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Silencing the Silencers: Chaucer's Satire of Clerical Authority in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

As a preamble to my thesis, I shall foreground it in the two schools of thought in Chaucer studies: the Robertsonian and Donaldsonian, which, throughout much of their discursive intercourse, have been seen as – sometimes bitterly – contrasting and opposite.

I approve of D. W. Robertson's persuasion to the extent of his belief that the text is inseparable from context. This is even more so, I would argue, given that Chaucer's text is so far removed from us; Thomas Stlinger observes how, "in the 1580s, Sir Philip Sidney, as distant from Chaucer as we are from Jane Austen, could marvel that 'in that misty time he (Chaucer) could see so clearly'" (2). With such a vast temporal and cultural gap, it becomes all the more meaningful and important that E. T. Donaldson's application of close reading and associated "New Criticism" approaches to the *Canterbury Tales* in general be informed by a historical understanding of how Chaucer's readers would have received his works in his own time.

This awareness, however, brings me to the first of many ironies to come in this thesis. Robertson's historically aware approach should not actually bring him to his conclusion:

"We demand tensions in literary art – ambiguities, situational ironies, tensions in figurative language, tensions between fact and symbol, or between reality and the dream... this highly (subjective) "reality" has replaced the romantic infinite. But the medieval world with its

quiet hierarchies knew nothing of these things. Its aesthetic, at once a continuation of classical philosophy and a product of Christian teaching, developed artistic and literary styles consistent with a world without dynamically interacting polarities” (51).

Perhaps Robertson writes the above in making a generalisation on the era; but his statement is very difficult to justify when applied to the period of Chaucer’s lifetime. It is indeed rather strange that Robertson is so detailed and sure about what medieval culture is *not*; could that be his denial of assertions and evidence already put before his eyes? Chaucer’s land and time, late in the medieval era, is still marked by trauma of the Black Death, which has decimated a third of England’s population. The resulting socio-cultural foment arises as a general labour shortage gives rise to democratizing impulses and conservative reactions marked by such events as the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt and the Statute of Labourers. Such, of course, are much less “quiet hierarchies” than they are “dynamically interacting polarities”; and such polarities are amply represented in the cut and thrust of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Miller “quiting” the Knight’s Tale, the Wife of Bath’s tirade against her husbands and society’s institutions, and the animosity between the Friar and the Summoner are just some examples (I 3119). What Robertson calls the medieval era’s “aesthetic”, based on classical philosophy and Christian teaching, is not free from controversy either. Here, then, is the jumping-off point for my thesis; I argue that the discourse of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is indeed grounded in “dynamically interacting polarities” within the fields of philosophy and religion. Old social structures, paradigms and ways of thinking are being challenged by the new. Peggy Knapp theorizes that “discourse is produced by social power”, and correspondingly, that discourse functions as a site where social and ideological conflicts for that power are located (2). Those conflicts, therefore, are played out in the ironies and reversals endemic in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, and others within the *Canterbury Tales* which

it echoes. The scope of my thesis covers, specifically, the following: the rise of individual subjectivity, *experience* and nominalism on one hand, against the limits and abuses of institutional – particularly religious – *auctoritee*.

Revolutionary forces gather pace and new paradigms arise when the old are in decline. This could be said of the relationship between the English laity on one hand, and the church and the aristocracy on the other; a tension which does indeed emerge in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Rigby notes that this was the time of the Papal Schism, which when added on to the wealth and corruption of the English church, meant that that “anti-clerical sentiment was at its pre-Reformation peak”, an opposition manifesting in its most extreme form as Lollardy (1). More popularly, however, anticlericalism is expressed within the contemporary literary genre of estates satire; “the failings of the clergy often receive particular attention” (Rigby 11). Going by the relatively large proportion of coverage given to anticlerical satire in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, Chaucer certainly shares this concern as well. The *Nun's Priest's Tale*, I argue, takes part in this satirical discourse; inasmuch as such a reading of the *Tale* has not heretofore received much scholarly attention. Within the larger frame of the “interacting polarities” of *experience* and *auctoritee*, Chaucer portrays the representational incongruities of anticlerical satire in an ironic moral allegory, highlighting what David Aers describes as the “severe contradictions” between the Church’s proclaimed Christian “self-representations” and the practices of its human representatives (5).

Such a reading is prompted by Harry Bailly’s description of the Nun’s Priest. Up to this point in the sequence of the tales, the Nun’s Priest is mentioned only in passing – in the General Prologue, as one among three priests in the Prioress’ company. The reader, conditioned to reading each pilgrim’s tale in the context of his or her characterisation, is left wanting in this

