a marvelous tale that potentially entraps the credulous, or single-minded, in a maze of contradicted allegories and convoluted rhetoric.

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