Delight, Subversion and Truth in The Canterbury Tales: Chaucer's Talking Birds

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Delight, Subversion and Truth in *The Canterbury Tales:*

Chaucer's Talking Birds

(TITLE)

BY

Terri Benson Blair

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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Abstract

Geoffrey Chaucer mentions birds over 240 times throughout *The Canterbury Tales* (Tatlock and Kennedy). This frequent allusion to birds is significant, especially since three of his twenty-four tales are actually about birds. What makes these three tales particularly fascinating is that their bird protagonists have the gift of speech. This study examines Chaucer’s use of bird imagery in *The Canterbury Tales*, in particular, his use of talking birds in “The Squire’s Tale,” “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and “The Manciple’s Tale.” My theory is that Chaucer uses bird imagery and talking birds to question the sovereign power of the fourteenth-century British nobility, most specifically the dangers of flattery and the issue of nature versus nobility. To this end I discuss Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* audience, their knowledge of bird imagery, and the need for subversion. I also discuss the way Chaucer uses language and discourse to reveal certain truths or realities about the nobility, as well as his propensity for addressing serious matters, such as the nobility’s sovereign power, with a high degree of delight and entertainment.

In addition, I discuss the ways in which Chaucer’s audience for *The Canterbury Tales* was different from his audience for previous works, such as the *Book of the Duchess*. I examine reasons Chaucer subverted meaning in *The Canterbury Tales* and how he did so in his talking bird tales. I also examine the use of animal imagery in art, literature and religion, and discuss Chaucer’s audience’s familiarity with it. And throughout my discussion I look at the way Chaucer uses talking birds to draw attention to language, while simultaneously delighting and entertaining his audience.
DEDICATION

My thesis is dedicated to my husband, Russell Blair, my son and daughter, Raymond and Jennie Blair, and my parents, Ray and Iris Benson. Their love, faith and encouragement have kept me on track. When I say that I could never have completed this project without their help, I mean it with all my heart.

I would also like to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who is my constant source of strength and wisdom.
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Delight, Subversion and Truth in *The Canterbury Tales*: Chaucer's Talking Birds

Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer mentions birds over 240 times throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. This frequent allusion to birds seems significant, especially since three of his twenty-four tales are actually about birds.¹ What makes these three tales particularly fascinating is that their bird protagonists have the gift of speech. This study looks at Chaucer's use of bird imagery in *The Canterbury Tales*, in particular, his use of talking birds in "The Squire's Tale," "The Nun's Priest's Tale" and "The Manciple's Tale." My theory is that Chaucer uses bird imagery and talking birds to question the sovereign power of the fourteenth-century British nobility, most specifically the dangers of flattery and the issue of nature versus nobility. To this end I discuss Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* audience, their knowledge of bird imagery, and the need for subversion. I also discuss the way Chaucer uses language and discourse to reveal certain truths or realities, as well as his propensity for addressing serious matters, such as the nobility's sovereign power, while simultaneously delighting and entertaining.

Who was Chaucer's audience for *The Canterbury Tales*? This is a difficult question in some ways, because *The Canterbury Tales* were incomplete when Chaucer died. Pearsall explains that

There are no references to the *Canterbury Tales*, and no manuscript of the work in part or whole, survives from before 1400. It seems clear that

¹Chaucer also wrote *The Parliament of Fowls* and *The House of Fame*, which both feature talking birds.
Chaucer, though he must have allowed his friends to see or hear portions of the work, kept the poem as a whole to himself, constantly revising and reallocating and reordering the tales. At his death, the work remained unfinished, in the form of a series of unconnected fragments. (296)

However, even though the Tales remained unfinished when Chaucer died, it seems probable that he would eventually have finished them and had them copied as one work. So a better question might be: Who was Chaucer’s intended audience? There is evidence that Chaucer may have been writing his Canterbury Tales for a different audience than that of his earlier works. When Chaucer was composing the Book of the Duchess, he was a member of the royal household and had frequent opportunities for contact with powerful court figures, but between the fall of 1386 and the fall of 1389, he left the royal household and moved to London and a position in customs. This move changed Chaucer’s audience from a consistent and immediate court audience to a more sporadic listening and reading audience. As Strohm points out, his reading audience would sometimes “draw its conclusions in private, away from any possibility of Chaucer’s intervention” (65). There is also textual evidence within the Tales themselves of his move toward an audience of readers. In the prologue to “The Miller’s Tale,” Chaucer, as narrator, makes a disclaimer against some of the churlish language that will be encountered by his audience in the upcoming tale. He tells his audience that “whoso list it nat yheere / Turne over the leef and chese another tale” (l.3176-77). Chaucer’s admonition to “turne over the leef” implies that his audience will be reading his stories (turning over the leaf of a book), rather than hearing them. In the Retraction
at the end of the *Tales*, Chaucer also seems to be speaking to an audience that he will not be addressing in person:

> Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretyes or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that thereof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. I And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wil. (X.1081-82)

It is important to note, however, that although Chaucer may have directed *The Canterbury Tales* to a reading audience, oral tradition was still very much alive, and people were still telling stories as a form of entertainment. So, even though his tales were directed to readers, it is likely that many of them would still have been read aloud.

Not only was Chaucer’s audience for *The Canterbury Tales* more likely to be readers rather than listeners, but they were also probably a more bourgeois, middle-class audience than the aristocratic, court-connected audience of his previous works. John H. Fisher explains that

> the royal court, inns of court, and wealthy merchants of London were beginning to intermarry and enter into corporate business ventures (purchase property, export of wool and grain, and the like) in Chaucer’s time. These groups formed an educated, secular, bourgeois audience for sophisticated poetry in English. (53)

Fisher asserts that although Chaucer was thought of, both then and now, as a court poet, evidence indicates that most of his work was “addressed to the new bourgeoisie”
If Chaucer was directing The Canterbury Tales mostly to this “new bourgeoisie” rather than the nobility, it might seem as if he would not have needed to disguise his criticism of the noble class. However, keeping in mind that he had a lifetime annuity from the court, one recognizes that it behooved him to remain “supercautious to never say anything that could offend his superiors” (Fisher 40).

If Chaucer was indeed being careful not to offend the nobility who still supported him financially, it seems logical that he would have looked for a delightful, entertaining way to subversively question them without ruffling any feathers. Animal fables were the perfect choice. In The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry, David J. Bernstein explains that fables have long been connected with dissent:

Aesop was supposedly a slave from Samos who used his animal tales for political purposes. Here is how Phaedrus, the Roman fabulist whose works formed the core of medieval collections, accounted for the origin of the fable: ‘Now I will briefly explain why the type of thing called fable was invented. The slave, being liable to punishment for any offence, since he dared not say outright what he wished to say, projected his personal sentiments into fables and eluded censure under the guise of jesting with made-up stories. (135)

Though Chaucer was by no means a slave, he certainly could have been punished for saying things that were openly critical of the nobility. So it makes sense that he chose three animal fables to comment on the nobility in ways that could have been seen as dissentious. And medieval people were certainly familiar with animals, both naturally
and symbolically. In Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature, L. A. J. R. Houwen points out that since society in the Middle Ages was agrarian, the daily lives of most people involved animals, whether as food, clothing, or even as quill and parchment. Houwen also mentions the prominence of animals in art and literature. He says that "[s]ince they are seldom presented in ways that coincide with our conceptions of naturalism or realism, it is tempting to infer that in almost all cases they fill symbolic roles" (4). But how do we know that the birds in "The Squire's Tale," "The Nun's Priest's Tale" and "The Manciple's Tale" were filling symbolic roles? Joyce E. Salisbury says that

Two principle attitudes toward animals existed during the Middle Ages: one that we will call allegorical, and the other scientific. Writers using the allegorical treatment—which is best seen in the medieval handbooks we call the Physiologus and the bestiary—were primarily interested in showing that the real value in actual or purported animal behavior was to point a spiritual moral to the reader. (5)

Houwen further explains that "[i]n coming to grips with each case, we need to ask ourselves whether the scene [depicting animals] reflects any views about the animals involved or whether instead it animalizes a human relationship found in real life or in fiction" (22). The falcon, cock and crow of Chaucer's bird tales do not behave as their natural counterparts would, primarily because they talk and reason as humans do, so it is safe to say that these animals are being used in a fanciful way to comment on human behavior.
Noting that Chaucer’s audience would have had a broad knowledge of animal imagery “from many sources including Aesop,” Beryl Rowland explains that fourteenth-century Englishmen would have been familiar with all kinds of animal stories and their meanings:

The fable of the innocent ass sentenced to beating and death by the lion served to demonstrate the fate of those of humble rank; the popular story of Pope Benedict IX appearing after death with the head of an ass and the body of a boar was used to indict the church [and] the story of the singed cat was useful for disciplining wives. (5)

Along with the well-known animals found in Aesop’s and other fables, Chaucer’s audience would also have been familiar with Flemish and Anglo-Saxon tapestries, illustrated manuscripts, and religious and secular iconographies of their day, all rich in animal imagery. For example, the four Biblical Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were symbolically represented by a man, lion, ox and eagle. These images of the Evangelists “appear in all medieval media and throughout the medieval Christian world” (Benton 150-51), so Chaucer’s audience, whether noble or bourgeois, was accustomed to religious animal symbolism.