regard and thus, perhaps, would be especially alert in seeking hints of the Nun's Priest's persona in his prologue, tale and epilogue. In the twelve manuscripts of Fragment VII with the shorter link between the *Monk's* and the *Nun's Priest's Tales*, after Harry listens to the tale, he barely responds at all to the tale itself, merely noting that it is "murie" (VII 3449). Instead of heeding the Nun's Priest's exhortation to take only the "moralitee" from the supposedly authoritative fable, he displaces his commentary onto the tale-teller's person instead. In other manuscripts where Chaucer shifts the *Nun's Priest's Epilogue* to the Monk, the Host clarifies the intent of his comments on either tale-teller: "Ful ofte in game a sooth I have herd seye!" (VII 1964). Here is a hint, perhaps, for critical attention to focus as much on the teller as on the tale, and for the Host's comments to be taken seriously as "sooth". Chaucer now begins to satisfy the reader's curiosity, as the twelve manuscripts then have the Host identify the Nun's Priest with his protagonist, the "roial cok" Chauntecleer, stating that, were he "seculer", he would metaphorically be a "tredefoul" with a "nede of hennes" (VII 3450-53). Harry further points out the Nun's Priest's birdlike eyes and ruddy complexion, which recall Chauntecleer's red "coomb" and "burned gold" colour, and that they have in common a handsome and virile nature (VII 2859). Jill Mann notes, too, that "the cock was frequently interpreted as a symbol of the priest or preacher in the Middle Ages" (*Aesop to Reynard* 252). Could this, then, suggest an allegorical association of the Nun's Priest with Chauntecleer?

There is significant textual evidence to substantiate this association. Chauntecleer's owners are a celibate "povre wydwe" and her "doughtren two", who lead a "ful symple lyf" (VII 2821). Further, Chauntecleer and their other animals are enclosed in their yard, the "clos" (VII 3360). All together, these connote a "cloister" and the larger image of an idealized monastic community, living in poverty on "swich as God hire sente" and confined contently away from

worldly excess (VII 2828). With this background, the problematic description of Chauntecleer's seven hens as his "sustres and paramours", with its incestuous implications that are difficult to relate to the text, can be potentially resolved by reading them as sisters in the wydwe's nunnery (VII 2867).

Indeed, the elegant, polished "damoysele Pertelote" brings to mind the "curteisie" of the Prioress Madame Eglentyne, and her young nun, her "chapeleyne", who would doubtless take after her (I 132). As for Chauntecleer, Catherine Cox notes that most fourteenth-century nunneries have (male) priests in residence, who are needed to "conduct the sacraments of Penance and Confession", and escort the nuns on trips outside the cloister – hence the "preestes thre" with the nuns in the Prioress' pilgrimage party (63). Penance and Confession are conducted at Mass, where the priest would also sing the divine service; notably, Russell Fox's choice of flattery is to likewise compliment Chauntecleer for singing like "any aungel hath that is in hevene" (VII 3292). Such priests living with nuns were often the subject of gossip alleging their impropriety, and in the 14th century, there were indeed scandals of resident priests seducing nuns. Cox writes:

"Some priests even lived in a state of concubinage, while maintaining an image of continence and piety... sexual and financial abuses of clerical offices were so rampant in the fourteenth century that by Chaucer's day the priesthood was one of the more criticized vocations, the subject of negative popular sentiment second only perhaps to the antifraternel backlash in its ferocity and imagination" (61).

The antifraternel sentiment, of course, is represented through the friar's exchanges with the summoner; and Chaucer is sure to include monks, clerks, and pardoners in his satire as well, highlighting their abuses of authority for improper financial gain. Given that popular anticlerical

cynicism extends to the priesthood, and that clerical abuses extend from the financial to the sexual as well, I would argue that Chaucer completes these aspects of anticlerical satire through his characterization of the Nun's Priest and his relation to Chauntecleer.

More than that, Chauntecleer is their "paramour" as well, or courtly lover – something enabled by his depth of learning, evident in his use of numerous exempla. The polygamous sexual relationship they all share constitutes a historically realistic abuse of clerical practice that allows us to read the *Nun's Priest's Tale* in a common mould with the *Friar's*, *Summoner's*, and *Pardoner's Tales* (VII 3178). As Helen Phillips notes, "the popular story of the fox and cock was already commonly used... to symbolize Christian ideas: the devil ensnaring the Christian soul, or hypocrisy, especially of false churchmen" (190).

In contrast to the satirical exchange that is the pairing of the *Friar's* and *Summoner's Tales*, a parallel reading of the *Monk's* and *Nun's Priest's Tales* yields much less rivalry, but places the latter tale as a follow-on allegory to the Monk's sequence of exempla; like them, the Nun's Priest tells of Chauntecleer living dangerously in "blynd prosperitee" until Fortune wills otherwise (VII 1994-97). Unlike the Monk's "ensamples", however, Chauntecleer escapes his fall; a simple reason could be that Harry has requested the Priest to make the pilgrims' "hertes glade", which he fulfils by compromising moral gravity to have Chauntecleer survive, for a happy ending (VII 2811).

Yet, with a relationship of sign and signified already established between Chauntecleer and the Nun's Priest, might his moral allegory then be one in which he, the teller, is just as "blynd" as Chauntecleer? The anticlerical *Friar's* and *Summoner's Tales* derive their intense satirical effect from the use of dramatic irony, in which the protagonists fail to perceive the incongruity between their actions as clerical representatives and the Church's self-representation

as the highest moral arbiter. Their blindness to their incongruity, bred by an inveterate self-obsession, forms the locus for a confluence of criticism and comic relief. Likewise, the Priest/Chauntecleer's abuses and excesses would be telling to a reader aware of contemporary currents of anticlericalism, and alert to Harry's hints; but are imperceptible to the character himself, even at the end when Chauntecleer learns not to "wynketh, whan he sholde see,/ al willfully" (VII 3431-2). Unlike the other anticlerical tales, the Nun's Priest's implied abuses are never made explicit; but the sexual sensationalism of doing so would arguably militate against it. The Priest must, at least overtly, retain a dignity higher than that of the churlish Miller and his bawdy tale; as I will go on to show, Chaucer has a larger *entente* for the *Nun's Priest's Tale* beyond the simple portrayal of scandal. Yet by casting as ironic an aspersion as this on the Tale's teller, the Priest, Chaucer begins his undercutting of clerical and literary *auctoritee* from the very core of the tale.

