

The Special Nature of Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

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Introduction: *The Nun's Priest's Tale* may be a victim of its own success. At least in North America, it is the story from *The Canterbury Tales* most likely to be taught in high school classes (in translation, of course), probably because the themes of sex and violence are refracted through the medium of the beast fable, so that the sex gives little offense and the violence absolutely none. Overanthologizing has had the effect of making it seem commonplace next to most of the best tales. This is unfortunate, I think, because it may be Chaucer's best story and in some ways his most unusual. This paper will try to suggest (proof being out of the question) that *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is one of the best of Chaucer's tales, and that it is uniquely close to being told in Chaucer's own voice. I will give three reasons in support of this double contention. Each reason will be accorded one part in the paper: Part I will show how this tale is treated as a special occurrence by the Prologue leading into it, and thus seems a potentially special story. Part II will explain how the Nun's Priest is different from the other narrators, and that this is underscored in both the Prologue and the Epilogue. Finally, Part III will try to show the unique balance in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, and how that is appropriate to the story in which Chaucer most nearly identifies with the

narrator.

Part I: The first thing to note about *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is that it is a combination of two motives that run through *The Canterbury Tales*: it is told because another pilgrim's story has been interrupted, and it is a command performance. *The Tale* is given at the behest of Harry Bailly, the Host, but only after the Monk has been silenced by the normally compliant Knight. The Monk has already told seventeen tales of woe, ironically called *The Monk's Tale*, as if there were only one, all on the familiar theme of the vanity of human wishes. One is tempted to say that Samuel Johnson's poem of that title⁽¹⁾ treats the theme better, because Johnson has a sense of proportion. The Monk, instead of limiting his examples of Success and Pride going before the Fall, begins his examples not with Adam, which ought to be early enough, but before Adam, in Christian tradition, with the fallen angel Lucifer, who became "Sathanas" (Satan) after his "falle" (2802; numbers refer to lines). And then he proceeds to Adam. In fact, he may plan to tell a hundred such stories, every one demonstrating that there is a pot of the blackest coal at the end of the rainbow. At this point the Knight steps in and urges the end of these tales of inverted fortune. A successful man like the Knight would rather hear the exact opposite: stories of how a poor man climbs up, makes his fortune, and then *remains* prosperous:

"And the contrarie is joy and greet solas,
As whan a man hath been in povre estaat,
And clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat,
And there abideth in prosperitee

Swich thyng is gladsom, as it thyneketh me
And swich thyng were goodly for to telle." (3571-77)⁽²⁾

Next, Harry jumps in, probably emboldened by the Knight's speech, as Laura Kendrick has suggested (104), and urges the Monk to change the theme of his story. Fortunately, the Monk refuses to tell any more tales, and Harry abruptly summons the Nun's Priest to tell a lighter tale, something to lift the pilgrims' spirits, which the priest immediately agrees to do.

This is not the first time such an interruption has occurred. After the very first story, elegantly delivered by the Knight, the drunken Miller barges in and insists on giving the next story which, ironically, turns out to be a rousing and wonderful piece, but so far from what Chaucer would seriously give in his own voice⁽³⁾ that in his role as author, Chaucer delivers a mock apology for it. And then the Reeve is interrupted by the Miller, who wants to censor the Reeve's intended satire on millers, but unsuccessfully: the Reeve has his say, and it is an excellent tale too, if not as funny as the Miller's.

As for command performances (meaning, in practice, requests for something lighter than the story just told), the best example is *The Pardoner's Tale*. Harry the Host requests as an antidote to *The Physician's Tale* — which is almost too dire to be taken seriously⁽⁴⁾ — in which Virginia, virgin daughter of the noble knight Virginius, chooses death over shame, and rather than marry a corrupt old judge, accepts death by decapitation at the hands of her father. The Pardoner is a well-known rogue and can be counted on to tell "some myrthe or japes," maybe in the vein of the Miller's hilarious story. Instead, the Pardoner delivers a great tale of murder and death, with

the personified Death actually appearing in disguise. This is a masterpiece to rival any of the other tales, but it is not what was requested. Among these several interruptions, and at least two command performances, only the Nun's Priest gives the pilgrims what they ask for. After the Monk's plodding *Tale* (which was actually many tales, threatening to be many more), the priest gives something light and merry to raise everyone's spirits.⁽⁵⁾ Not only is the priest's story successful as a work of art (as are the Miller's, Reeve's, and Pardoner's stories, even if we can't say as much for Chaucer's own tales),⁽⁶⁾ it is a complete success to the pilgrims in the story too, being exactly what the Host ordered, which Harry promptly verifies in the Epilogue:

"Sir Nonnes Preest," our Hooste seide anoon
I-blessed be thy breche, every stoon!
This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer." (4244-46)

Thus, *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is represented as the culmination of a frustrating series of interruptions and substitutes, and the first one that the pilgrims, represented by their Host, are completely satisfied with. This doesn't, of course, make it the greatest of the tales, or even one of the greatest. In the rarified atmosphere of world literature, such points could never be proved anyway. What it does suggest is that Chaucer is using these motives, along with the satisfaction of the pilgrims with the *Tale*, to indicate its intended distinction.

Part II: Just as the Nun's Priest's story is singled out as the

culmination of the two motives mentioned above, I believe that Chaucer establishes the distinction of the Nun's Priest as a narrator in every phase of his performance, from his appearance in the Prologue, to his manner of treating the tale itself, which will be discussed in Part III, to Harry's comments on him in the Epilogue.

In the Prologue to the his tale, the Nun's Priest is accosted rudely by Harry. In fact, "rude" is Chaucer's very word:

Than spak our Hoost with rude speche and boold,
And seyde unto the Nonnes Preest anon,
"Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!
Telle us such thyng as may oure hertes glade.
Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade.
What though thyn hors be bothe foul and lene?
If he wol serve thee, rekke not a bene.
Looke that thyn herte be mure evermo." (3605-12)

We can see that the Nun's Priest gets much rougher treatment than the Monk, who had originally been slated to tell his story after the Knight because is of relatively high station. Even though Harry sides with the Knight in urging a new story, he still calls the Monk "Sire Monk" (3585) and observes a certain decorum in addressing him. By contrast, he speaks to the Nun's Priest the way he would talk to a child. The second-person "thou" (in "*thou* Preest" and "*thou* Sir John") is familiar, and the repetition is quite patronizing. This suggests the undemocratic side of Harry's friendly address. He speaks this way because the priest has no social standing: he is the

subordinate of the Nun and rides a ghastly, skeletal horse (it is "bothe foul and lene," as Harry is pleased to observe) that reminds us of Don Quixote's poor horse Rosinante, except that Rosinante was "born" more than two hundred years later.

The priest's answer is subservient and completely without resentment:

"Yis, sir," quod he, "yis Hoost, so moot I go,
But I be myrie, ywis I wol be blamed." (3613-14)

In his notes, Cawley observes (458) that *Yis* is a more emphatic form of agreement than *Ye* is. And besides saying "Yis" twice, the priest calls Harry "sir," and expresses polite concern to follow the Hoost's orders to be "myrie." There can be no doubt that the Nun's Priest is very humble and obliging. The natural democratic instinct is to warm to such a person, which explains the surprising fulsomeness of Chaucer's last words before the *Tale* itself:

And thus he seyde unto us everichon,
This sweete preest, this goodly man sir John. (3616-17)

Next comes the *Tale* itself, which is told with an undisputed zest and humor, but that will be discussed in the next part of this paper. What is important at this point is that Harry, and by implication, the other members of the audience, enjoy the *The Nun's Priest's Tale* too. Right after praising the Nun's Priest's story for two lines, Harry deconstructs the priest's appearance for ten lines, with one extra line of congratulation:

"But by my trouthe, if thou were secular
 Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright.
 For if thou have corage as thou hast myght,
 Thee were nede of hennes, as I wene,
 Ya, moo than seven tymes seventene.
 See whiche braunes hath this gentil preest,
 So great a nekke, and swich a large breest!
 He loketh as a sperhawk with his yen;
 Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyen
 With brasile, ne with gryn of Portyngale,
 Now, sire, faire falle yow for your tale!" (4247-4257)