In fact, people of the Middle Ages had an extraordinarily close and spiritual association with animals. There was a strange kind of fusion between the animal world and the human world:

St. Francis not only preached to birds and considered them his brethren but even considered it worthwhile to have a heart-to-heart conversation
with the wolf of Gubbio about his eating habits. Rats, snails, and insects whose infestations caused property damage were sometimes put on trial collectively and excommunicated. Large animals such as pigs were put on trial individually when they committed murders by actually de-facing infants which had been left unwatched. (Houwen 3)

If animals were preached to and excommunicated from the church, it seems likely that tales featuring animals would have been taken more seriously for their moral implications than they are today.

Along with religious and artistic animal symbolism, there were many well-known books devoted entirely to animals. Salisbury writes that the animal book, the Physiologus, originally written in Greek sometime in the second century A.D. was widely disseminated in many forms as attested by its translation into such diverse vernaculars as Syriac, Ethiopian, Russian, Flemish, Provencal, Old English, and Icelandic. ‘Perhaps no book except the Bible,’ according to E. P. Evans, ‘has ever been so widely distributed among so many people and for so many centuries as the Physiologus.’

(14)

Salisbury adds that ‘[a]long with the Physiologus, the bestiary or ‘Book of Beasts’ served as the principle source of animal lore during the Middle Ages...developed around the end of the twelfth century and flourished through the fourteenth’ (16). These books did not describe animals scientifically, however. Since animals were seen as object lessons for human behavior, “the actual physical animal was of little or no
importance to these writers" (5). For example, in Richard Barber's translation of the Bodleian Bestiary, the fox is symbolic of the devil, the crow can foretell rain, and the hen symbolizes divine wisdom. If certain animals conjured up images of specific people or types of people for Chaucer's audience, then Chaucer could have said a great deal by his choice of bird alone.

That Chaucer's audience was accustomed to the use of animal imagery in art, religion, and literature makes it seem reasonable that he would have used this device as a means to implicitly question his society. Throughout The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer "has drawn our attention to the fact that poetic discourse mirrors a reality imperfect or fallen" (Grudin 162). By putting truth into the mouths of birds, Chaucer may be drawing our attention to some of the imperfect realities of society more delightfully than if he were using human speakers to do so. Thomas Honegger says that

animal protagonists [often have the] literary function of, at least initially, creating a certain distance between themselves on the one side and the human narrator and audience on the other. Even though they are anthropomorphized, it is not as easy to identify with them as with human heroes. Secondly, they provide a cover for criticism. (224-25)

As the Nun's Priest says, after making a comment on free will versus predestination, "My tale is of a cok" (VII 3252). If Chaucer's subversive criticism of the nobility in his three talking bird tales had been discovered and disapproved of, he could quite truthfully have said in his own defense, "My tale is of a cok (or a falcon or a crow)."

But why would Chaucer need a "cover for criticism," especially since The
*Canterbury Tales* were not copied as a unified body of work until after his death?
Though the *Tales* were unfinished when Chaucer died, it seems likely that he had every intention of having them copied in their completed form when they were finished. And there is evidence that some of the fragments which would eventually become *The Canterbury Tales* may have already been circulating among Chaucer’s associates.
Pearsall says that “[p]resumably Sir John Clanvowe took the opening lines of *The Book of Cupid (The Cuckoo and the Nightingale)* from a written copy of the Knight’s Tale, or its pre-*Canterbury Tales* predecessor,” and in his *Envoy to Bukton*, Chaucer tells Bukton, “The wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede / Of this matere that we have on honde” (Pearsall 295-96). So even though *The Canterbury Tales* were not completed in Chaucer’s lifetime, it seems that parts of them were being read in some form by a select, private audience. There are many historical reasons why Chaucer would have avoided openly criticizing or even questioning the nobles of his society. Derek Pearsall says that “we have to reckon with the immensity of the weight of ‘authority’ in the Middle Ages and the difficulties, even the dangers, of skepticism” (quoted in Grudin 20). Verbal criticism could be viewed as treason, and some of Chaucer’s associates—most notably the poet Thomas Usk—were arrested and hanged for such crimes (see Strohm 26). As Carl Lindahl puts it, “medieval Londoners, for all intents and purposes, considered words and deeds to be of equal significance” (77). During Chaucer’s years as court poet, he was in a precarious situation. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out, “The court poet in the late fourteenth century...must be careful not to speak in ways that offend men of higher rank...both patrons...and interpreters of his art” (284). Since
Chaucer was maintained by the court, he was obliged to write poetry that pleased and flattered them. Louise Fradenburg says that the court [and its poet] "becomes the instrument whereby the sovereign expresses the truth and magnificence of his being" (88). V. J. Scattergood says that Chaucer "knew what it was to have to say things he did not completely endorse in ways he was not sure would be approved by his audience" (quoted in Fradenburg 86). Since fragments of *The Canterbury Tales* were already being circulated and perhaps even being read orally to private audiences, and with eventual completion and copying of the *Tales* in mind, Chaucer would have had to consider the effect his words might have on the court which still supported him. And since Chaucer knew that speaking against the sovereign was punishable by death, it is likely that he may have subverted some of his meaning to ensure his own safety in the event that any part of his *Tales* should fall into the wrong hands.

Chaucer may have used animal imagery for reasons other than subversion, too. Grudin makes the statement that "[e]ven the most casual of [Chaucer's] readers will recognize his perennial interest in talk, talkers, and dialogue" (1). By giving animals (who do not speak in their natural state) the gift of "talk," he certainly draws attention to the "talkers," as well as to the "dialogue" they are speaking. When a falcon, a crow and a pair of chickens begin to speak, we are forced to sit up and take notice of their words.

Chaucer used language in several powerful ways. First of all, from 1066 until after 1350, England was trilingual, with the ruling class speaking in French and writing in Latin, and the majority of the people speaking English (Fisher 5). Chaucer was one of the first to use the English language to write court poetry, which had formerly been
delegated to French. Fisher says that “[a]ll critics agree that modern English poetry begins with him” (18, 33). But beyond being one of the first to write sophisticated poetry in the vernacular, Chaucer used language and discourse as a means of representing reality. Fisher calls it “mimesis—the representation of reality through language,” and says that “matching the subjects and styles of the stories to the personalities of their tellers . . . [is] Chaucer’s greatest achievement” (69). The language, discourse or conversation of the falcon, cock and crow of “The Squire’s Tale,” “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and “The Manciple’s Tale” reveal certain truths about reality. Fisher says that Chaucer’s “pilgrims and the characters in the stories they tell may represent universal types or qualities, but they always act and speak, like Macbeth and Hamlet, as self-motivating human beings” (134). Through the discourse of his talking birds, Chaucer points out that certain people in his society do not have a voice, and in his talking bird tales, he gives them voice. In “The Squire’s Tale,” those who have been wounded by the ignoble acts of the nobility are given a voice through the character of the female falcon. In “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” the lower classes are given voice through Chauntecleer the Cock, and sometimes through the Nun’s Priest himself. And in “The Manciple’s Tale,” the court poet (possibly Chaucer himself) is given a voice to say things he is not usually at liberty to say, through Phebus’s crow. And though Chaucer gives a voice to the voiceless in these tales, in true Chaucerian form, he does not present answers, only questions. As Grudin says, “much of great literature is ‘great’ . . . because it recognizes and grapples with the limiting contingencies of its culture” (26), and this is precisely what Chaucer does in the context of “The Squire’s Tale,” “The
Nun's Priest's Tale" and "The Manciple's Tale." He "recognizes and grapples with" the questionable nobility of the fourteenth-century British noble class, through the escapades (and language) of his delightful talking birds. The crow of "The Manciple's Tale," we are told, could "countrefete the speche of every man" (IX.134), and, within the context of that tale, we are admonished to "thenk on the crowe" (317-18). If the Nun's Priest's chickens and the Squire's falcons can also "countrefete" human voices, then it makes sense that Chaucer would want us to "thenk on" them as well.

