

Decoding the Ambiguity of "the Nun's Priest's Tale"¹

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ABSTRACT

The multi-layered complexity of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" seems praiseworthy, but it potentially causes readers to feel uncertain of what the tale is all about. Derek Brewer summarizes the various critical readings of the tale and concludes that the presence of such sundry critical viewpoints about the same literary piece induces one to wonder, "what is this nature; what is the status of the text, that can sustain such inconsistencies, give rise to such diverse interpretations? How should we accommodate such variety?" (1984: 91). To resolve such a problem, Brewer suggests that "we have to take Chaucer's own word for it [the tale]: 'my tale is of a cok'" (1984: 106). This viewpoint seems insightful; nevertheless, it explains neither the structural nor thematic ambiguity of the tale. Also, it pays little attention to how centralizing Chauntecleer's dream experience, which constitutes the fulcrum of "the Nun's priest's Tale", into the narrative influences the tale's clarity and confounds its thematic value. Thus, this paper discusses the main events that obscure the structural and thematic texture of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" and explains how the tale's complex structure engenders its own thematic ambiguity and vagueness. The paper analyzes the dominant ambiguity and vagueness of "the Nun's priest's Tale" by examining the role of the narrator as well as the influence of Chauntecleer's conversations with both Pertelote and the Fox in establishing the tale's mysterious scaffold.

Keywords: Chaucer, dream visions, Middle English poetry, the *Canterbury Tales*, "the Nun's Priest's Tale", narrative ambiguity, Chauntecleer the Cock.

1. Introduction

Emphasizing the complexity of "the Nun's Priest's Tale", most critics contend that this specific tale is "at once one of Chaucer's most light-hearted and most artistically complex tales" (Finlayson, 2005: 493). Helen Cooper views "the Nun's Priest's Tale" as "a kind of story-collection in miniature that works through receding layers of narrative" (1983: 5). The complexity of the tale, as Cooper believes, stems from the structural as well as thematic layers or crusts that constitute the overall texture of Chauntecleer's dream as well as the entire narrative. Similarly, Finlayson argues that the tale seems "in its overall form and overt moralistic purpose, a beast-fable; but it very rapidly becomes a mock-epic and, by its end, has mingled epic, burlesque, parody, tragedy, dream vision and debate, romance and allegory" (2005: 493). The tale is classifiable into various, if not contradicting, literary genres; therefore, it can be read from different perspectives and associated with many didactic and thematic functions. This means that the tale's formalistic and moralistic richness makes it hard, if possible at all, for readers to associate such a tale with any specific approach of writing or categorize it into any notorious literary genre in the medieval era.

This multi-layered richness of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" is interesting, but it potentially causes readers to feel uncertain of what the tale is all about. Considering the tale's "kaleidoscope of genres" (Finlayson, 2005: 493), Derek Brewer summarizes the many critical readings of the tale and concludes that the presence of such sundry critical viewpoints about the same literary piece induces one to wonder, "what is this nature; what is the status of the text, that can sustain such inconsistencies, give rise to such diverse interpretations? How should we accommodate such variety?"

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(1984: 91). In response to all these questions, Brewer suggests that "we have to take Chaucer's own word for it: 'my tale is of a cok'" (1984: 106). This means that to resolve the chaotic atmosphere of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" readers should read the "Nun's Priest's Tale" as "a folye... of a fox, or of a cok and hen" (Chaucer 1987: *CT*, vii, 3438-9). This viewpoint is insightful; nevertheless, it explains neither the structural nor thematic ambiguity of the narrative.

Brewer pays little attention to how centralizing Chauntecleer's dream experience, which constitutes the fulcrum of "the Nun's priest's Tale" (Kordecki, 2011: 21), into the narrative influences the tale's clarity and confounds its thematic value. Relying on the viewpoint that "dreams are... riddles" (Irigaray, 1985: 138), this paper aims at analyzing the dominant ambiguity and vagueness of "the Nun's priest's Tale" by examining the role of the narrator as well as the influence of Chauntecleer's conversations with both Pertelote and the Fox in establishing the tale's mysterious scaffold. The paper discusses the main events that obscure the structural and thematic texture of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" and explains how the tale's complex structure engenders its own thematic ambiguity and vagueness. To better achieve this, it is necessary to introduce first "the Nun's Priest's Tale" as a beast fable and show how Chaucer manipulates such a narrative mode or genre.