Neither should an allegorical relationship between Chauntecleer and the Nun's Priest be extended to conclude that the entire *Nun's Priest's Tale* should be read allegorically – or at least, exclusively allegorically. The dramatic frame, for a start, following on from the sententious *Monk's Tale*, together with Chauntecleer's and the Priest's constant moralising, does provide an initial impulse towards patristic reading. But a straightforwardly allegorical reading soon breaks down: obvious ironies such as Chauntecleer's misinterpretation of "mulier est hominis confusio" have the effect that every allegorical relation that might provide a *sentence* is undermined by some irony or other plot detail. Consequently, only an ironic, satirical reading emerges as credible.

Cooper also notes that Chaucer sets the *Nun's Priest's Tale* generically as a beast fable; a genre marked by, she writes, "practical homely wisdom" (340). The point to note here is that this

is far removed from allegorical idealism; as far as pragmatism is from morality. Jill Mann raises the fable of the wolf and the lamb, in which the wolf frames the lamb for slandering him as a pretext for eating the lamb (*Aesop and Reynard*, 29). The “moral” – that the powerful would malign the weak in order to advance their interests – hardly counts as morality at all. Mann then elaborates that the natural inevitability of animal instinct contrasts starkly with the causal and value relationships inherent in patristic allegory: that good begets good, and vice versa. Chauntecleer can hardly be held culpable for his inborn instinct to “tredyng”, or the weakness to flattery he inherits from his father (VII 3178). This incongruity between animals and humans, then, allows opportunities for ironic displacements that provide ample fodder for satire, while severely reducing the potential for a clear, persuasive *sentence*.

Chauntecleer and Pertelote “are also meant to be seen as a wedded pair” (Delany 142). This provides a parallel context for more treatment of clerical authority through the gendered metaphorical lens of a marriage relationship, as Delany notes that “the subordination of wife to husband serves as the emblem of natural, social and cosmic hierarchies” (142).

That high and low styles are juxtaposed in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* mirrors also Chaucer’s radical confluence of high style and low in the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Low style, ironically, is shown to be superior to the high. The *Knight’s Tale*, with its elevated lines, is “quited” by the *Miller’s Tale*; and the *Monk’s Tale*, whose “tragedie is to seyn a certain storie” that is “sowneth into honestee”, is described by both the Knight and Host as “hevynesse” (VII 1967-72). The mock epic style also satirises authoritative discourse:

Thanne wolde I shewe yow how that I koude pleyne

For Chauntecleres drede and for his peyne.

Certes, swich cry ne lamentacion,

Was nevere of ladyes maad whan Ylion
Was wonne, and Pirrus with his streite swerd,
Whan he hadde hent Kyng Priam by the berd,
And slayn hym, as seith us eneydos,
As maden alle the hennes in the clos,
Whan they had seyn of Chauntecleer the sighte. (VII 3353-3361).

That a barnyard cock is lamented for in such courtly and elevated terms – amid the poverty of his barnyard – serves really to make him, from the start, a figure of incongruity, occupying what Cooper describes as “this ambiguous ground between the zoological and the courtly or chivalric” (354). With so many facets of irony in the way, the possibility of constructing a credible allegorical system around Chauntecleer towards a patristic moral becomes very remote indeed. As Donaldson states, the “fruyt of the tale is its chaff” (150). It brings me to an ironic reading of Chaucer’s reception theory for the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*:

Whereas a man may have noon audience,
Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence. (VII 2801-2802)

In the dramatic frame, the Host decries the Monk’s sententious “hevynesse”, and wants a tale of *solas* (VII 2769). Yet most of Chaucer’s actual readers would have read it patristically – as has been the critical reception of the Tale over centuries. Chaucer, perhaps, in full knowledge that his readers would treat it as allegory, writes the Tale ironically – at least in regards to clerical authority; in that way he masks, and yet mirrors, his critical view of that institution.

Even the *Parson’s Tale* may be regarded as (ironically) anticlerical, as much as it functions as a mirror to critique the failings of the Church; Chaucer thus turns the church’s hermeneutic authority against itself. To the Parson, the Friar and Summoner are blinded in the

sin of Avarice, then the Nun's Priest is blind to his sin of Lechery. Chaucer subtly attacks the Priest for presumably enjoying sexual relations with his convent "sustres" like Chauntecleer does with Pertelote. She hints at his sinfully sensual nature by pointing out his dream arises from his "compleccioun" of "rede colera", which, as the Riverside Chaucer notes, disposes him to be "hasty of worde and of answe... desyrous of company of women more than hym nedyth" (813).