Dereck Pearsall (239) sees Harry's observations as exposing a weakness in the Nun's Priest's character. Perhaps he is inclined towards the "secular" in his relations with women, and that is what his appearance suggests? He is, after all, compared to both a "cock" and a sparrow hawk, which is a bird of prey. As Harry sees it, the priest has the physique of a human Chauntecleer, and if he had the "corage" (which is closer to *inclination*, or the emotive word *heart*, than to the modern word *courage*) that he has ability ("myght") — if he took what he he *could* take — he would be be a brave cock ("trede-foul") and could have all the "hennes" he wanted. Zooming in, the "gentil preest" has a muscular build, with a "great nekke" and a "large breest" (a big neck and broad chest) and too much naturally ruddy color to need either of the popular red dyes of the period. But in the first place, Harry is simply teasing, and means no harm. In fact, allowing for Harry's rough and patronizing tone, this is intended as a compliment: the gentle priest is actually, in the modern

vernacular, a "hunk," which is surely worth mentioning, since we would never guess it from his demeanor or tale. And besides, if the Nun's Priest were another Friar, making marriages of young women at his own cost, as Chaucer says in mock praise of the latter, we would be told as much. Chaucer's positive assessment of the priest, along with the sterling impression he gives of himself as the narrator of the *Tale*, mean he is no playboy, whatever his potential for that vocation.

But this nuance of the Nun's Priest's virility must have some point, or so much prominent space wouldn't be devoted to it. I think the priest represents an emerging ideal: the Renaissance man. It is a commonplace that though the Renaissance was already flourishing in Italy at this time, England was still in the Middle Ages. But of course Chaucer was a traveled ambassador and used both classical and Renaissance sources constantly, as he does in this tale; so he was probably as conscious of Renaissance ideals as scholars who consign him to the Middle Ages. In any case, the Nun's Priest has the balance of the emerging ideal: He is modest, amiable, useful, and witty, but also virile. To borrow Shakespeare's phrase, he is one of those exemplary persons "that have the power to hurt and will do none." He could take advantage of people, but instead, like Don Quixote, he rides his broken-down horse and remains faithful to a humble ideal of conduct. This again helps to explain why it is so easy to identify the narrator of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* with Chaucer himself.

Part III: The balance exemplified by the Nun's Priest's virile appearance setting off his gentleness is echoed in the *Tale* often enough for the abstracted idea of *balance* to become a motif. The most obvious

example of balance is the famous debate between Chauntecleer and Pertelote on the significance of dreams in general and Chauntecleer's dream in particular. Chauntecleer has dreamt of an animal he has never seen, but describes so precisely that we recognize it as a fox, taking him by the throat in order to murder him. Chauntecleer has decided to keep to his perch, high above the reach of the dreaded creature, because he takes the dream for an accurate foreboding. Pertelote, his loveliest "wife" chides him for believing in dreams and for admitting a fear of anything to her. Without delving into the details of the debate, which do not concern this paper, it is about a draw. On the one hand, Chauntecleer is the real scholar, offering seven classical authorities supporting his position, as well as three stories recounting the dire consequences of ignoring one's dreams, to Pertelote's one source. Offsetting this fusillade of erudite allusions is Pertelote's common sense and empirical observation. At least one critic, Walter Clyde Curry, thinks she wins the debate outright, and Chauntecleer's side is just pompous nonsense:

Against Pertelote's presentation of scientifically accurate facts and sound medical theory, Chauntecleer has nothing to oppose but his colossal conceit and a few stories gleaned from old authorities. His manly self-love must have writhed under the lash of his little wife's outspoken contempt for his fears at so paltry a thing as a dream caused by choler. Still, assuming a lordly air of condescension — as no doubt befits a husband when confronted by unanswerable arguments — the cock proceeds to shift the basis of the discussion from fact to authority....As a matter of fact, never having thought independently for himself,

Chauntecleer has no conception of what rightly constitutes a proof. For all his show of scholarly learning and for all his evident desire to pass [120] as a widely read and deep student of the occult, he has never investigated the philosophy or psychology of dreams. His puerile mind is capable of grasping only the thread of a marvellous story, trusting blindly and with childlike simplicity to the correctness of interpretations offered by authorities. (119-20)