2. The Beast Fable Genre

Obviously, the term beast(s) fable or animal(s) fable fully depends on the word "fable" (Latin *fabula*), which is defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, as "a brief tale in verse or prose that conveys a moral lesson, usually by giving human speech and manners to animals and inanimate things...Fables often conclude with a moral, delivered in the form of an epigram" (Baldick, 1990: 80). This implies that regardless which animal figures are presented in the narrative and how they are portrayed, such figures are made in charge of delivering a moral lesson. Discussing "Aesop's Fable of the Wolf and the Lamb", Clayton argues that the Wolf and the Lamb are insignificant as animal figures and therefore the narrative should not be simply read as a story about animals. "In this fable," Clayton writes, "power, wickedness and malice triumph over weakness, innocence and honesty" (2008: 180). Whether or not such a moral theme reflects people's ethical experiences in reality, it devotes the narrative its weight and makes it an invaluable didactic means. In Bussey's words, "fables are, in fact, admirably calculated to make lasting impressions on the minds of all persons...to convey to them moral instruction" (1984: 6). This probably explains why fables have been used since the time of the Greeks, e.g. *Aesop's fables*, to educate children and show them "the doctrine of *Universal Love*, upon which Christianity itself was founded, and on which it still subsists" (Bussey, 1984: v). In short, the beasts fable is a purely didactic narrative that aims at addressing people's morals and showing them the morally ideal way to adopt.

To emphasize the fables' didactic function, Aesop the Greek (c. 620-560 BC) (Herodotus, 1998) as well as his Roman successor Phaedrus, tends to articulate the moral theme(s) of beasts fables briefly and directly. Elaborating on this quality of Aesop's fables, Francis Bacon contends that "the fable serves as a very appropriate expedient for instruction and persuasion, the higher goals of rhetoric beyond simple entertainment and delight" (1856: 699). Similarly, Tom Burns (2006) emphasizes Aesop's fables' brevity and sort of simplicity, which he attributes to the poet's use of either the *promythium* (the fable's prologue) or *epimythium* (the fable's epilogue) to clearly summarize the moral lesson of the entire narrative. Due to their "poignant, straightforward, and memorable [nature]" (Short & Ketchen, 2005: 817), Bussey (1984) believes that Aesop's fables are appropriate for teaching children as they can read and memorize such brief parables or, at least, their *promythium* and/or *epimythium* easily. This is praiseworthy; nevertheless, it is interesting that while emphasizing the clarity of their moral themes and messages, Aesop's fables potentially marginalize, to a certain degree, their sense of humor. In fact, Aesop's humorous parables are not among his best narratives; they are criticized for their "bitter mockery" (*The Courtier*, 1976: 24).

However, the Aesopian fable influences the structure and tone of the fable genre around the world and inspires many fabulists from different cultures to use their own languages to refigure Aesop's fables and use them as a mode of discourse (Perry, 1952). Among the greatest fabulists and poets who have got influenced by Aesop are Chaucer,

Lydgate, and Henryson as well as the seventeenth-century French fabulist, Jean de la Fontaine (Wheatley, 2000). Regarding Chaucer, Lydgate, and Henryson as well as Marie de France, it is claimed by Richard Lee Garrett (2011) that they all "through their translations, [express] a conscious awareness of, and anxiety about, contemporary sociocultural conditions, with the primary issue common to all of these writers being that of authorial identification--the role, identity, and authority of the author during their respective periods" (1). This indicates that Chaucer, similar to his European contemporaries, has not translated, imitated, or adopted some of Aesop's fables in order to educate his Middle English audience on morals. Instead, he has refigured the Aesopian model "as a means of self-advertisement" (Garrett, 2011: 1).

Garrett supports his claim that Chaucer's involvement in the Aesopian fable tradition is a form of "self-advertisement" by referring to "the Manciple's Tale". He writes (2011: 2),