Sure enough, he abandons God/"destinee", or his religious calling, to be a hedonist: "Venus' servant", who does "all his power" not to "multiplie" – which is already wrong – but worse, "moore for delit" (VII 3342-45). In contrast, the Parson – who I use a referent and moral auctoritee, due to his idealized portrayal - notes in his tale how this constitutes a double sin, of both "brekyng of hire avow of chastitee" and "assemblynge but oonly to hire fleshly delit" (IX 895-905). A crucial image is one of Chauntecleer flying "doun fro the (narwe) beem" into the "yerd", where he might find corn to eat and space to "trad" Pertelote (VII 3172-77). Allegorically, this is a fall from grace; he is tempted upon seeing her "beautee" and feeling her "softe syde" (VII 3160-75). So he succumbs to carnal "confusio" and descends from their "narwe perche", which may be read as their elevated, holy monastic ideals, into the sinful world of self-gratifying lechery and gluttony, and where the evil Fox lurks (VII 3160-69). He also calls Pertelote his "worldes blis", revealing his total absorption into the material and carnal world since, lost in her charms, he has "diffye both sweven and dreem" – or abandoned any concern for the spiritual realm (VII 3171). The Nun's Priest use of the mock-epic style – as he goes on to characterize Chauntecleer as a "grym leoun" and "roial prince" – further heightens the dramatic irony of his own blind self-reflexivity.

But as the Parson declares that the “roote of thise sevene synnes is Pride”, we see that Chauntecleer’s lechery and moral blindness indeed stems from Pride; in particular, “Inpaciens is he that wol nat been ytaught ne undernome of his vice, and by strif werreieth troughe wityngly, and deffendeth his folye.” (IX 400). Though proud as a prince, Chauntecleer’s dominion extends only to his seven hens; and if in lechery he dominates them sexually, he must in pride be the dominant discursive voice as well, imposing in the farmyard a dominant culture centred on him. So he pays no heed to Pertelote’s well-meaning advice, founded on practical *experience*, about his dream; but cows her into passive, permanent silence. He does so by invoking exempla of “many a man moore of auctorite” (VII 2975). *Auctoritee* is thus the basis of his pride and dominance.

As such, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale finds itself also a participant in the debate between *experience* and *auctoritee*. To Andrew Galloway, “the Middle English *auctoritee* can mean ‘authority’ in the personal sense of a text’s composer or *auctor*, as well as a reverential, suprahuman *auctoritas*” (29).

It is a historical construct, specific to Chaucer’s own space and time; a time in which the Church is the sole medium for salvation, and “absolutely authoritative pronouncer of the correct view on everything” (Aers 4). Yet the church derives its authority from external sources – the supposedly objective Christian God, and the prestige of the classical era. It represents itself as founded in empirical experience:

The firste moevere of the cause above...

Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun

Certeine dayes and duracioun

To al that is engendred in this place...

Ther nedeth noght noon auctoritee t' allegge,
For it is preeved by experience... (I 2987-3001)

Ther nedeth make of this noon argument;
The verray preeve sheweth it in dede. (VII 2982-2983)

Galloway thus describes medieval authority as “self-evident” and “a natural, political and philosophical necessity” (31). The “first moevere”, to the medievals, makes himself known through holy scripture; in effect locating authority in an external plane, mediated and accessible only through textuality. So the Church, as medieval exegetical practitioner, or interpreter, stands in the very powerful position of interlocutor between controller and controlled.

. Its work of authoritative textual appropriation and interpretation, in Chaucer’s time, is still based on the Latin commentary tradition – essentially clerical glosses of bible and medieval standard texts, collectively known as *auctores* in being often conflated with their human authors. Peggy Knapp writes that church hermeneutic theory had, up to the early medieval era, been based on Augustinian theology, which greatly circumscribes the use of non-biblical textual authority, and calls for all authoritative interpretations to be made through the lens of *caritas* (74-75). By Chaucer’s time, however, “late medieval literary theory unites sacred and secular texts within the scope of a universal interpretative model” (Lawton 457). Classical *auctors* thus become legitimized as authoritative; and of interest to my study is Odo of Cheriton’s incorporation of beast fable into the sermon tradition by the thirteenth century (Mann, *Aesop to Reynard*, 14). Scanlon locates this shift as commencing in the twelfth-century School of Chartres: “the Chartrian application of figural exegesis to classical texts is part of the Church’s...

attempt to parlay its international presence into a fuller and more manifold relation with... secular society” (181).

Definitions of clerical authority are thus hardly objective; but, as historical constructs, turn out to be mutable, shifting according to the Church’s political desires. Its unchecked monopoly on textual interpretation then inevitably sets up a nexus drawing together the two conflicting interests of piety and power. Yet the same social forces that move the church are empowering the laity as well: the rise of the money economy, estates proliferation, a growing middle class – epitomised by the Host and the Wife of Bath – and increasing lay literacy lead to a growing perception of incongruities between Church doctrine and practice; and a confidence to challenge it, not least in the foundational realm of textual interpretation. In so doing, they posit “new social-intellectual structures of authority” (Galloway 24). The historical construct of clerical authority slowly collapses; and the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* plays an integral part in Chaucer’s articulation of his ambivalence to that authority.

He does so by problematizing clerical interpretive authority as ever being subject to contests of appropriation and definition. For Chauntecleer, *auctoritee* seems to be validated; his dream does come to pass. But the dream, and its concomitant authoritative exempla, are in reality meaningless: they prove a futile warning to Chauntecleer, who, despite his auctoritee-based rhetoric, has ironically “diffye both sweven and dreem” (VII 3171). Rationalism prevails: it is his own lechery, when he “fley doun fro the beam”, and his own pride, when he is taken in by the fox’s “flaterye”, that lead to his close shave (VII 3437). His initial basis in *auctoritee* cannot save him; it is only through lived experience that he overcomes his moral blindness, learning not to “wynketh, whan he sholde see” (VII 3431). *Auctoritee* gets tied up in its own knots and is ineffective in providing any salvation or resolution.