Though it is obvious that Chaucer wants us to think about the issues he is questioning in these tales, it is also obvious that he wants us to find them delightful and entertaining. And he has an amazing ability to question, criticize and entertain, all at one time. What makes his fusion of these three functions so amazing is that it is never clear when he switches from one to the other; he seems to be doing them all at once. This may be the primary reason Chaucer uses talking birds to address what could have been a very somber topic. Grudin says that The Canterbury Tales "suggest that society is not at ease with total truth" but that "truth is possible when tempered with delight" (155, 161). Chaucer's falcon, cock, and crow enable him to carefully temper truth with delight.
Chapter One

"The Squire's Tale": The Questionable Nobility of the Noble Class

"The Squire's Tale" is a story within a story, the outer narrative featuring a strange knight's magical gifts to a king, and the inner narrative featuring a female falcon's grief over her unfaithful tercelet (male falcon) husband. Although the inner and outer parts of "The Squire's Tale" may at first seem unrelated, I argue that they are connected. The most striking similarities between the two parts are that both focus on language, truth and nobility. Language and truth are obvious themes in both the inner and outer stories, whereas nobility is an obvious component of the outer tale, but a more subverted aspect of the inner tale. Since the central characters of the outer tale are a king and a knight, this tale is indisputably focused on the noble class. The falcon protagonists of the inner tale make it less obvious that Chaucer is referring to nobility. However, it is obvious that the falcons in this tale are symbolic of humans, since they do not behave like falcons in the natural world. For example, when the female falcon is telling Canacee about the tercelet's deceptive courting, she says that he "[f]il on his knees" (544) begging for her love. And then a little later she mentions taking him "by the hond" (596). And as Houwen says, when we are trying to determine whether animals are being used symbolically, we need to "ask ourselves whether the scene reflects any views about the animals involved or whether instead it animalizes a human relationship found in real life or in fiction" (22). I think it is safe to say that the falcons in this tale are symbolic of humans.

It seems that fourteenth-century Britishers would have had a special
understanding of the falcon, due to the long-standing popularity of falconry in Europe, and that they would easily have been able to imagine the bird as an apt representative of the noble class. Robin S. Oggins says that "[t]he earliest record of falconry in Europe dates from the fifth century A. D." Though "[f]alconry was primarily a sport of the well-to-do" (48), it seems that all classes would have been familiar with falcons and doubtlessly fascinated by them. Since falcons were owned by the wealthy, a falcon would have made a fitting poetic type for a person of the noble class.

Oggins writes that "[i]n the thirteenth century King Edward I of England bent pennies over his falcons' heads and sent the pennies to shrines, sent wax images of sick falcons to shrines, and even sent sick birds themselves on pilgrimages" (50). Since falcons were so highly valued and esteemed, even by the king himself, it makes sense that Chaucer's audience would have listened carefully to what a falcon had to say. It also makes sense, in the context of The Canterbury Tales, that the young Squire, a nobleman himself, would have understood this connection and made use of it in his tale.

Just before the Squire tells his tale, the Merchant has told the fabliau tale of old Januarie and his young wife, May, who, when caught in the act of adultery, amazingly manages to talk her way out of it. When the Merchant has finished, the host bids the young Squire to "sey somwhat of love, for certes ye / Konnen theron as muche as any man" (V.2-3). The young Squire modestly protests that he does not really know a great deal of love, but says that he "wol say as I kan" (4). "My wyl is good," he tells the host, "and, lo, my tale is this" (8). And then he proceeds to tell a tale that does contain
"somewhat of love," though the focus is really on something else.

The Squire's tale takes place at Sarray, in the land of Tartarye, in the kingdom of the noble King Cambyuskan. Every year on the Ides of March, this king has a feast to celebrate his birthday. As the tale commences, a strange knight arrives at the annual celebration on a steed of brass. Besides the steed of brass, the strange knight brings three other gifts to King Cambyuskan: a mirror, a ring and a sword, which all have magical powers. These gifts are important because "more than a third of the Squire's Tale is devoted to the subject of the gifts" (Grudin 121), and also because they are connected to the inner tale of the talking falcon. The strange knight informs the king that the brass steed will take him anywhere he wants to go in one day's time, with the turning of a pin. The mirror can see any trouble that might threaten the king, as well as discern both friends and foes; it can also reveal to a lady if her lover is false or treasonous. The ring enables its wearer to understand and speak the language of the birds and to know which plants will heal wounds. The mirror and the ring are given specifically to the king's daughter, Canacee. The sword, which the strange knight bestows on the king, can cut through any armor. The dull side of this sword, when inserted in the wound it has made, has the power to heal the very wound it has just inflicted.

It seems odd that the strange knight gives the mirror and ring to Canacee, since the other gifts are for the king. Upon first glance, the other two gifts (the steed and the sword) seem to signify power. Perhaps a desire for understanding, rather than for power, is required by the owner of the ring and mirror, though we are not explicitly told
this. Later in the tale, however, when Canacee meets the self-torturing falcon, it is apparent that she has the sensitivity needed for the responsible use of such gifts. For when Canacee discovers the falcon’s anguish, she tells her, “Ye sle me with youre sorwe verraily, I have of yow so greet compassion” (462-63). And the Squire tells us, just after the falcon begins her sad story, that “evere, whil that oon [the falcon] her sorwe tolde, / That oother [Canacee] weep as she to water wolde” (495-96). So, whatever reasons the knight may have had for bestowing the two gifts on Canacee, it seems that he has made a good choice.

After the gifts are distributed and explained, the celebration continues, the strange knight dances with Canacee, and then Canacee retires early. The next morning Canacee is up before the others “[f]or such a joye she in hire herte took / Bothe of hir queynte ryng and hire mirour” (V.368-69). She and five or six of her acquaintances set out for the woods. Canacee hears the birds singing, and “right anon she wiste what they mente / Right by hir song, and knew all hire entente” (V.399-400). Canacee has not been in the woods long when she hears a falcon with a piteous voice, shrieking so loudly that the whole woods echo with the sound of her cries. This poor falcon sits in a dry tree, beating herself with her wings and piercing herself with her beak, until the blood runs down the tree. Canacee begs the falcon to tell her what is wrong, asking, “Is this for sorwe of deeth or los of love? / For, as I trowe, thise been causes two / That causen moost a gentil herte wo” (V.450-52). Canacee’s emphasis on the falcon’s “gentil herte” hints that the bird is of the noble class. Canacee stands under the tree for a long while, holding her apron open in an effort to catch the swooning bird, imploring
her to come down from the tree and offering to heal her wounds with herbs (another benefit of the ring.) When the bird finally falls from the tree, however, she lands on the ground (perhaps a bit of Chaucerian humor in this fairly serious tale.) Canacee scoops the poor falcon up in her arms, and sitting in Canacee's lap, the falcon begins to tell her story "in hir haukes ledene" (V.478). Before the falcon begins her tale, she says that perhaps her tale will "maken othere be war by me" (490), evidence that this animal tale has a moral and is "allegorical" (Salisbury 5) rather than literal.

And then the wounded falcon begins the tale that has led to her present condition. It seems that this female falcon had been "bred . . . [a]nd fostred in a roche of marbul gray / [s]o tendrely that no thyng eyled" her (499-501). That is, nothing had "eyled" her until she met the tercelet. This tercelet "semed welle of alle gentillesse" (505), and he wooed the female falcon for "many a yeer" (524) until she finally fell in love with him. But she was soon betrayed. In a passage that describes both his nobility and his deceit, the heartbroken falcon relates the beginning of her relationship with the tercelet:

Tho dwelte a tercelet me faste by,
That semed welle of alle gentillesse;
Al were he ful of treson and falsnesse,
It was so wrapped under humble cheere,
And under hewe of trouthe in swich manere,
Under plesance, and under bisy peyne,
That no wight koude han wend he koude feyne,
So depe in greyn he dyed his coloures.
Right as a serpent hit hym under floures
Til he may seen his tyme for to byte,
Right so this god of loves ypocryte
Dooth so his cerymonyes and his obeisaunces,
And kepeth in semblaunt alle his observaunces
That sownen into gentillesse of love. (504-17)

Though this sweet-talking tercelet seems like a very noble, faithful lover, he is noble in name only. The female falcon tells Canacee that he pretended he would die if she rejected him, and she admits that her heart was “to pitous and to nyce, / [a] innocent of his crouned malice” (525-26) to realize that she was being deceived. The female falcon’s description of the tercelet’s “gentillesse,” his “cerymonyes and obeisaunces,” his “observaunces,” and especially his “crouned malice” make it fairly obvious that this tercelet is representative of a nobleman. In fact, the female falcon actually speaks of his “gentillesse of blood” (620), and says that he is “gentil born” (622). George Economou calls the falcon “a bird who has assumed the personality of a man of the noble class” (682).

Not long after the female falcon has given her “herte and al [her] thoght” (533) to the tercelet, he abandons her for a kyte. The female falcon tells it this way:

Though he were gentil born, and fressh and gay,
And goodlich for to seen, and humble and free,
He saugh upon a tyme a kyte flee,
And sodeynly he loved this kyte so
That al his love is clene fro me ago,
And hath his trouthe falsed in this wyse. (622-27)

It is interesting to note that the kyte is a bird much inferior in to the falcon, which makes his betrayal even more devastating to the female falcon. The *Bodleian Bestiary* describes the kyte as being “weak both in strength and flight: its Latin name (miluus) comes from ‘mollis avis’ (weak bird). It is nonetheless very rapacious and always attacks tame birds” (Barber 177). Just before the female falcon mentions the kite, she makes a little speech that is repeated almost verbatim in “The Manciple’s Tale,” though with a different twist. She tries to explain why the noble tercelet took up with a common kyte:

That ‘alle thynge, repeiryng to his kynde,
Gladeth hymself;’ thus seyn men, as I gesse.