Chaucer in his fable translations, particularly in *The Manciple's Tale*, is also calling attention to himself as an individual author, attempting to convey truths as a fourteenth-century *actor* while at the same time establishing his voice as a writer of fiction. Through the beast fable he is able to achieve this balance, while at the same time critiquing some of the established literary conventions of the day. While this viewpoint is interesting, it does not consider at all that while "the Manciple's Tale" is entirely a fable, "the Nun's Priest's Tale" is not. The latter is a "kaleidoscope of genres" (Finlayson, 2005: 493). It is a narrative mosaic mainly made of the pilgrim narrator's words, the fable of the cock and fox, and Chauntecleer's dream. Accordingly, what applies to "the Manciple's Tale" does not necessarily apply to "the Nun's Priest's Tale". Whether or not Chaucer's purpose of narrating a fable in "the Manciple's Tale" is associated with "the concepts of the *actor* and *actoritas*" (Garrett, 2011: 93), introducing the fable of the cock and fox in "the Nun's Priest's Tale" should have a completely different purpose --to complicate the narrative and make it more expressive of the complex nature of dreams. The paper explains how Chaucer uses all the narrative components and means to obscure "the Nun's Priest's Tale" and make it as complex as possible, taking into consideration that narrative complexity, in this case, becomes a "mantra...[that] demands an epistemological analysis unbiased by enthusiasm or hostility" (Peruzzi, 2017: 4). Probably, Chaucer fuses two main medieval genres, namely the beast fable and the dream vision, in "the Nun's Priest's Tale" to complicate the narrative, thus provoking readers and critics to spend more time on reading and analyzing such a narrative looking for the "high sentence". To understand how this mechanism of complicating the narrative works in "the Nun's Priest's Tale", the following section investigates the main narrative factors that make "the Nun's Priest's Tale" a complex piece.

3. The Complexity of "the Nun's Priest's Tale"

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" is made of four main segments or sections, namely the narrator's introduction (Chaucer 1987: *CT* vii, 2821-2888), Chauntecleer's narration of the dream (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2892-2907), the debate of Chauntecleer and Pertelote over the significance of dreams (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2908- 3171), and finally the fulfillment of the dream (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3273-3435). The first three parts introduce, narrate, and describe the dream, which constitutes what can be called the dream's verbal transition, while the fourth part reports the fulfillment of the dream, which is embodied by the fall and escape of Chauntecleer, thus representing the dream's factual transition. This structural itemization of the narrative's scaffold indicates that "the Nun's Priest's Tale" is made of different, narrative components and levels, which makes the narrative ambiguous. Nevertheless, to decode that ambiguity, this paper investigates the value, in terms of ambiguity, of three main narrative constituents, namely the narrator, Chauntecleer's conversation with Pertelote, and Chauntecleer's conversation with the Fox.

3.1. The Narrator

From its early beginning, "the Nun's Priest's Tale" indirectly introduces the narrator who tells us about the "povre wydwe" that "was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage" and "in pacience ladde a ful symple lyf" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2821-2826). He/she talks about about the Widow's "yeerd" and the many things in that place including "a cok,

high Chauntecleer" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2847-2849). After that, the tale's overall genre is introduced, that is a narrative in which "Beestes and briddes koude speke and syng" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2881). Finally, the dream is reported: "this Chauntecleer gan gronen in his throte,/ As man that in his dreem is drecched soore" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2887-2888).

Regarding this introduction, Spearing notes that "it is not by accident that Chaucer has brought together in the same poem...a dream and elaborate introduction" (1999: 118). This viewpoint is accurate, but it does not emphasize the significance of the narrator's introduction to Chauntecleer's dream or the whole "Nun's Priest's Tale". The narrator's introduction to the tale is probably to provide Chauntecleer's dream with a realistic frame "in which the fantasies that follow may take their proper place" (Whitlock, 1986: 230). Through the narrator's introduction (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2821-2888), Chauntecleer's dream experience is set in a realistic environment through which the least familiar object or incident in the narrative, namely the dream, is surrounded by many realistic objects and figures. Thus, the introduction of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" allows the narrative to shift from the most realistic to the least realistic and vice versa. This process is probably to de-estrangle the least familiar, or the unrealistic, namely Chauntecleer's dream, and make it more accessible and plausible.

Still, it is undeniable that fusing the realistic with the nonrealistic through the narrator's introduction to "the Nun's Priest's Tale" makes the entire narrative confusing and perplexing. When reading, "But ye that holden this tale a folye,/ As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,/ Taketh the moralite, goode men" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3438-3440), readers do not question the narrative's sincerity. Rather, they enthusiastically scrutinize its lines looking for the "high sentence" as articulated by beasts and birds (Finlayson, 2005: 493). If not, then the narrator's introduction to "the Nun's priest's Tale" is very similar to the narrators' introductions of Chaucer's other dream-vision poetry, such as *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Legend to Good Women*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*. In these narratives, the narrators' introductions are set to establish "the connections between... [the] narrator, dreamer, and reader" (Sarhan and Sa'eed, 2014: 23). Accordingly, the narrator's introduction to Chauntecleer's dream potentially reflects the traditional structure of Chaucer's dream vision poetry, which basically reveals the narrator's amusement "upon a particular phenomenon" (Sarhan and Sa'eed, 2014: 19).