The entire tale, then, functions as “a parody of preacherly tropology” (Allen 27). At every turn the Priest, either in his own voice or through Chauntecleer’s, supplies authoritative moralizing that in one way or another ends up serving to mock or undermine the authority of the clerical institution itself. To “chaunt cleer” is to sing clearly, which Chauntecleer does:

His voys was murier than the murie orgon

On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon. (VII 2851-52)

But the irony is that his exegesis of *auctoritee* is anything but clear.

Jill Mann writes regarding this point in the narrative of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*: “it becomes clear that Chauntecleer’s towering intellectual edifice is erected on a very simple and completely non-intellectual foundation” (*Aesop to Reynard* 256):

Shortly I seye, as for conclusioun,

That I shal han of this avisioun

Adversitee; and I seye forthermoor,

That I ne telle of laxatyves no stoor,

For they been venymous, I woot it weel;

I hem diffye, I love hem never a deel! (VII 3151-3156)

“He (Chauntecleer) does not want to take any laxatives. And the only way to avoid this is to prove that dreams are not the result of physiological imbalance but the portentous signs of things to come” (Mann, *Aesop to Reynard* 256). Mann sees this scene as one that sets Chauntecleer and Pertelote in the conventions of romance hero and heroine, through his emphatic assertion of his bravery. In the context of my thesis, however, this is the conclusion of yet another imposition of abusive *auctoritee*; which may be discerned by taking into account not just what Chauntecleer says, but how he says it.

Between recounting the exempla of the man who dreams of his friend being murdered, and the man who presumably drowns after sailing in spite of his friend begging not to after having been warned in a dream, Chauntecleer states:.

And certes in the same book I rede,

Right in the nexte chapitre after this

I gabbe nat, so have I joye or blis (VII 3064-3066)

Despite Chauntecleer's claim that he "gabbe nat", Cooper notes that in none of the extant sources do the two exempla appear in succeeding chapters (344). This may not have been intentional on Chaucer's part; he may have had in mind another compilation of sources. But it is much more likely that Chauntecleer is lying, making things up as he goes along in order to assert his *entente* on Pertelote – who has no way of verifying his sources anyway.

Chauntecleer completes that exemplum, and continues:

And therefore, faire Pertelote so deere,

By swiche ensamples olde maistow leere

That no man sholde been to recchelees

Of dremes; for I seye thee, doutelees,

That many a dreem ful soore is for to drede (VII 3105-3109).

Subsequently, Chauntecleer proceeds with another exemplum, this time of the life of St Kenelm, who sees his own murder in the dream but, being "but seven year oold", takes little heed of his dream. He closes this exemplum by declaring to Pertelote:

By God! I hadde levere than my sherte

That ye hadde rad his legende, as have I (VII 3120-3121).

Chauntecleer, then, is not just defending his decision or asserting his bravery. Rather, like Jankyn in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, he takes on a preacherly, didactic tone that is addressed very personally to Pertelote, and which also makes very clear that he is the teacher and she is the student. Such might be reminiscent of the Priest himself moralizing to one of the nuns or even the Prioress – who, judging by her poor French “after the scole of Stratford atte Bowe”, in all probability lacks his depth of education. Further, Chauntecleer’s seeming frustration at Pertelote’s ignorance, as evinced by his exclamation that he “hadde levere than my sherte” that Pertelote understands his point, is accompanied by his emphatic drilling in of his *sentence*: “for I seye thee, doutelees,/ That many a dreem ful soore is for to drede” (VII 3105). Here may be observed Chaucer’s portrayal of Chauntecleer’s aggressive act of subordination and silencing, on account of his superior knowledge of *auctors*. An unequal hierarchical relationship is constructed, ironically on the basis of an *auctoritee* that is soon to be exposed as hollow. Chaucer’s satire here is in depicting the reality of personal – or institutional – distorting of moral *sentence* in pursit of cynical interests. Chauntecleer’s triumphal regaining of discursive authority against Pertelote’s questioning allows him to set the agenda again according to his own desires:

Madame pertelote, so have I blis,
Of o thyng 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... (VII 3158-3162)

He then commits what is perhaps his most egregious abuse of *auctoritee*:

For al so siker as *In principio*,
Mulier est hominis confusio –

Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,

Womman is mannes joye and al his blis. (VII 3163-66)

Chauntecleer's mistranslation of this Latin aphorism can be read in several ways. He is possibly ignorant of the Latin; but in view of his encyclopaedic knowledge of classical exempla, that is unlikely. Chaucer's narrative instead has Chauntecleer continue:

For whan I feele a-nyght your softe syde,

Al be it that I may nat on yow ryde,

For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas!

I am so ful of joye and of solas... (VII 3167-3170)

And after descending from their narrow perch, and feeding her breakfast, his discursive authority culminates in his obtaining from her sexual pleasure:

Real he was, he was namoore aferd.