Men loveth of propre kynde newefangelnesse,
As briddes doon that men in cages fede.
For though thou nyght and day take of hem hede,
And strawe hir cage faire and softe as silk,
And yeve hem sugre, hony, breed and milk,
Yet right anon as that his dore is uppe
He with his feet wol spurne adoun his cuppe,
And to the wode he wole and wormes ete;
So newefangel been they of hire mete,
And loven novelries of propre kynde,
No gentillesse of blood ne may hem bynde. (608-20)

This speech is interesting in the context of this particular tale, because the female falcon says, in relation to the tercelet's infatuation with the kyte, that "alle thyng, repeirynge to his kynde, / [g]ladeth hymself' (608-9). She calls the common kyte the same "kynde" (or species) as the noble falcon when they are obviously two completely different types of birds. Not only are they different, but the kyte is inferior in many ways to the falcon. However, if we look at the real focus of the tale, which is language, truth and nobility, we can see what the female falcon is saying. She seems to be indicating that, although the falcon is noble by virtue of his birth, he is as common as a kyte by virtue of his actions. His "humble cheere" and "hewe of trouthe" (507-8) are just a cover for his "crouned malice" (526). A small detail, but one worth noting, is the fact that Chaucer uses a secondary animal symbol within his already symbolic tale of the falcon to make sure we know what he means. When the lady falcon is telling Canacee about the deceitfulness of her faithless tercelet husband, she calls him a "tigre, ful of doublenesse" (543). Michael Storm explains that the tiger was known in Medieval times as a symbol for hypocrisy and asserts that "in Chaucer's brief phrase we can observe yet one more instance of the remarkable care which he lavished upon even the smallest details of his verse" (174).

The falcon's tale concludes shortly after she has disclosed the tercelet's unfaithfulness. When her tale is at an end, Canacee takes her home and nurses her back to health, using "herbes preciouse and fyne of hewe / [t]o heelen with this hauk"
Not only has the ring allowed Canacee to understand the bird's language, but it has enabled her to find the proper plants that will heal the bird's wounds. While the bird is convalescing, Canacee keeps her by the head of her own bed in a little pen covered with a blue velvet cloth and painted with "false fowles" (647). Next to the false fowles, Canacee has painted magpies "on hem [the false fowles] for to cry and chyde" (650). The blue velvet cloth is perhaps Canacee's way of honoring the female falcon's nobility, and the pictures of the false fowls being scolded by the magpies are a graffiti-like statement of Canacee's support of the true fowl who has been wounded by falsehood.

At this point in the narrative, the Squire abruptly shifts gears. We are told only that "this faucon gat hire love ageyn / [r]epentent, as the storie telleth us, / [b]y mediation of Cambalus, / [t]he kynges sone" (654-57). Nothing more is said of the falcon. The Squire ends this part of the tale and begins a third part, which is abruptly interrupted and then ended by the Franklin. Before the Franklin goes on to tell his own tale, however, he gives us the moral of the Squire's tale, saying, "Fy on possession, / [b]ut if a man be vertuous withal!" (686-87). Why does the tale end so abruptly? It is possible that Chaucer was not yet finished with it and intended to complete it later. Or, since he is depicting an oral tradition in which storytellers are often interrupted, he could have inserted the interruption as a bit of realism. But it seems to me that he ended the tale because the interesting and important part of it was finished. Even in the context of the tale, the Franklin interrupts the Squire only after the falcon's narrative is finished, saying, "In feith, Squier, thow has wel yquit / [a]nd gentilly. I preise wel thy wit"
(673-74). And the fact that the Franklin sums up the moral indicates that we have heard the part that matters. But besides the statement that possessions (or position) are worthless unless they are coupled with virtue, what has the tale really shown us? The principle moral seems to be wrapped up in the relationship between words and deeds, language and truth. And this is where the gifts of the outer tale connect with the false fowl of the inner tale.

Grudin says the gifts “are all visual symbols whose meaning seems particularly connected with such powers as relate to human understanding and communication” (117). Though it may at first be difficult to connect the strange knight’s brass steed, mirror and sword with the story of the falcon, Grudin explains that the connection has to do with the way both tales focus on the use of language and truth by the nobility:

They are framed on the one side by the eloquence of the strange knight and on the other by the falcon’s description of the tercelet’s duplicity, a duplicity accomplished entirely by his abuse of that same eloquence. Understood and applied, the gifts recall a Ciceronian view of speech and rhetoric as a powerful art of understanding as well as of communication. They provide a rationale for the eloquence of the strange knight; they also comprise an effective and powerful response to the “crowned malice” (V [F] 526) of the tercelet. (118)

The female falcon’s allusion to the tercelet’s “crowned malice” suggests a nobleman who is covering malice with a crown, or hiding his lack of true nobility beneath a noble title. As the female tercelet rhetorically asks, regarding the faithless tercelet, “Who kan
say bet than he, who kan do werses?" (600).

The gifts of the eloquent knight in the outer tale definitely give King Camyuskan a great deal of wisdom for governing his kingdom. On the other hand, the tercelet of the inner tale has a great deal of eloquence but no wisdom with which to govern his behavior. Chaucer uses the magical gifts of the strange knight, as well as the tale of the troubled falcon, to focus his readers' attention on the relationship between language and truth (or words and deeds), especially as they apply to the ruling class. Through the outer tale, he demonstrates the value of using language and truth wisely, and through the inner tale, he shows the results of false flattery and points out that being of the noble class does not necessarily make one noble.
Chapter Two

"The Nun's Priest's Tale": Fowl Flattery

"The Nun's Priest's Tale," like "The Squire's Tale" talks about language, truth, flattery and the nobility. Its focus, however, is on the dangers of flattery and of going against one's natural inclinations. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is not as clear in its allegorical allusions as is "The Squire's Tale" or "The Manciple's Tale," because it slips in and out of the animal fable realm, making its characters more difficult to identify as direct types. But of the three talking bird tales, it is probably the most delightful, due to its physical comedy, high energy level and memorably humorous characters.

When we are first introduced to the Nun's Priest, the Monk has just finished his rather tedious narrative on men of "heigh degree" who had "fillen so that ther nas no remedie" (VII.1991-2). The Knight stops him, saying that he would much prefer to hear about a man that "hath been in povre estaat, / [a]nd clymbeth up and wexeth fortunat, / [a]nd there abideth in prosperitee" (2775-77) than to hear of one who has fallen from high degree. To hear of a person of low estate rising would be "joye and greet solas" (2774), the Knight says. When the Knight says that he would like to hear about someone of low degree being brought higher, this hints that Chaucer may be rooting for the underdog in this tale.

Honneger notes that though "[t]he basic pattern of the story-line derives from one of the many versions of the well-known fable of The Cock and the Fox" (198), some important differences distinguish Chaucer's rendition from earlier versions:

The Nun's Priest is obviously trying to avoid any identification of the fox
with Renart/Reynard, since such an identification would utterly destroy the
balance of the tale and shift the focus of attention on to the well-known
hero of the beast epics. It is not the fox, then, that stands at the centre of
attention, but the cock Chauntecleer and his relationship with Pertelote.
Indeed, the fox is not introduced until about half of the tale has been told,
nor is he the famous ‘Reynard’: he remains anonymous for most of the tale,
and when he is finally given a name, it is ‘daun Russelle.’ (219-220)

Besides this widely known fable, the fox, cock and hen were also well-known in medieval
times by their symbolic meanings. The fox, as might be expected, was known for his
deviousness. A popular legend said that when he was hungry and unable to find food, he
would roll in red earth and lie quietly on the ground, appearing to be bloody. Birds would
see him lying still, seemingly covered with blood, and would perch on his apparently
dead body. The fox would suddenly sit up and devour the unsuspecting birds (Barber
65). The cock was sometimes associated with castration and sexuality but more often
with his crowing voice, which was considered both beautiful and useful in that it could be
relied upon to herald the dawning of each day. The Bodleian Bestiary says that “[i]ts
song brings hope back to everyone, eases the pain of the sick, cools the fevered brow,
brings faith back to those who have lapsed” (Barber 172-73). The hen, surprisingly, was
known as a “symbol of divine wisdom” (Barber 174), chiefly because Christ refers to
hens in the Bible saying, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and
stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children
together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings” [Matthew 23:37].
Throughout the tale Chaucer plays off of the preconceived images of the fox as a deceiver, the cock as both a victim of castration and a symbol of hope, and the hen as divinely wise.