This strikes me as miscomprehending. Even if we take Chauntecleer seriously as a human character — and simply forget that he and his favorite wife are talking chickens (as if Chaucer wanted us to forget that) — we have to remind ourselves that he is answering authority with relevant authority. As Robert P. Miller points out,

"Authors were for medieval clerks as well as cocks increasers of knowledge who set down their findings in memorable form for the benefit of future generations. In his bookish appeal to the library, Chanteceleer subjects his own present experience to certain established criteria, and in doing so he reflects a typical medieval habit of mind." (3)

Which is to say, Chauntecleer isn't simply being pedantic in citing authority. He is acting according to the best traditions of the day. Furthermore, whatever we have decided about dreams in the intervening six centuries, in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* Chauntecleer, not Pertelote, turns out to have been right, so Curry has no reason to rule Pertelote's argument "unanswerable" — or to assume that Chauntecleer sees it in that light. One of the salient points of the

debate is Chauntecleer's exulting sense of having won. He celebrates by ignoring his own arguments and flying down from his perch. The fox doesn't appear until April ("Syn March bigan, thritty dayes and two" [3987]), but this is a clear omen of things to come. Pertelote's appeal to Chauntecleer's pride and lust have succeeded where her arguments failed, and he has forgotten about the fox.

But there is a more serious problem with Curry's comment. The tone is humorless; it is hard to see how Curry could have appreciated the comedy of the debate. Objecting that Chauntecleer has a "puerile mind" is like calling him "lecherous." It ignores the fact that for all their erudition both Chauntecleer and Pertelote are chickens. And this leads back to the main point. We can see all the balances that the story has established: Chauntecleer's learning is balanced by Pertelote's common-sense; Chauntecleer feels he has won the argument, but Pertelote carries the day, because he does fly down from his perch; Pertelote has common sense on her side, but Chauntecleer turns out to be right. And then there is the ultimate balance of Chauntecleer's capture and subsequent salvation. For those who haven't read the story, the Fox takes advantage of Chauntecleer's pride in getting him to close his eyes and sing, whereupon he grabs the hero by the throat and carries him away, chased by the poor widow and her two daughters. Whereupon Chauntecleer appeals to the Fox's pride and convinces him to taunt his pursuers; so the Fox opens his mouth to agree, and Chauntecleer escapes: a perfect balance. In Hussey's terse summation, "Chauntecleer shut his eyes when they should have remained open, and the fox opened his mouth when he should have kept it shut" (185).

Finally, the balance in this story extends to the details, as we

might expect of the language's second- or third-greatest poet.⁽⁷⁾ The crowning point of the story, as good as the mock-heroic and allegorical aspects are,⁽⁸⁾ is the use of language to strike the balance between Chauntecleer and Pertelote's human and avian features. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this method.

One of the first touches that hilariously balances the human and the bird is Pertelote's diagnosis of Chauntecleer's dream :

"Certes this dreem, which ye han met to-nyght,
Cometh of the greete superfluytee
Of youre rede colera, pardee,
Which causeth folk to dreden in hir dremes
Of arwes, and of fyr with rede lemes,
Of rede beestes, that they wol hem byte
Of conek, aand of whelpes, grete and lyte...." (3723-29)

Of course there is the additional joke that the red beast of Chauntecleer's dream really exists, but the funniest thing in this passage is Pertelote's evidence that the humor governing Chauntecleer, and the cause of his delusions, is the preponderance in his system of red bile ("colera": *cholera*), which is evidenced, we presume, in his red crest! Maybe this is so funny because the red of a cock's crest is an immeasurably truer hue than the red of a ruddy human's face. This image is intentionally absurd, since by inference, all roosters should be plagued like Macbeth with terrible dreams, and most hens too. As Robertson says, "Chaucer's chickens are amazingly convincing as chickens, and they are, at the same time, amusingly human" (252). Pertelote's human side is seen in her very funny parody of the a

scholarly disclaimer:

"Of other humours koude I telle also
That werken many a man in sleep ful wo;
But I wol passe as lightly as I kan." (3734-36)

This joke needs no explanation, but the context makes it even more apposite, since, in the first place, Pertelote (the hen) immediately passes lightly into the classical authority Cato ("Caton"); and then Chauntecleer sites seven authors and recounts three stories, the sum of which demonstrates how relative things are, since next to her husband, Pertelote really *does* skim over the subject. But even so, we can't help thinking, this is rather heavy matter for a chicken.