He fethered pertelote twenty tyme,

And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme. (VII 3176-3178)

The mistranslation, then, is obviously deliberately calculated; Chauntecleer's aim is to flatter, pacify and silence Pertelote, manipulating her to obtain sexual favours. Dramatic irony would, once again, have the Nun's Priest unwittingly let on what perhaps happens between him and his tonsured concubinage. But in the larger frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, the reader would realise the analogical relationship Chauntecleer's abuse shares with the Pardoner, Friar, Summoner and even Jankyn. Mistranslation is just one manifestation of how Chauntecleer, and by implication the larger clerical establishment, abuse their privileges, trust and *auctoritee* in invoking religious *auctoritee* to exploit the commons for their selfish gain. A gendered dimension is apparent too, as all the satirised clerical figures exploit female victims. "In principio", or "in the

beginning”, appeals to Genesis and John, and claims authority thereby; but invokes that same authority for an entirely re-appropriated and re-interpreted message, for purposes diametrically opposite to Augustinian *caritas* (Boitani 32). The gap in power and authority is clear; Pertelote cannot reply and only gives in to Chauntecleer’s physical demands.

It should be noted, however, that she has, in fact, begun the quarrel of *auctors* by quoting Cato, *ad verbatim*:

Lo Catoun, which that was so wys a man,

Seyde he nat thus, -- ne do no fors of dremes? (VII 2940-41)

Her doing so distinguishes her from the Wife of Bath – whose aggressive questioning and interpretation of the Gospel as an *auctor* is much more subversive. Yet Pertelote’s act of *ad verbatim* appropriation – known as literalistic exegesis – is considered to be more authoritative than Chauntecleer’s glossing of supposedly authoritative allegorical stories (Lawton 454). Naturally, a direct statement by an authority should supercede a lesser authority’s interpretation of a fictional exemplum. So his dismissal of her argument, despite its length, is in actuality built on very shaky ground. The bulk of his case consists of two exempla by “oon of the gretteste auctor that men rede” – he cannot even name his auctor, although the *Riverside Chaucer* identifies him as Cicero or Valerius (VII 2984). He claims his *auctors* to be:

... many a man moore of auctorite

Than evere caton was, so moot I thee,

That al the revers seyn of this sentence,

And han wel founden by experience

That dremes been significaciouns

As wel of joye as of tribulaciouns

That folk endure in this life present

There needeth make of this noon argument;

The verray preeve sheweth it in dede. (VII 2975-2983)

This poses troubling questions for medieval authority theory. How does Chauntecleer evaluate which *auctors* have more *auctoritee*? Furthermore, he seems to privilege experience over *auctoritee* – or does he? The irony is that the so-called experience, which ought to be real-life lessons, turn out to be the entirely fictional exempla that he quotes. This stands in clear contrast to Pertelote's solidly, realistically grounded wisdom in medical science, and herbs that would cure Chauntecleer. It is her social status as a female, and lack of education that allow her to be overwhelmed by Chauntecleer's flimsy exegesis. "The certainty of moral truism", writes Cooper, is "rendered unstable by the constant reference to other *texts* for authentication" (349).

Chaucer's criticism of the authority gap between clerics and commons, and the abuses inflicted thereby, is no unfamiliar theme. The problem lies in exploitative textual interpretation; and, in a deeper way, in the erstwhile claimed monopoly of the clerical class would hold sway over any other: in other words, their *auctoritee*.

It is here that the beast-fable convention has its satirical effect: On one hand, Chauntecleer is a cock, doing what cocks do by natural instinct. On the other, he performs acts of interpretation and instruction from cynical, self-interested motivations that are morally converse to the understood, Augustinian ideal. If comedy arises from incongruity, here is a double incongruity: firstly between ideal and cynical exegesis, and secondly the distancing between the natural and the fabular, anthropomorphic behaviour of Chauntecleer. The double comedy can only emphasise its very serious satirical meaning.

The Nun's Priest subsequently also has a moment of ironic antifeminist interpretation:

My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,
That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe,
To walken in the yerd upon that morwe
That he hadde met that dreem that I yow tolde.
Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo,
And made adam fro paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.
But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.
Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.
Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;
I kan noon harm of no womman divyne. (VII 3252-3265)

He insists that Chauntecleer “tok his conseil of his wyf with sorwe” and “wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde”. Proposing a reading of his Tale as a lapsarian allegory, he likens Chauntecleer to Adam, innocently “myrie and wel at ese” before Pertelote’s advice causes his near-fall (VII 3259). That, obviously, that is compromised by antifeminism – and the fact that it Pertelote’s advice does not actually bring Chauntecleer’s “to wo”. The Nun’s Priest’s sarcastic treatment of the antifeminist moral further discredits the authority of the male dominated institution that is the agency responsible for generating such morality.

The reader may perceive an emerging parallel with the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*; indeed, her complaint that clerks will never “speke good of wyves,/ but if it be of hooly seintes lyves” echoes in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as an indictment of the inseparable association between clerical authoritative discourse and antifeminism (II 688-690). She, too, proves the Nun's Priest's antifeminist sentence wrong: her “conseil” does not lead her husbands “to wo”, and neither does the successful “conseil” of the loathly lady (II 195-196). In the Clerk's tale, too, Griselda redeems everyone by her steadfastness and in her delivery of judgment (IV 438-41).

Having made his antifeminist moralizations, the Nun's Priest suddenly retracts his *sentence*, saying: “I seyde it in my game... but for I noot to whom it might displease” (VII 3260-62). It is a Freudian slip; for in the frame story, he is the Prioress' subordinate, and one can imagine she would not take kindly to what he said. He resorts to hiding behind fallacy, as if he could abdicate his authorial *auctoritee*: “thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne” (VII 3265). *Auctoritas* fails him ultimately; “rede auctours”, he says, but he cannot find any *auctoritas* beyond himself.