Scrutinizing the narrator's introduction to "the Nun's Priest's Tale", it is obvious that such an introduction is not to comply with the narrative system adopted in Chaucer's other dream visions but rather to provide readers with many details about three of the tale's main characters, namely the Widow, Chauntecleer the Cock, and Pertelote the wife. For instance, it is clearly reported through the narrator's introduction that the Widow is a poor, old woman who lives with her two daughters in a small cottage that has a yard where the Widow breeds some farm animals like chickens and cows (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2821-2846). This concise report may seem structurally decorative for some readers; nonetheless, it alludes to the "domestication of animals in its decisive human intervention in animal destiny [that] provides criticism with a potent category for thinking about nonhumans both in and out of literature" (Kordecki, 2011: 104). This means that the narrator's introduction to "the Nun's Priest's Tale" is to help readers shift from the realm of humans' rationality and principles, which associates animal fables with "the world of fabulous and fictitious" (Wolosky, 2014: 21), into the realm of beast fables in which it is plausible that "Beestes and briddes koude speke and syng" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2881). That is to say, the introductory information provided by the narrator about the Widow and other characters in "the Nun's Priest's Tale" is not structurally ornamental. Rather, it helps readers to leap into the world of "nonhumans" (Kordecki, 2011: 107) that constitutes the structural and thematic scaffold of "the Nun's Priest's Tale". This function may be praiseworthy from a structural perspective; nonetheless, it loads the text with an endless number of thematic reverberations that complicate the text and make it perplexing.

The narrator introduces the tale stating that it is about beasts and birds that can speak and sing; then he directly introduces these speaking birds, Chauntecleer and Pertelote, as a husband and wife (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2883-86). This piece of information may seem unnecessary for the development of the narrative, but it is vital to constitute the perplexing atmosphere of the tale. Instead of elaborating on how that husband-wife relationship can establish an

atmosphere of relaxation and positivity, the narrator indirectly emphasizes Pertelote's carelessness about her husband's mood and psychological status in a way that undermines the whole institution of marriage. The narrator expresses his/her concern about Chauntecleer's dream while Pertelote seems careless about whatever causes her husband "to grone", thus becoming the opposing viewpoint of the narrator who apparently tries to anticipate the impetus of the Cock's groaning and roaring much before Pertelote. Whatever are the conditions that allow the narrator to notice the dreamer's "gronen" much before Pertelote, they cannot be counted on behalf of Pertelote. Rather, many negative remarks can be taken against her, i.e. she is emotionally away from her husband and does not care about her family, she is not as "witty" and "discreet" as the narrator, or she is perhaps very selfish. In short, Pertelote's interruption of Chauntecleer's dream does not reflect any concern about the dreamer's health and safety; it reflects Pertelote's personal disturbance against the vulgar sound of the dreamer's "roore".

The narrator depicts the dreamer "gronen in his throte,/ As man that in his dreem is drecched soore./ And whan that Pertelote thus herde hym roore" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2886-2888). Bulkeley argues that "gronen" and "roore" are expressive sounds of pain, grief, and displeasure that result from psychological or maybe mental disorder, which suggests that Chauntecleer's experience can be taken in as an enigma rather than an apparition or nightmare, which demands for serious interpretations (2016: 157). Simultaneously, Chauntecleer's dream can be taken in as an apparition or nightmare since "gronen" and "roore" are expressive sounds of fear and distress, thus implying that the dream is empty and does not worth interpretations (Macrobius, 1952: 89). Whether Bulkeley's viewpoint or Macrobius's is accurate, "Chaucer is clearly aware of this complex range of possibilities for the dream: he explicitly evokes dream theory several times in his writing, and he implicitly exploits dream experience's complex possibilities" (Kruger, 2006: 72).

However, the narrator's introduction to "the Nun's Priest's Tale" implies that Chauntecleer's dream is possibly part of the two main classes of dreams:

One class was supposed to be influenced by the present or past, but to have no future significance. It included the εἴδω πῶς *insomnia*, which gave a direct representation of a given idea or of its opposite—e.g. of hunger or of its satiation—and the φαντασματα, which lent a fantastic extension to the given idea—e.g. the nightmare or *ephaltes*. The other class, on the contrary, was supposed to determine the future. It included (1) direct prophecies received in a dream (the χρηματισμός or *oraculum*), (2) previsions of some future event (the ὄραμα or *visio*) and (3) symbolic dreams, which needed interpretation (the ὄνειρος or *somnium*). (Freud, 1900: 37-38).