The Nun’s Priest begins his tale with a poor old widow, who lives in a small cottage beside a grove, in a dale (2821-23). Though he tells us a few details regarding the widow’s situation, it soon becomes apparent that the real focus of the tale is on her rooster, “a cok, hight Chauntecleer,” who could outcrow any other rooster “[i]n al the land” (2849-50). This Chauntecleer had a voice “murier than the murie orgon / [o]n messe-days that in the chirche gon” (2852). Not only was his crowing pleasant and loud; it was accurate, “[w]el sikerer was his crowyng in his logge / [t]han is a clokke or an abbey orlogge” (2853-55). If his voice was not enough to distinguish him from all his “peer[s]” (2850), he had a fine group of hens “in his governaunce” (2865) as well:

Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce,
Which wer his sustres and his paramours,
And wonder lyk to hym, as of colours;
Of which the faireste hewed on her throte

Was cleped faire damoysele Pertelote. (2866-70).

After the Nun’s Priest explains that Pertelote is Chauntecleer’s most beloved hen, he adds that, at the time this tale takes place, “[b]eestes and briddes koude speke and synge” (2881). In each of Chaucer’s talking bird tales, he explains the birds’ ability to speak in different ways, each one fitting the context of its respective story. The Squire’s falcon could not really speak human language, but her bird language was understood
because of the magical powers of Canacee's ring. Though the Squire's falcons do not really speak in the language of humans, the Nun's Priest's chickens do. If the Nun's Priest's chickens are representative of the lower classes, Chaucer seems to be pointing out that they do not presently have a voice, but hearkens back to a time when, if only in his imagination, they did.

Shortly after we meet Chauntecleer and his wives, Chauntecleer has a disturbing dream. In the dream, an animal that he has never seen before appears in the barnyard to attack him, and when Chauntecleer awakens, he is terrified. He asks God to help him interpret the dream correctly and to "kepe [his] body out of foul prisoun!" (VII. 2896-97). He describes the animal and the dream to the unsympathetic Pertelote:

> Withinne our yeerd, wheer as I saugh a beest
> Was lyk an hound, and wolde han had me deed.
> His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,
> And tipped was his tayl and bothe his eeris
> With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris;
> His snowte smal, with glowynge eyen tweye.
> Yet of his look for feere almoost I deye. (2899-906)

Chauntecleer's dream foreshadows the impending appearance of his natural enemy, the "col-fox" (3215). And though his natural instincts are absolutely correct, Pertelote immediately begins to "chicken" him, calling him "hertelees" and actually going so far as to tell him that he has "lost [her] herte and al [her] love" (2908,10), which is not true, since she loves him throughout the tale. Pertelote then clues Chauntecleer in on what
women really want, telling him, "[f]or certes, what so any womman seith, / [w]e alle
desire, if it myghte bee, / [t]o han housbondes hardy, wise, and free" (2912-14). If
Pertelote's reference to herself as a woman does not indicate that this story is about
humans rather than chickens, then her rhetorical question to Chauntecleer does. "Have
ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?" (2920), she asks him accusingly. Of course, he
has neither. These references to Chauntecleer and Pertelote as husband and wife
animalize "a human relationship found in real life" (Houwen 22), indicating that the story
is fable. However, in this tale, things are not quite so simple. At times these chickens do
behave like humans, such as the instances mentioned above, but at other times, they
behave very much like chickens. So, this story is allegorical most of the time, but
occasionally, and without warning, it can become a comical story about chickens.
Honegger discusses this movement in and out of fable:

In *The Nun's Priest's Tale* . . . we note a pronounced tendency to keep the
audience from entering the unambiguous and clearly circumscribed realms
of either the animal fable or the beast epic, and the narrator prevents the
shutting of the gates to the trivial reality of this world. We are allowed to
venture into these realms, but never so far as to lose sight of the other side.
(208)

Therefore, it is nearly impossible to say unequivocally that Chaunticleer is always
symbolic of the lower classes, or that the fox is always symbolic of the ruling order, or
any such statement of direct typng. It is only possible to note that *at times*, each of the
Nun’s Priest’s animal characters seems to be representative of a certain person or group
of people. It is possible that, in this tale, Chaucer is talking about things that could upset the ruling class, thereby endangering his own safety, so he deliberately keeps the allegory questionable. This back and forth movement of the tale from a real-world chicken story to fable is similar to Chaucer's tendency in his own life to keep from aligning himself too strongly with any one political faction. Strohm explains that, although Chaucer could not avoid being connected with the Ricardian faction, he kept himself as loosely aligned as possible:

Chaucer's relation to the king was, as we have seen, neither bound by oath nor secured by land tenure; it was a relation based on mutual interest and thus open to constant reevaluation on both sides. Chaucer's management of his career suggests that he exercised this prerogative and that he adjusted the extent of his own factional involvement according to circumstance. A number of episodes in Chaucer's career support an estimate of his good judgement in precarious circumstances. (36)

Pearsall seconds Strohm's opinion, saying that "Chaucer seems to have found in the comedy of the Nun's Priest's Tale the perfect medium for the expression of his view of life" (230). Peter Travis says "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is Chaucer's "linguistically and artistically most self-referential poem" (203), (though "The Manciple's Tale" contains a more direct parody of Chaucer in the character of the crow.) But just as Chaucer was careful not to speak out too strongly for or against any political faction, the Nun's Priest is careful to keep his tale from being a direct allegory of specific situations or types of people.
After Pertelote has shamed Chauntecleer for being so terrified by a dream and told him what women want, she proceeds to prescribe medicine for what ails him, attributing his dream to overeating. She then invokes the wisdom of Catoun, saying, "Lo Catoun, which that was so wys a man, / Seyde he nat thus, 'Ne do no fors of dremes'?" (2940-41). "I conseille yow the beste," she tells him, "I wol nat lye" (2945), though she has already lied by telling him he has lost her love. She then goes on to explain which herbs she will gather to use as laxatives or purgatives "[t]o purge yow bynethe and eek above" (2953). And then, she tells him, "Be myrie, housbonde, for youre fader kyn! / [d]redeth no dreem" (2968-69). She seems to be telling him to disregard his dream for his family's honor. This comment is interesting, because his "fader kyn," being chickens, would have likewise dreaded a dream of their natural enemy, the fox. Although Pertelote believes that she is arguing against the ability of dreams to predict the future, she is really arguing against nature because the natural instincts that cause Chauntecleer, as well as his "fader kyn," to know "ech ascencioun / [o]f the equynoxial" (2855-56) are the same ones that make him, and all chickens before him, afraid of foxes. By discounting his dream, she is discounting his natural wisdom and also showing her own lack of natural wisdom. It makes sense that Pertelote would not understand Chauntecleer's fear of the fox, because, throughout the tale, she goes against her chicken nature and behaves like a human.

Chauntecleer politely acknowledges that Catoun does have a great deal of wisdom but then goes into his defense of the power of dreams, citing several authorities to back up his opinion. Chauntecleer's defense of dreams is far longer and more detailed
than Pertelote’s, perhaps an indication that he knows what he is talking about, or perhaps a comical allusion to his arrogance. Chauntecleer begins his argument by telling a tale of “two felawes [that] wente [o]n pilgrimage” (2985-86). He does not give the specific source for his tale, saying only that it was “[o]n of the gretteste auctour[s] that men rede” (2984). This statement is humorous but important. It is humorous because Chauntecleer, like many self-proclaimed experts, is not able to cite the actual source of his wisdom. It is important, because he says it is one of the greatest authors that men read. He is using human wisdom to address a chicken problem, once again going against his own nature.

The tale Chauntecleer tells is of two men who are traveling together. When they stop at the end of the day, there is no place that has lodging for the two of them, so they separate for the night. One finds lodging in an ox’s stall, and the other finds good lodging. The one who finds good lodging goes to sleep and dreams that his friend is calling to him for help, saying that he will be murdered in an ox’s stall. He pays no attention to the dream, goes back to sleep and dreams the same thing again. The third time, his friend appears in the dream already dead, and tells him that he has been murdered and thrown in a dung cart. Sure enough, the next morning the dream proves to be true. The man who had the dream finds the body and is instrumental in catching the perpetrators and seeing them hanged for their crime. Chauntecleer’s point is that the man should have listened to his first dream and saved his friend’s life.

And then he launches into another tale that comes from “the same book . . . [r]ight in the nexte chapitre after this” (3064-65), still keeping the source vague. This tale is a
shortened variation of the first, concerning two men who plan to take a trip on the sea. The night before they are to set sail, one man dreams that he will be drowned if he sails on that day. In the morning, he tells the dream to his friend, the friend heedlessly embarks on his trip anyway, and is drowned.

Chauntecleer then tells an even shorter tale of a young boy who dreams he will be murdered; and his dream, like the others, comes true. This story is a bit different from the other two, in that Chauntecleer cites a specific source for it, saying it comes from "the lyf of Seint Kenelm" (3110). It is also different in that the boy's nurse "expowned every deel" of his dream "and bad hym for to kepe hym weel / [f]or traisoun" (3115-17). The boy's nurse, who would have been of a lower class than the boy himself, understands the dream and warns him to beware of impending danger. This points out that wisdom comes from a person's nature, not their social standing.