It is in this moment of naturalistic psychological depiction that Chaucer once again exposes the moral blindness of the clerical establishment. It is a case where *auctoritee* follows assertion; the Nun's Priest has blurted out his verdict, before realizing he has nothing to back it up. The ludicry of the Nun's Priest hiding behind his character, a fowl, lends a mocking weight to Chaucer's criticism of clerical *auctoritee*.

This scene constitutes what Alastair Minnis describes as the “compiler's disavowal of responsibility” (199). Our discussion of its function and implications will be informed by beginning with a review of other instances in the *Canterbury Tales* where Chaucer uses this

device. It is, in fact, built into the very frame of the tale, as Chaucer introduces his narrative method:

“Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
He moot as wel seye o word as another” (I 746).

Right from the beginning of the tale, Chaucer creates a realistic verisimilitude. It functions as a latter-day “novel”, and is perhaps revolutionary as a fictional literary work in its time. Jill Mann notes regarding this “impression of realism”, as in contrast to the stereotypical depictions in most estates satires, that it is not so much founded in a correspondence to Chaucer’s external reality, but an effect produced by specific literary techniques (*Estates Satire* 190-192). Firstly, the portraits of the characters mix moral responses with emotional and personal ones; secondly, the inclusion of seemingly unnecessary detail, for instance that the Squire “carf biforn his fader at the table”; and thirdly, the corrupt characters’ victims are not subjectively detailed in the narrative (Mann, *Estates Satire* 192-194). The overall effect is the creation of believable and timeless pilgrims with realistic lives, motivations and deeds of their own. Chaucer’s use of individual subjectivity, therefore, should be recognized as uncommon in its time, when estates satire and literature in general tend towards the monologic and didactic – and a democratizing break from the impositions of oft-corrupt authoritative discourse. Even

“Gower and Langland”, writes Rigby, “might have judged the pilgrims” by external moral criteria, “but Chaucer nowhere tells us that we should do so or provides the context to permit such judgments” (45). Chaucer’s ethos is essentially to forgo any pretence to authority to elevate the importance – and indeed, *auctoritee* – of the individual. His use of the humility trope emphasizes this: “my wit is short, ye may wel understonde” (I 746). Convincingly, therefore, he reiterates his opposition to clerical authority by separating himself from it. He liberates his narrative perspective from the elitist strictures of authoritative discourse through the citation of perhaps the two most unquestionable *auctors*:

Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,

And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.

Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,

The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede. (I 739-742)

That “brode” speaking might be considered as “vileynye” only goes to show the depth of the epistemological current Chaucer is swimming against. Authoritative discourse, being as it is highly intellectual glossing of Latin texts, is – as Rigby borrows the concept from Mikhail Bakhtin – monologic, “claiming to have the final word” and actively suppressing other voices, particularly through the authorizing of only some genres – like the Monk’s tragedies – and the banning of vernacular Bible translations (19). Chaucer’s project, however, is an inclusive one that radically advocates a withdrawal of authority in favour of an inclusive dialogic, even heteroglossic, poetics:

He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,

But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.

M' athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.

And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
For goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
The millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;
So was the reve eek and othere mo,
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame;
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game. (I 3168-3186)

So while Chaucer distinguishes between the “harlotrie” of the Miller and the “gentilnesse”, “moralitee” and “hoolynesse” to be found in the Knight’s tale and elsewhere, he implies it would be even more morally undesirable to “falsen som of my mateere”, than risk aspersions of “yvel entente”. For, he hints, even “smale” things can “toucheth gentillesse, and eek moralitee and hoolynesse”. In this he bemoans the way authority figures read morality into everything – and self-interestedly. His dialogic project, then, stems from his recognition of empiricism and individual worth over the morality imposed by institutional authority, which

while conservative and safe for the clerical and political elite, excludes and silences many like the Miller and the Reeve.

Minnis writes on Chaucer's dialogic ethos that his "sense of combining an organizing diverse materials may owe something to the compilers' theory and practice of *ordinatio partium*. The major medieval compendiums were compendius, containing *materiae* to cater for a wide range of demands and tastes", and provide both teaching and delight" (200). *The Canterbury Tales* is essentially a compendium in itself; and it is interesting to see here how Chaucer appropriates a traditional, authoritative genre – the compendiums hitherto were meant for high-styled tales – to undercut that very authority and pursue his progressive agenda. The reader will recall how he similarly appropriates Christ and Plato to justify the same end.

Minnis writes, without realizing its gravity, that "Chaucer treats his fictional characters with the same respect that the Latin compilers had reserved for their *auctores*. The 'lewd compiler' has become 'compiler of the lewd'" (203). A reading, however, with a sociopolitical perspective would see the subtle, but momentous subversion going on here – the implication that the entire structure and hierarchy of authority has been turned on its head. The reverence given to clerical interpretation and the auctors may now be given to the individual, even though he be a cherl. What is "trewe", then, is much less the good, Christian, moral, elite. Instead, even the miller is a "man", one and the same like any other. However "rudeliche and large", the "trouthe" of the tale simply lies in the fact that the miller has said it. Chaucer hereby participates in many contemporary dialogic movements, like those of social leveling, the emergence of the individual, and textual subjectivity.