Regardless of which category applies to Chauntecleer's dream, "this variation in the value that was to be assigned to dreams was closely related to the problem of 'interpreting' them. Important consequences were in general to be expected from dreams" (Freud, 1900: 38). In short, Chauntecleer's dream, which is complex by nature, is complicated by the narrator's introduction to the tale, a process that extremely obscures the dream as well as the entire tale.

However, Spearing celebrates such the complexity of Chauntecleer's dream. He writes, "one significance of this uncertainty as to how [the dream] should be classified is that it is part of the tact with which it fulfills its social function" (1999: 27). While this viewpoint is insightful, it does not consider how the dream's natural lack of certainty overshadows its thematic function and moral intentions in the narrative. In fact, "the doubleness of the dream [and its association] with both meaningful revelation and individual agitation" (Kruger, 1992:17) enshroud the dream, from its early beginning, with mystery and uncertainty and make it hard to understand.

Moreover, by asserting that Chauntecleer's dream is probably *somnium*, i.e. apparition or nightmare (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2888-2908), the narrator undermines Pertelote's authority as a dream-interpreter and in consequence advertises himself/herself as an authoritative voice at the level of interpreting dreams. This makes of the prefatory lines (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2882-2889) that introduce Chauntecleer's dream an "extension or support of the dream itself" (Spearing, 1999: 18). In these lines, the narrator bridges the narratological schism that stems from Chauntecleer's debate with Pertelote over the significance of dreams. He/she suggests that Chauntecleer's dream is *somnium*, which is, according to Kruger, "the perfect middle term between revelation and deception. It reliably exposes a truth like the two higher kinds of dream, but it presents that truth in fictional form" (1992: 23). This means that the narrator is not just a

"story-teller" but an authoritative reference of Chauntecleer's dream, a stance that adds to the ambiguity of the dream and its tale.

The narrator loads "the Nun's Priest's Tale" with what Susan Gallick calls "verbal confusion" and "phantom doctrine" (1977: 232), a strategy that makes the dream and its entire tale inspirational, self-powered, and confusing for readers and characters at the same time. Chaucer knows about the complex nature of dreams, and it seems that he wants "the Nun's Priest's Tale" to be fully enshrouded by that complexity. Whether or not this narrative technique is to promote the beast fable into a serious narrative that can teach "goode men" "the moralite" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3440), it complicates the tale and perplexes its thematic value, a stance stressed also by Chauntecleer's conversation with Pertelote

3.2. Chauntecleer's Conversation with Pertelote

The apparently mysterious labyrinth made by the narrator while introducing the dream is followed directly by Pertelote's sort of aimless question and unpredictable attack against Chauntecleer: "What eyeth yow, to grone in this manere?/ Ye been a verray sleper; fy, for shame!" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2890-2891). Pertelote asks her question not only to know what bothers Chauntecleer –if it really matters for her- but in order not to leave her sudden attack against her husband unreasonable. Her rhetorical question paves the way for her to blame her husband whose dream, as she thinks, has no value whatsoever. This results in switching the weight of the whole episode from Chauntecleer the dreamer to Pertelote's anger and misevaluation of her husband's experience; hence, the complexity raised and heightened by the narrator is encountered by Pertelote's "simplicity" and "incuriosity". Consequently, the dream is torn between two opposing interpreting extremes that constitute the dream's gothic or mysterious skeleton, which in its turn overshadows and apparently undermines the thematic cohesiveness of that dream. That is to say, instead of simplifying the dream by giving some clues towards one accurate interpretation, Pertelote, similar to the tale's narrator, is employed to establish the foundations of the dream's gothic structure.

The narrator reports, "'Avoy!' quod she, 'fy on yow, herteless! / Allas,' quod she, 'for, by that God above, / Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love!" (Chaucer 1987: *CT* vii, 2908-2910) Spearing thinks that these lines are "to provide a psychological explanation for the dream that follows; and this is where Chaucer's originality as a dream-poet shows itself most strikingly" (1999: 20). While this is true, it is feasible to take in such a description as part of the narrator's strategy to emphasize Pertelote's controversial personality, as her comment against her husband is unruly "roore". Kordecki believes that Chaucer's narrator views the relationship between Pertelote and Chauntecleer as controversial in order to show the destructiveness of "the voice of a woman working to prop up a vain husband" (2011: 109). In support of this viewpoint, Kordecki refers to Chauntecleer's misinterpretation of the Latin motto, "*Mulier est hominis confusio*" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3164), into "womman is mannes joye and al his blis" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3166), whereas it should be translated into "woman is man's downfall" (Kordecki, 2011: 110).