The final example is of Chauntecleer's amorous intentions as they mix with his scholarly pride. He praises Pertelote for the lovely red about her eyes, then slips a harmless Latin joke by her, even stopping to mistranslate it, and then launches into a wooing mode:

"Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,
It makethe al my drede for to dyen;
For al so siker as *In principio*,
Mulier est hominis confusio, —
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is
'Womman is mannes love and al his blis.'
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,

That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem."

And with that word he flee doun fro the beam.... (3958-69)

Chauntecleer is like a Spanish lover, in his genteelly expressed sense of superiority to his favorite wife. The Latin phrase means, "In the beginning, woman is man's ruin." It is a mixture of the first words from St. John's Gospel ("*In principio*") and Chauntecleer's own joking reference to the fall of man (brought about by Eve). After putting this rather funny little joke over on his lady, he rhapsodizes on her "softe syde," which almost evokes a feather pillow, since it is her feathers that make Pertelote soft, and then he works himself into a more explicit mood, rhyming "syde" with the explicit action word (as it were) "ryde"; and he finally jumps from the beam because it is too narrow to accomplish his goal. Chaucer was blessed with a pre-Victorian directness, and he soon informs us of the climax of Chauntecleer's pattern of action:

He feathered Pertelote twenty tyme,

And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryde. (3976-77)

We may note how the word that Chaucer chooses for "embrace" is "feathered," which reminds us that this is an affair between chickens and also refers back charmingly to Pertelote's "softe side" (soft because of the feathers). This is elegant poetry, and it conveys the balance between the human and bestial sides of the happy pair.

These elegant descriptions of Chauntecleer are also balanced by the hard life of the poor widow and her daughters. The widow is poor and uncomplaining — and she owns the noble Chauntecleer and

his harem. Robert B. Burlin puts this this especially well:

Chauntecleer is, after all, introduced in such a way that everything that is most human about him is bound to be most ridiculous: his appearance and deportment, couched in heraldic color and the aristocratic diction of courtly romance, contrast at every point with the chiaroscuro but exemplary model of patient poverty, the widow and "maner dey" who happens to be his keeper. All of the admirable comic strokes in the first half of the *Tale* depend on the sudden reminders that this puffed-up language and passionate egotism, so unmistakable in its foolishness, has been incarnated in a scarlet-eyed hen and a loud-crowning cock.

(217)

Burlin goes on to say that we don't really laugh at the fact that Chauntecleer and Pertelote are chickens: "What we laugh at in their performance is not the chickens, of course, but the generically distilled essence of prideful humanity, specifically (for, as the narrator reminds us, these are *talking* birds) the ingenious verbal smokescreens the human animal pours out to defend his vanity." I would quibble with this (especially the "of course"). What we laugh at is the tension between these examples of human frailty, underscored by the stoic suffering of the mistress, and the fact that Chauntecleer and his retinue *are* chickens.⁽⁹⁾ But no one can read Burlin's comment above and doubt that he appreciates the balances in the *Tale*.

Thus, the details of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* make it a special case. Except for *The General Prologue*, I can think of nothing in *The Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer identifies as closely with. The Nun's

Priest is portrayed as a master storyteller, as elegant as he is humble. In the fourteenth century, democracy was a thing for the future, of course, but this tale was a blow for the eventual realization of the ideal of equality of opportunity. The humblest storyteller may also be the best.

Conclusion: *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is the story that most directly represents Chaucer in his true persona. Earlier in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer portrays himself (Chaucer the pilgrim) as a bumbling proser, whose attempt at poetry is doggerel, and who is ridiculed by Harry. But he can do this with no real sacrifice of ego because we all know he is the author of all the tales and the master of their many iambic triumphs. Under these circumstances, Chaucer is likely to identify most with the narrator who best represents a proto-democratic ideal, who is the hardest to pigeonhole, being a humble cleric with a virile appearance, and who is the most balanced and perhaps even the wittiest in his expression. Everything in this tale suggests the kind of balance that Chaucer always strove for.