Shortly after he has confidently defended the validity of dreams, however, he forgets his ominous dream of the fox and begins to focus on Pertelote's beauty. "Now let us speke of myrthe," he tells her, "and stynte al this" (3157). Chauntecleer amorously tells Pertelote, "For when I se the beautee of youre face, / [y]e been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen, / [i]t maketh al my drede for to dyen (3160-62). At this point in the Nun's Priest's narrative, we are abruptly reminded that Chauntecleer and Pertelote are chickens, not people, especially when the sexual act is described:

And with that word he fley doun fro the beem,
For it was day, and eke his hennes alle,
And with a chuk he gan hem for to calle,
For he hadde found a corn, lay in the yerd.

Real he was, he was namoore aferd.

He feathered Pertelote twenty tyme,
And tred hire eke as ofte, er it was prymer. (3172-78)

When Chauntecleer flies down from the beam and begins to cluck to his hens over a grain of corn, we picture the typical rooster, strutting around the farmyard. Honegger comments on this shift in characterization:

Chauntecleer’s ‘Ye ben so scarlet reed about youre eyen / It maketh al my drede for to dyen’ (II. 4351-4352) and his subsequent, repeated ‘feathering’ of Pertelote should jolt even the least involved reader to attention. It makes him or realize that, in spite of the learned discourse on the truthfulness of dreams, we are still in the ambiguous no-man’s land between animal fable, beast epic, and folk tale. On the one hand, the anthropomorphized animals aspire to human status; on the other hand, their typical animal characteristics are retained. (215-16)

Jill Mann agrees that the tale “presents us with the problem both of applying moral analysis to animals, and of bringing the comic style of the Tale into relation with a serious meaning” (quoted in Honegger 213). Immediately after the Nun’s Priest’s description of Chauntecleer’s feathering of Pertelote, he says that he will leave “this Chauntecleer in his pasture” (3185), again making him very much a chicken. The Nun’s Priest then stops the action for a moment to explain that all goes well with Chauntecleer and his hens for a time, “thritt dayes and two” to be exact (3190). And on the day the
story picks up again, he reminds us of Chauntecleer's natural wisdom, as well as his pride:

... Chauntecleer in al his pryde,
His sevne wyves walkynge by his syde,
Caste up his eyen to the brighte sonne,
That in the signe of Taurus hadde yronne
Twenty degrees and oon, and somwhat moore,
And knew by kynde, and by noon oother loore,
That it was pryme, and crew with blissful stevene. (3191-97)

Chauntecleer was relying on his natural wisdom ("kynde") and on "noon oother loore" to tell him that it "was pryme." But the narrator first mentions Chauntecleer's "pryde." The Bible says that "[p]ride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" [Proverbs 16:18], and this certainly proves true for Chauntecleer. Just before we are given the rest of the story, Chaucer interjects a little aside, saying, "God woot that worldly joye is soone ago, / [a]nd if a rethor koude faire endite, / [h]e in a cronycle saufly myghte it write / [a]s for a sovereyn notabilitee" (3207-09). Perhaps Chaucer is warning sovereigns of being too much at ease with their nobility, not listening to their natural wisdom and, as a result, falling for flattery.

The "col-fox" appears (3215), and the comedy, action and noise ensue. The fox bursts into the yard where Chauntecleer and his wives are walking unsuspectingly. In mock-epic style, the Nun's Priest cries out against the fox:

O false mordrour, lurkynge in thy den!
O newe Scariot, newe Genylon,

False dissymulour, o Greek Synon,

That brogest Troye al outrely to sorwe! (3226-29)

After this comic dramatization of the fox’s treacherousness, the Nun’s Priest indicts Chauntecleer for disregarding nature, saying, “O Chauntecleer, accursed be that morwe / that thou into that yerd flaugh fro the bemes! / thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes / that thilke day was perilous to thee” (3230-33).

When the Priest has scolded both the fox and Chauntecleer, he digresses into a commentary on predestination versus free will. Just after he has said that Chauntecleer should have heeded the dream’s warning, he says, “But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee, / after the opinioun of certein clerkis” (3234-35). He goes on to say that the debate on free will versus predestination is a matter of “greet disputisoun” (3238), and it seems, in this passage, that he is not sure which opinion is correct. It would seem, however, that in the context of the tale, the Nun’s Priest believes in free will, particularly in light of his repeated censure of Chauntecleer’s refusal to heed the dream’s warning. He seems fairly convinced that if Chauntecleer had listened to his own natural wisdom, he could have avoided the almost-fatal altercation with the fox.

The rest of the tale moves quickly and is almost all action until the closing comments. The narrative resumes with Pertelote lying in the sun with her sisters, and Chauntecleer singing “murier than the mermayde in the see” (3270). Chauntecleer is absentmindedly watching a butterfly among the cabbages when he sees the fox. “Cok! Cok!”, he crows (3277), and would have run, if it had not been for the fox’s fast talking.
The fox uses language and false flattery to keep Chauntecleer from obeying his natural wisdom, which tells him to flee:

... Gentil sire, alas, wher wol ye gon?

Be ye affrayed of me that am youre freend?

Now, certes, I were worse than a feend,

If I to yow wolde harm or vileynye!

I am nat come youre conseil for t'espye,

But trewely, the cause of my comynge

Was oonly for to herkne how that ye synge. (3284-90)

The fox has already managed to keep Chauntecleer from running away, but now he mesmerizes him with elaborate praise. He is telling Chauntecleer everything he obviously already believes about himself. The fox then moves from flattery to outright deceit, saying, "My lord youre fader--God his soule blesse!--/ [a]nd eek youre mooder, of hire gentillesse, / [h]an in myn hous ybeen to my greet ese" (3295-97). It is possible that the fox may have known Chauntecleer's father and mother, since he has been living in the grove near the barnyard for three years (3216), but if they were ever in his house, it was no doubt as a meal, rather than as guests. (If the fox did eat Chauntecleer's parents, he would have been behaving according to his nature.) As the fox praises Chaunticleer's singing voice, he uses words to elevate him to the unnatural status of a man, saying, "Save yow, I herde nevere man so synge / [a]s dide youre fader in the morwenynge" (3301-02). And once again, when Chaunticleer is going against his own nature and behaving most unchickenlike, he is in the most danger. The fox continues his
deceitful description by telling Chaunticleer that his father used to close his eyes when he sang, and stand on his toes, stretching "forth his nekke long and smal" (3308). Of course, in this position, which the fox knows Chaunticleer will imitate, the cock will be in a perfect position for the fox to grab. The narrator says that Chaunticleer is "ravynshed with his flaterie" (3324), aligning physical violence with the deceptive use of language, which could point to the physical danger a sovereign might place himself in if he listened to false flattery. And then the Nun’s Priest makes an aside that sums up the moral of the tale and seems to be directed toward the nobility:

Allas, ye lorde, many a fals flatour
Is in youre courtes, and many a losengeour,
That plesen yow wel moore, by my feith,
Than he that soothfastnesse unto yow seith.
Redeth Ecclesiaste of flaterye;
Beth war, ye lorde, of hir trecherye. (3324-30)

And sure enough, Chaunticleer closes his eyes, stands on his toes and begins to sing. At this moment, "Daun Russell the fox stirte up atones, / [a]nd by the gargat hente Chauntecleer, / [a]nd on his bak toward the wode hym beer" (3334-36). The fox grabs Chauntecleer by the throat, thereby cutting off language and silencing his voice. At this point, pandemonium reigns. The narrator wails, "O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!" (3338) (though it is eschewed in the end when Chauntecleer escapes the fox’s clutches and changes his destiny.) Once again the narrator returns to mock epic mode, comparing Chauntecleer’s predicament to King Richard when he was slain, and
the noise of the hens to the Roman senator's wives when Rome was burned. But just when the Priest is likening the chickens' situation to horrendous historical battles, he brings the widow and her daughters on the scene, and we are once more in a barnyard, where a fox has just stolen a chicken:

This sely wydwe and eek hir doghtres two
Herden thise hennes crie and maken wo,
And out at dores stirten they anon,
And syen the fox toward the grove gon,
And bar upon his bak the cock away,
And cryden, 'Out! Harrow and weylaway!
Ha, ha! The fox!' and after hym they ran,
And eek with staves many another man. (3375-82)

We have definitely left the realm of fable, and are now in the real world. The dogs, cow and calf, hogs, ducks, geese and hens are all running and making an uproar, the chickens just a part of the rest of the animals on the widow's farm. Chaucer has allowed them to be true to their natures and has still given them voice. But then, we are no sooner in the animal world than Chaucer yanks us back into the human sphere by mentioning a real person, Jack Straw: "So hydous was the noyse— a, benedicitee! — / [c]ertes, he Jakke Straw and his meyne / [n]e made nevere shoutes half so shrille / [a]s thilke day was maad upon the fox" (3393-97). This reference to Jakke Straw and the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 fits perfectly in this wildly humorous chase scene in “The Nun's Priest's Tale.” Travis calls the Peasants' Revolt "the most earth-shaking and decentering
event in English history during Chaucer’s lifetime” (215), and he then explains why Chaucer would insert an allusion to the violent Revolt in an animal story:

throughout the Middle Ages the ‘ubiquitous vilification’ of the peasant was that he is nothing but an animal--an irrational (even insane) and inarticulate beast. Pressed into service by several chroniclers as they attempted to explain the causes of the Peasants’ Revolt, the axiomatic equation of peasants with animals is given a special turn, a kind of optative modality, in Chaucer’s sustained confusion of animal and human denotations in the fox chase. The third and most obvious way Chaucer yokes together the two worlds of literary and historical narration is by the curious bond of sound. The chroniclers of the Peasants’ Revolt apparently were as disturbed by the revolting noise of the peasants as by the fact that the peasants were revolting. Their ‘hideous cries and horrible tumult’ were an offence to their civilized ears. So Chaucer leaves to his civilized readers the fundamental task of hearing and interpreting the sounds not only of the peasants but of all who constitute this scene. (217)

Rowland says that an earlier satirist used an animal fable to “indict those who exploited the poor” (8). Chaucer’s insertion of the Jakke Straw/ Peasants’ Revolt reference in the midst of his noisy animal fracas may likewise be an indictment of those who exploit the poor, since the chickens, symbolic of the lower classes or peasants, ultimately win the day.