This reading reasonably relies on the tale's lines, yet it does not consider at all whether or not Chauntecleer himself knows Latin and may have a better translation than the one he introduces to Pertelote. Also, it does not consider Pertelote's knowledge in Latin as evidenced by her reference to Cato, one of the most authoritative Latin philosophers. In light of the given information by the narrator about Chauntecleer, it is hard -if not impossible- to speak with certainty about the Cock's educational background in Latin. Therefore, the reasons that motivate the Cock to use and misinterpret that Latin phrase are uncertain and hard to infer. Still, the vagueness of Chauntecleer's motivation for misinterpreting that Latin motto does not mean that the poet has any plan for allowing his Cock to commit such a mistake. It seems that Chaucer is making use of all the available narrative figures and devices to provide the tale with an atmosphere of vagueness and uncertainty, thus mirroring the dream's mysterious nature or mood.

In the process of enriching the tale's mood of uncertainty, the narrator introduces Chauntecleer and Pertelote as two opposing philosophical poles that have their own logics and logistics on dreams and their interpretations. Each of these two poles is portrayed establishing his/her own authority and plausibility at the cost of the other, which makes the

husband-wife relationship more controversial and vague. In their philosophical argument throughout the tale (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2889-3171), Chauntecleer and Pertelote discuss the divisive validity of dreams by referring to many authoritative figures, philosophers, and theologians, such as Cato, Boethius, Macrobius, Saint Kenelm, Prophet Joseph, Dan Pharaoh, Hector, etc. Pertelote tries to prove that dreams should never be trusted or taken seriously while Chauntecleer tries to prove the contrary. Throughout their debate, Chauntecleer introduces his dream as a *prophetic* experience (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3125-3153), whereas Pertelote considers it a "*mundane*" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2923-2939). Each of the two declaimers has his/her own resonance; nevertheless, the conversation does not come up with a clear conclusion or final consensus about the validity of dreaming.

Chauntecleer closes the conversation with Pertelote stating, "I am so ful of joye and of solas./ That I diffye bothe sweven and drem" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3170-3171). While this statement potentially suggests that Chauntecleer denounces dreams and their validity, it complicates the tale and obscures the personality of the dreamer. The narrative does not provide readers with any clues or justifications of why Chauntecleer has made such a sudden shift of perspective. It can be part of the tale's overall "pattern of reversal" (Brewer, 1984: 103), which is never pointless. It is confusing to see Chauntecleer, who has piled up multiple examples to defend the significance of his prophetic dream, giving up his belief and opinion in favor of his wife's philosophical viewpoint. Brewer considers Chauntecleer's sudden surrender to his wife's viewpoint as part of the tale's "narrative inconsistency" (1984: 104). While this is perceptive, the apparent "illogicality" of Chauntecleer's sudden withdrawal from his debate with Pertelote is either a dim-witted step towards the fulfillment of the catastrophic dream or a reflection of the Cock's passive and irresponsible personality. If it is a step towards the fulfillment of the dream, then the Cock is a stupid character. Who would plot against his/her own life? If it is part of the Cock's irresponsible personality, then why should one care about such a passive figure? Either way, the atmosphere of uncertainty and the sort of illogicality associated with the dreamer's personality make the entire dream a "dull" experience.

A close reading of Chauntecleer's speech to Pertelot demonstrates that the Cock is neither stupid nor passive but an active figure who has his own logic and principles. The Cock says,

Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,
 Of o thing God hath sent me large grace;
 For whan I se the beautee of youre face,
 Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,
 It maketh al my drede for to dyen;
 For al so siker as *In principio*,
Mulier est hominis confusion-
 Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
 Womman is mannes joye and al his blis (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3158-3166)

The Cock withdraws from debating with his wife about the significance and reliability of dreaming by praising her face and eyes. His celebration of Pertelote's physical beauty rather than logic or rhetoric in this specific situation demonstrates that the speaker does renounce his belief in prophetic dreams on behalf of his wife's *compelling* logic; rather, he is attempting to cope with her irrationality and lack of wisdom. The Cock's statement, "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis", potentially reflects his patriarchal belief that women are to be viewed in terms of joy and pleasure, rather than intelligence and wisdom. Chauntecleer stops arguing with Pertelote because he already knows that talking with a woman whose main concern is to get praised for her eyes and face is unrewarding. That is to say, the conversation between Chauntecleer's and Pertelote does not synthesize the declaimers' philosophically opposing perspectives but leaves them incompatible.