Notes

- (1) Dr. Johnson's poem, written in the eighteenth century, is actually entitled "The Vanity of Human Wishes." The important, if dogmatic, critic F. R. Leavis considered "Vanity" a great poem, and one which readers must respond to in order to fully appreciate Johnson's accomplishment.
- (2) All textual references in this paper are to A.C. Cawley's edition.
- (3) It could be objected that Chaucer is more modest than this, since he represents himself, in his role as one of the pilgrims, as giving something

so bad in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* that he is interrupted by the Host and ordered to tell a new story or leave off altogether. In fact *Sir Thopas* is pure doggerel, and Chaucer's substitute story, *The Tale of Melibee*, is pure prose. But these extremes are just a form of self-deprecating humor that Chaucer can afford to indulge in because everyone knows that he is the real author of all the stories.

- (4) One odd sign of Chaucer's greatness is this very openness to extremes. One is reminded of Dickens. Chaucer can strike a nice balance, as I intend to show in this paper, but he can also present extremes, and the fidelity of Virginia is one of these. In the case of Virginia's death, one is reminded of the comment attributed to Oscar Wilde about the death of Little Nell in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (though I have no idea where Wilde said it): "When reading the death of Little Nell, one must have a heart of stone to keep from laughing." It is worth noting, though, that Chaucer fares better in this comparison of extremes. Dickens's operatic presentation of Little Nell's death is in his own voice, and is in fact quite earnest: Dickens lived a fantasy life through his characters and was personally depressed by the artistically necessary death of Nell. Chaucer, on the other hand remains aloof: it is the Physician who narrates the story, and Virginia's extremes in things beginning with the letter *v* (like *virtue*) reflect on the narrator more than his creator.
- (5) S. S. Hussey (183) seems to suggest that the Monk intends to tell his entire repertoire, but the Monk only mentions having "an hundred in my celler" (2769), which is to say he has collected a hundred of these "tragedies" and keeps them at the monastery. It is anyone's guess how many stories the Monk would have told if he hadn't been stopped.
- (6) The success or failure of Chaucer-the-pilgrim's tales is a matter of opinion. They are intended to be humorously boring, and in this they succeed. The problem is that reading through either the doggerel or its prose sequel — especially the latter — is almost as boring for the reader as for the pilgrims (only less so because the reader gets the joke). Is this really permissible? Shakespeare's handling of Juliet's Nurse, a lovable gasbag, suggests that there is at least a better way: *Establish* how boring a person is, but never really demonstrate this quality for more than a minute or two.

- (7) Among academics who still grant that there is such a thing as literary superiority, and who decide, for instance, what core poets should be required of literature students in universities or graduate schools, almost all affirm Shakespeare's supremacy, but there is no agreement (at least that I can determine) as to whether Chaucer or Milton is Number 2. And there are the dissenters who would depose one or the other (or both) from this short list.
- (8) The mock heroic is obvious and occurs at all points in the story, but the allegorical element is not paramount. There is no point-by-point correspondence between characters and ideas, as there is in the morality play *Everyman* or the 17th-century proto-novel *Pilgrim's Progress*. Even so, D. W. Robertson, Jr. (251-52) makes a compelling case that Chaucer was familiar with the medieval renderings of a fox, representing a Franciscan friar, attacking a cock, representing a priest (not unlike the Friar and Nun's Priest in *The Canterbury Tales*), and that there is a conscious suggestion of this correspondence in the *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. It hardly needs saying, however, that our enjoyment of the *Tale* doesn't depend on our awareness of this, and Robinson says nothing to suggest that it does.
- (9) The great George Lyman Kittredge puts this as well as anyone: "Chaunticleer and Pertelote, when they converse, are human beings, a lord and his lady, with characters as true to human nature as that of Harry Billy or the Wife of Bath. Yet, in a moment when we are almost forgetting that they are barnyard fowl, a touch brings back the reality, — the beams on which they roost, or the corn of wheat [here Kittredge is reminding his audience of fellow Americans that *corn* in Chaucer's time meant *wheat* and not *maize*], or the lovely scarlet red about Dame Pertelote's eyes, or the diet of worms..." (87).

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