Our focus on class-independent subjectivity, brings us to another layer of irony in Chaucer's dialogic project. So a cherl like the miller – as well as contemporaries like Piers the

Plowman – now have a legitimate voice of their own in literature. But what happens when this enfranchisement of literary representation is extended to what is, as it were, a chicken?

I have already discussed the implications of Chaucer writing Chauntecleer as a wish-fulfilment fantasy of the Nun's Priest himself – a fantasy that sees the Nun's Priest unwittingly excoriating the abuses of his own clerical class through Chaucer's employment of dramatic irony. But consider now that Chauntecleer's owner, the "povre wydwe" and her "doughtren", are of a similarly low social stature to the Miller. (VII 2821). If the working-class cherl already has auctoritee and legitimacy, what then should we make of the suppressing of the "povre wydwe" in favour of her chicken?

"Typically", writes Fehrenbacher, these lines have been taken to describe "an idealization of honest and contented poverty, of a peasantry that endures its lot and holds its tongue." (138). In countering that understanding, however, he points out that Chaucer executes a radical change of context: he modifies the characterisation of Chauntecleer's owner from one of wealth to poverty. Together with the poor old women in the Friar's Tale, so oppressed by the Summoner, and in the Pardoner's Tale, it "raises questions about the plight of such cottars that (Chaucer's) sources ignore" (138).

Chauntecleer here is made the protagonist, amid human owners that are caricatured stock-character peasant rebels:

So hydous was the noyse, a, benedicitee!

Certes, he jakke straw and his meynee

Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille

Whan that they wolden any flemyng kille,

As thilke day was maad upon the fox. (VII 3393-3397)

Their speech, represented as “skriking and howping”, is of course – as Fehrenbacher notes – “outside authorized discourse” (144). The mock-heroic setting of Chauntecleer further parodies the place of clerical authority as being distant and self-interested, callously aloof from the real world of poor peasants who, nonetheless, have a developing collective consciousness and are threatening to break into monologic institutional authority by force. If human farmers and other farmyard animals are peasant rebels, while the rooster - by no means the greatest of barnyard livestock, if ever there was one - is “roial... as a prince in his halle”, compared to the wydwe’s own sooty “halle”, the irony wrought by this displacement of discursive authority is stark (VII 3184). Chaucer’s satire asks: are *auctors*, then, ultimately textually manipulative chickens?

Chaucer, however, has the Nun’s Priest close with the following lines:

Nay, quod the fox, but God yeve hym meschaunce,

That is so undiscreet of governaunce

That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees.

Lo, swich it is for to be recchelees

And necligent, and truste on flaterye.

But ye that holden this tale a folye,

As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,

Taketh the moralite, goode men.

For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,

To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis

Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.

Now, goode god, if that it be thy wille,

As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,

And brynge us to his heighe blisse! amen. (VII 3433-46)

In the original text of the Bible, the *auctor*, St. Paul refers to by “al that writen is” are the canonical books of Judeo-Christian Scripture. The Nun’s Priest, however, is clearly not referring to Scripture, but to his own Tale. Will any tale or text then suffice?

Minnis writes regarding this that “the compilers who adopted this final cause shifted the stress to the first part of the statement (All that is written is written for our doctrine...) and the ‘all’ came to mean ‘almost anything’, writings of all kinds... St Paul did not say that all that is written is true: he said that all that is written is written for our doctrine. The onus is therefore placed on the discriminating reader” (205).

Minnis’ “discriminating reader”, upon finishing the breathtaking tale, would probably realise the hollow banality of the concluding sentence about “jangling” and trusting on flattery. It is up to him or her to decide between the “fruyt” and the “chaf”; no one else may have the authority to impose. Chaucer himself is probably rolling in his grave with amusement at the countless readers through the ages who have trawled the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* for monologic, authoritative meaning, especially the clerics of his time who probably had no idea he was satirising their exegetical practices even as they applied those practices to his tale. Here is, therefore, constituted a new politics of reading, that Chaucer implicitly calls for with amazing foresight. He certainly has had the last laugh.

Conclusion

The greatest problem for patristic interpretations is the fact that Chauntecleer turns the fox’s trick back upon him – and in the end, neither gains any profit than where he first began, returning to

status quo ante bellum as it were. The only plausible *sentence* are not to “jangle”, and not to trust flattery – but they are too insignificant morals for such a rich and long tale; it must be read for the irony that it is. “The meaning is subverted by the insistent futility of the text” (Cooper 348). That, however, would be the exact *sentence* of a tale that has as its satirical target patristic exegesis itself. “Against the explicit, overtly systematic discourse of Christian doctrine”, writes Scanlon, “(Chaucer) must mobilize the less direct, but no less powerful resources of fabular narrative” (191). The poet goes to great lengths, often by parodying the authoritative exegetical structures he attacks, to show the hypocrisy and self-interest that results from the unchecked discursive power of contemporary structures of exegetical authority. That Chauntecleer escapes his morally deserved fate – to the contrary of the Monk’s patristic *sentence* – undercuts the authority of Christian teaching: two wrongs (giving in to flattery and dispensing it) do indeed make a right. Chaucer, though virtually every possible variant of irony, excoriates the cynicism of churchmen and brings their ostensibly Christian morals down to the lowest common denominator: self-seeking pragmatism.

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