The clear opposition between *prophetic* dreams and "'Ne do no fors of dremes'" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2941) is

the fulcrum of the thematic ambiguity of Chauntecleer's dream as well as "the Nun's Priest's Tale" entirely. Considering the philosophical opposition between Chauntecleer and Pertelote, Brody says that "the Nun's Priest's Tale" is "paradoxically both absurd and serious, realistic and unrealistic, fictive and true, and that paradox, that tension between the literature-like and the life-like, is central to the tale. It is the source at once of much of its humor and much of its point" (1979: 33). In short, the many reverberations associated with Chauntecleer's debate with Pertelote about the significance and validity of dreams add to the complexity of the narrative and makes it more ambiguous, an atmosphere that is stressed also by Chauntecleer's conversation with the Fox..

3.3. Chauntecleer's Conversation with the Fox

Stressing the indirect opposition between Chauntecleer's belief in dreams and Pertelote's excessive "simplicity", the narrative focuses on how Chauntecleer tries to restore his dream's significance that has been overshadowed and profaned by the narrator and Pertelote. Against Pertelote and the narrator's viewpoints, Chauntecleer points out that his dream is a prophetic vision that grants him the opportunity to explore his fate. He swears: "By God, me mette I was in swich mischief/ Right now that yet myn herte is soore afright./ Now God,' quod he, 'my swevene recche aright" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2895-97). In this way, Chauntecleer constructs the "divine" or "sacred" scaffold for his dream in an attempt to confront the disequilibrium imposed by Pertelote and the narrator on the Cock's dream through their contradicting perspectives. The Cock obviously believes that "God" is the supreme power that can bring dreams into their fulfillment, "recche aright".

The Cock refutes or, at least, undermines the futile and devastating suggestions or interpretations of the narrator as well as Pertelote by introducing God as the only omnipotent figure that can interpret dreams accurately and bring them into their true fulfillment. Swearing "by God" indicates that the dreamer is confident that "when the deity admonishes, we may escape by vigilance and caution, sacrifice and disaster; but never do divine announcements go unfulfilled" (Macrobius, 1952: 118). The Cock relies on this religious background while addressing Pertelote: "I pray yow that ye take it nat agrief" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 2893). He wants her to listen seriously to his own religious interpretation of the dream and to not view his dream as a joke or "amiss" because "the divine dream 'deserves a very receptive audience'" (Kruger, 2006: 17). This defensive tactic of shielding the dream's dignity is fruitful, but it provides the dream with a new interpretation, which adds to the dream's complexity, especially when connected to the dream's two main contradicting interpretations suggested by the narrator and Pertelote.

However, after finishing his conversation with Pertelote, which implies his shrewd nature, Chauntecleer the Cock goes to the yard, where he perchance meets the Fox who starts a conversation with the Cock. Chauntecleer's astuteness is apparently muffled, or even undermined, by his conversation with the Fox, which seems as a reverberation of the Cock's *passive* obedience to his wife. The conversation between Chauntecleer and the Fox evasively associates Chauntecleer with passivity and fickleness. While this might be the case, it is possible that Chauntecleer has a different understanding and interpretation of that complex situation. After seeing the Fox, the Cock cries out: "'Cok! Cok!' and up he sterte/ As man that was affrayed in his herte./ For natureely a beest desireth flee" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3277-3279). The Cock knows that he should flee away from the Fox but decides to stay around for awhile. He disregards his natural instinct and starts talking with the Fox -although his prophetic dream and well-wrought knowledge should reject that demeanor. The sort of apparent self-contradiction between Chauntecleer's natural instinct on the one hand and demeanor on the other suggests either that the Cock is willing to die and his decision to talk with the Fox is very suicidal or that his natural instincts are numbed by a certain mysterious power. These two interpretations are justifiable and have their own logics; nevertheless, the presence of such contradicting possibilities does not resolve the ambiguity of the dream or Chauntecleer's personality. Rather, it adds to the ambiguity and lack of certainty that envelop the entire narrative.

4. Conclusion

The rich diversity of perspectives associates Chaucer's dream with different philosophical backgrounds and ramifications, thus causing it to get "clothed in doubt" (Macrobius 1952: 118). This diversity of viewpoints implies that Chaucer's dream may have different interpretations and reverberations and that the entire tale is "a confusion of perspectives in its kaleidoscope of genres" (Finlayson, 2005: 493). It also implies that defining and categorizing Chaucer's dream, a representative example of the *unknown*, is problematic. While this seems creative and inspiring, "the doubleness of the dream [and its association] with both meaningful revelation and individual agitation" (Kruger, 2006: 17) enshrouds "the Nun's Priest's Tale", from its early beginning, with mystery and uncertainty and makes it hard to understand. Listening to the Cock's prophetic dream, readers may laugh as if they are listening to a joke that may happen, or they may feel rather solemn and serious due to the Cock's preached wisdom. In a nutshell, the way in which Chaucer's dream is introduced and reported constitutes the kernel of the tale's atmosphere of uncertainty.