Immediately after the Jakke Straw reference, the Nun’s Priest implores everyone
to hearken to the way "Fortune turneth sodeynly / [t]he hope and pryde eek of hir enemy!" (3402-4). Due to Chauntecleer's clever manipulation of language, he is about to have a change of Fortune:

This cok, that lay upon the foxes bak,
In al his drede unto the fox he spak,
And seyde, 'Sire, if that I were as ye,
Yet sholde I seyn, as wys God helpe me,
'Turneth agayn, ye proude cherles alle!
A verray pestilence upon yow falle!
Now I am come unto the wodes syde;
Maugree youre heed, the cok shal heere abyde.
I wol hym ete, in feith, and that anon!' (3405-13)

The fox's pride causes him to heed Chauntecleer's words, and when he opens his mouth to yell at those who are running after him, "[t]his cok brak from his mouth delyverly, / [a]nd heighe upon a tree he fleigh anon" (3416-17). The clever use of language, in the form of flattery, enabled the fox to capture Chauntecleer, and the clever use of language, again in the form of flattery, enables the cock to escape. Houwen says that the fox is as prideful as Chauntecleer:

... Chauntecleer flatters the fox by appealing to his sense of pride (thereby showing that he has regained his reason), and he is saved when the fox opens his mouth in reply. That a stern warning against flattery is indeed (one of) the objectives of the Nun's Priest's narrative is made quite plain
when he ends his sermon with the apophthegm "Lo, swich it is for to be reccheles / And necligent, and truste on flaterye' (VII. 3436-37). (83)

When Chauntecleer flies up a tree to escape the fox, he is finally behaving the way his nature told him to in the beginning. He is finally acting like a chicken. The fox makes one last feeble attempt to trick Chauntecleer again, but this time he is not falling for it. He tells the fox, "Thou shalt namoore thurgh thy flaterye / [d]o me to synge and wynke with myn ye; / [f]or he that wynketh, when he sholde see, / [a]l wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!" (3429-32). And then, lest we might view this as nothing more than a funny chicken story, the Nun's Priest admonishes us to look a little deeper:

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" (3438-44).

And what is the "moralite," the "fruyt" and the "chaf" of "The Nun's Priest's Tale"? The "fruyt" is the truth, the "chaf" is false flattery and the "moralite" is an admonition to beware of false flattery. Both the "fruyt" and the "chaf" relate to language. And language is what changes Chauntecleer's destiny, though the narrator had said that it could not be changed (3338). If language is powerful enough to eschew destiny, then it is powerful indeed, and this seems to be another point Chaucer is making: language (or speech) is power for the nobleman as well as the peasant. The sovereign can use his
understanding of language to avoid false flattery and treachery; and the peasant can use language to articulate his needs and to be heard. Wrapped up in all this moralizing about truth and flattery, is a hilarious and wildly entertaining chicken story, which demonstrates Chaucer's amazing ability to weave criticism or truth into delightful entertainment. And he does it so well that it is difficult to discern where one ends and the other begins.
Chapter Three

"The Manciple's Tale": Nature versus Nobility

When we first meet the Manciple, the Canon's Yeoman has just finished his tell-all tale about the deceptive alchemy practices of his master, the Canon, and the pilgrims are two miles from Canterbury. The Host says that the Cook, who is falling asleep on his horse, needs to tell a tale, but the Cook is very drunk. The Manciple offers to take the Cook's place in the tale-telling contest but makes great fun of the Cook's drunkenness. The Host warns the Manciple that when the Cook is sober, he may retaliate. This seems to frighten the Manciple a little, so he gives the Cook "[a] draught of wyn" to pacify his anger (IX. 83). The wine seems to have the desired effect, and the Host bids the Manciple to "[t]elle on thy tale" (103). Interestingly, the tale the Manciple tells is about a crow who says too much (at least from the narrator's point of view.) Grudin says that "[o]ne function of this parallelism, and its bifurcation as the action develops, is to focus our attention on the issue of truth-telling" (153). Fradenburg points out that "language--its uses and abuses--has seemed to so many critics to be what the tale is 'about'" 88). I would add that, along with language, it is also about nature, nobility and truth, as seen through the escapades of a talking crow.

Fradenburg contends that, in the Prologue, the Manciple's replacement of the Cook in the tale-telling contest silences him, and therefore "prefigures the punishment of the crow at the end of The Manciple's Tale, in which Phebus 'refte hym al his song, / And eek his speche' [305-6]" (95). I would argue that loss of speech is not a punishment to the crow. Speech has served the crow's purpose; it has given him what he really wants,
which is freedom. I would also argue that the Manciple's silencing of the Cook is a prefiguring of the crow silencing Phebus, rather than Phebus silencing the crow: The Manciple points out the Cook's shameful drunkenness, and the crow points out Phoebus' shameful cuckolding. Both Manciple and crow say more than is necessary, though both end up getting what they want: The Manciple gets to tell his story, and the crow gets his freedom. The speech of the crow effectively silences Phebus, as he silently kills his wife, destroys his musical instruments and plans to take his own life.

The *Bodleian Bestiary* says that the crow "can reveal the purpose of men's actions: it can disclose the whereabouts of an ambush, and predict the future." It also says that "[t]his is a great offence, to believe that God entrusts His counsels to crows" (Barber 160). And in the context of "The Manciple's Tale," the crow's disclosure does indeed cause great offence to Phebus Apollo, the crow's owner, and actually instigates all the tale's succeeding action. David Raybin points out that vocalization is a prominent part of the tale from the very beginning:

The opening lines of the Manciple's Tale suggest the importance of voice as a theme. Phebus is a singer, possessed of a natural voice talent so beautiful

... that it was a melodie

To heeren of his cleere voys the soun. (II. 114-15)

His voice surpasses even that of Amphion, whose singing raised the walls of Thebes. (20)

And though the tale begins with Phebus Apollo, its focus is on the crow and his crafty
use of language. The line of introduction that appears immediately before the tale begins
says, “Heere bigynneth the Maunciple’s Tale of the Crowe”; and the Manciple introduces
Phebus’s crow before he introduces his wife; “Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a
crowe,” the Manciple tells us (IX. 130). Then, nine lines later, he adds, “Now hadde this
Phebus in his hous a wyf” (IX. 139). Raybin points out the effect of using the same
phrase to introduce both crow and wife:

The parallel phrasing that announces Phebus’s possession of the bird and
of the woman suggests both the similarity in their valuation by Phebus and
the narrative importance of their linkage: for all Phebus’s affection for his
pet, the Crow is kept “in a cage” (l. 131); and for all Phebus’s love for his
wife, ‘Jalous he was, and wolde have kept hire fayn’ (l. 144). Both are
zealously possessed and closely restricted. Where they differ is in the
power associated with the use they make of their voices. (21)
The crow is vocal throughout the tale, while the wife remains silent. In this tale, as in the
other talking bird tales, voice is associated with power, silence with powerlessness.
The crow’s voice eventually sets him free, while the wife’s silence (or lack of a voiced
defense) leads to her death.