Still, against the many probable possibilities associated with Chaucer's dream, it proceeds to its own fulfillment, which affirms its own revelatory value, at the cost of all other possibilities. The fulfillment of that dream involves a series of specious actions and events like the conversation between the Cock and the Fox as well as the Cock's fall into the Fox's mouth, which do not help in resolving the complexity of Chaucer's dream. Rather, they attract the weight of the narrative and the attention of the reader towards the dream's structural and thematic mystery, which inspires the ambiguous atmosphere of the entire narrative.

This indicates that the ambiguity of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" does not come by chance but as a reflection of the thematic complexity of the Cock's dream. In other words, the tale's thematic complexity and ambiguity mirror the structural and thematic complexity of the dream, which makes the dream livelier and the tale more conceivable. Such reticent complexity may downgrade the dream's value and obliterate its prophetic solemnity, but it suggests that dreams are not necessarily "individual" but sometimes collaborative. This explains why the Cock does not have the ultimate authority over his own dream; rather, he is just one authoritative interpreter of the dream among many others. The narrator's prefatory lines as well as Pertelote's harsh and hasty words multiply the probable possibilities through which readers may perceive such a dream that later becomes theirs. The readers -who share Chaucer's dream with the narrator and Pertelote – are given more than one strategy to adopt in order to interpret the Cock's dream.

This is not to diminish the trustworthiness or significance of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" or Chaucer's dream but to clearly state that this specific tale does not stick to the Aesopian conventions of the fable or to Chaucer's conventional structure of dream visions. It rather modifies such conventional structures in favor of narrative complexity, thus provoking more unbiased readings. Thus, reading such a narrative becomes disoriented as holding or defending a certain position does not mean refusing or effacing the opposite. The sense of uncertainty that dominates "the Nun's Priest's Tale" may cause some readers to take the Cock's dream as "a folye, as of a fox or of a cok and he" (Chaucer, 1987: *CT* vii, 3438-3439); nevertheless, it never refutes the prophetic significance of that dream. It is through the atmosphere of uncertainty Chaucer makes of Chaucer's dream a livelier experience and of the whole tale a plausible narrative. Therefore, understanding this tale, rather than any other Chaucerian narrative, demands taking in uncertainty and ambiguity as one of the narrative's main goals. In a nutshell, the ambiguity of "the Nun's Priest's Tale" makes the narrative's thematic function more ambiguous and difficult to understand, yet plausible.

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تحليل الغموض في (حكاية واعظ الراهبة) لتشوسر

مالك جمال زريقات*

ملخص

إن تعدد مستويات التعقيد في (حكاية واعظ الراهبة) لتشوسر من أهم مزايا النص، لكن هذه الخاصية قد تدفع القارئ للشعور بعدم اليقين إزاء القصة، ويلخص ديرك بريور القراءات المتعددة والمرتبطة بالحكاية، ويرى بأنها جميعاً تدفع القارئ للسؤال عن طبيعة ونوعية ومكانة النص الذي يقرأ وكيف أن مثل هذا النص يخلق الكثير من التفسيرات المتنافرة وكيف يمكن للقارئ أن يتعامل مع مثل هذا التنوع (1984: 91). ولحل هذا الإشكال، يقترح بريور أن تقرأ الحكاية بمستواها السطحي: كحكاية ديك (1984: 106). اعتقد أن هذا الطرح ذكياً وعقلانياً؛ ولكنه لا يتعرض لغموض الحكاية على مستوى التركيب أو المغزى وبالتالي فهو لا يساعد القارئ على فهم النص، كما أنه لا يركز على محورية الحلم ودوره في تعقيد القصة وإعطائها معناها وأهميتها الفكرية. وعليه، فيناقش هذا البحث الأحداث الرئيسية المنخرطة في تعقيد القصة على المستوى التركيبي والفكري، ويخلص إلى أن تعقيد القصة ما هو إلا انعكاس لطبيعة الحلم المعقدة. ويحاول البحث تحليل الغموض الذي يكتنف "حكاية واعظ الراهبة" من خلال التركيز على دور الراوي ودور حوارات الديك مع كل من زوجته والثعلب في تعقيد الحلم والسرد معاً.

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