And why can the crow speak? The Manciple tells us that Phebus taught the crow
to speak “as men teche a jay,” and that it could “countrefete the speche of every man/
[h]e koude, whan he sholde telle a tale” (132,134-35). Since Phebus teaches the crow to
speak, it seems likely that he is speaking Phebus’s language, saying what Phebus wants
to hear. This is the first time in the tale that the crow can be seen as a likeness of
Chaucer himself. Chaucer, as court poet, did not always choose what he would say in his poetry. For example, his *Book of the Duchess* was "an elegy on the death of Blanche of Lancaster" and was "addressed to royalty" (Fisher 55). It seems likely that Chaucer would have been commissioned to write such a work, rather than choosing to write it himself. Also, within the text of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is obvious that Chaucer can "countrefeit the speche of every man . . . whan he sholde telle a tale." Fisher says that "[t]he most remarkable stylistic innovation of the *Canterbury Tales*, and the one that has most influenced later English writing, is the creation of different voices, personalities, and points of view for the different pilgrims" (63). Chaucer was so good at counterfeiting these various voices that it is often difficult to remember that it is Chaucer speaking and not the particular pilgrim who is telling the tale. Fisher explains that this ability to create different voices came from the *ars dictaminis*:

The original craft of *ars dictaminis* was letter writing, and the aim of letter writing, as set forth in the earliest treatise on the subject, by Alberic of Monte Cassino in Italy in 1087, was to secure the good will of the recipient by making the style and language appropriate to his condition. We recall that before he begins to describe the Pilgrims in the General Prologue, Chaucer promises to tell us 'al the condicioun / Of ech of hem; so as it semed me, / And whiche [what] they weren, and of what degree' [37–40]. (63).

So, Chaucer's clever use of language, whether writing elegies or creating voices for the Canterbury Pilgrims, was much like the crow's. Both spoke the language of their
sovereign, and both could "countrefete the speche of every man."

At the tale’s beginning, we are told about Phebus and his wonderful attributes:

"He was the mooste lusty bachiler / [i]n al this world, and eek the beste archer . . . [and] [p]leyen he koude on every mynstralcie, / [a]nd syngen that it was a melodie / [t]o heeren of his cleere voys the soun" (107-8, 113-15). Not only was he talented, but he was extremely handsome and honorable, "the semelieste man / [t]hat is or was sith that the world bigan. / [w]hat nedeth it his fetures to discryve? / [f]or in this world was noon so faire on-lyve. / [h]e was therwith fulfild of gentillesse, / [o]f honour, and of parfit worthynesse" (119-22). Not surprisingly, Phebus’s crow was much like Phebus himself; he was physically beautiful and had a beautiful singing voice:

Whit was this crowe as is a snow-whit swan,
And countrefete the speche of every man
He koude, whan he sholde telle a tale.
Therwith in al this world no nyghtyngale
Ne koude, by an hondred thousand deel,
Syngen so wonder myrily and weel. (133-38)

The Manciple’s crow can be seen as a parody of Chaucer himself. Both Chaucer and the crow can counterfeit the speech of every man, and neither Chaucer nor the crow are free to speak complete truth. Another parallel is that Chaucer is maintained by the court, and the crow is maintained by Phebus Apollo. Fradenburg agrees and broadens the view to include “the nature of court poetry” in general (86), talking about the court poet “signifying” the sovereign. As a type of Chaucer, or the court poet in general, the crow
signifies, or glorifies, Phebus, as long as he is speaking Phebus’s language, but as soon as the crow begins to speak his own truth, he no longer signifies, or glorifies, Phebus. When the crow tells Phebus of his wife’s unfaithfulness, it is the first time he speaks for himself, and speaks other than what Phebus wants to hear. Fradenburg likens the crow and the wife to “unfaithful servants,” who “begin their narrative lives in the master’s ‘hous,’ in a cage: the crow literally, the wife in the cage of Phebus’s jealousy” (102). Chaucer, likewise began his narrative life in the king’s house, but unlike the crow, Chaucer begins his truth-telling after he has been let loose (at least from the king’s immediate household.) Chaucer, as court poet, sees the truth of life at court; the crow, as Phebus’s pet, sees the truth of Phebus’s wife’s unfaithfulness. Although Chaucer and the crow both see truths from an insider’s vantage point, Chaucer doesn’t tell all, as the crow does. Instead, he tells the truth subversively at times, and always “tempered with delight” (Grudin 161).

It is significant that the Manciple describes the crow and the wife in very similar terms. The crow was kept in a literal cage, the wife in a figurative one:

Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a wyf
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf,
And nyght and day dide evere his diligence
Hir for to plese and doon hir reverence,
Save oonly, if the sothe that I shal sayn,
Jalous he was, and wolde have kept hire fayn. (139-44)

It seems that Phebus would have kept his wife in a cage, just as he did his crow, if he
could have done so and still maintained his “gentillnesse . . . honour . . . and . . . worthynesse” (123-24). The Manciple points out the futility of Phebus’s desire to keep track of his wife, saying that “[a] good wyf, that is clene of werk and thoght, / [s]holde nat been kept in noon awayt, certayn; / [a]nd trewely the labour is in vayn / [t]o kepe a shrew, for it wol nat bee” (148-151). And then the Manciple holds forth on the futility of keeping anything restrained, in a passage almost identical to the one quoted by the female falcon in “The Squire’s Tale.” In the Manciple’s rendition, the word “newefangelnesse” is not used. Instead, the Manciple seems to focus more on the word “nature,” saying, “But God it woot, ther may no man embrace / [a]s to destreyne a thyng which that nature / [h]ath natureelly set in a creature” (160-62). He then repeats the bird-in-a-cage analogy quoted by the falcon in “The Squire’s Tale” but adds references not mentioned in the Squire’s version. The Manciple first refers to a cat, who would rather chase after a mouse than eat milk and flesh and lie on a silk couch. He then adds a rather nasty twist to the passage when he includes a “she-wolf” in the analogy. This she-wolf section applies directly to Phebus’s wife, who takes a lover that is far inferior to Phebus in every way:

A she-wolf hath also a vileyns kynde.

The lewedeste wolf that she may fynde,

Or leest of reputacioun, wol she take,

In tyme whan hir lust to han a make. (183-86).

The first part of the passage, which deals with a bird in a cage, seems to indicate that it is unnatural to cage any living thing. Chaucer refers to the caging of birds in a very
negative way in "The Monk's Tale," when he talks about the imprisonment of the "Erl Hugelyn of Pyze" and his "litel children thre" (VII.2407, 2411). After he has described their imprisonment, the Monk says, "Allas, Fortune, it was greet crueltee / [s]wiche briddes for to putte in swich a cage!" (2413-14). If Chaucer likens a prison to a cage, and refers to caging as a "greet crueltee," then it seems likely that he does not use the bird-in-a-cage analogy in a positive way. By drawing attention to the unnatural constraining of Phoebus' wife and the unnatural caging of his crow, Chaucer draws attention to the fact that "freedom has never . . . been the order of the day" (Fradenburg 93) in the British court system, especially where speech is concerned.

The Manciple then begins to describe the unfaithfulness of Phebus's wife, and it is almost a direct parallel to the she-wolf analogy, saying, "[a]nd so bifel, whan Phebus was absent, / [h]is wyf anon for hir lemman sent" (203-4). But before he can even get to the act of unfaithfulness, he expounds on his use of the word "lemman":

Hir lemman? Certes, this is a knavyssh speche!
Foryeveth it me, and that I yow biseche . . .
Ther nys no difference, trewely,
Bitwixe a wyf that is of heigh degree,
If of hir body dishonest she bee,
And a povre wenche, oother than this --
If it so be they werke both amys --
But that the gentile, in estaat above,
She shal be cleped his lady, as in love;
And for the oother is a povre womman,
She shal be cleped his wenche or his lemman.

(205-6, 212-20)

The Manciple continues with this line of thinking, alluding also to the difference between an outlaw and a tyrant, but then he says that he is not a learned man, so he will stop his expounding and continue his tale.

And though he has just made a long retraction of his use of the word “lemman” in reference to the honorable Phebus’s wife, he picks up the narrative again, saying exactly what he said in the first place: “Whan Phebus wyf had sent for hir lemman / [a]non they wroghten al hire lust volage” (IX. 238). So when the Manciple apologizes for using the word “lemman,” he is obviously not sincerely sorry. Rather than truly apologizing, he seems to be questioning the nobility of the noble class: Are they really noble just by virtue of the title? He uses language in a very slippery way here, seeming to say one thing, while really saying another. Fradenburg says that “[t]he effect of this discussion is to express that which it seems to deny” (105). By going on and on about the impropriety of calling a noble lady’s illicit lover her “lemman,” he is drawing attention to the ridiculousness of the double standard implied by using different words—depending on the class of the person involved—to describe the same thing. Boccaccio says that “flattery, hypocrisy, deceit, and the gullibility on which they depend . . . must be combatted with a knowledge of the arts of speech” (quoted in Grudin 9). This passage containing the false apology makes it clear that the Manciple is well-versed in these verbal arts. When the crow tells Phebus of his wife’s unfaithfulness, he, like the Manciple artfully disguises his
real intention (which is to gain his freedom.)

After the Manciple’s long discussion of his improper use of the word “lemman,” he tells the whole tale of the wife’s unfaithfulness in two short lines, saying only that “[w]han Phebus wyf had sent for hir lemman, / [a]non they wroghten al hire lust volage” (238-39). The crow, meanwhile, bides his time: “The white crowe, that heeng ay in the cage, / Biheeld hire werk, and seyde never a word” (240-41).

When Phebus came home, however, it was another story altogether:

And whan that hoom was come Phebus, the lord,
This crowe sang ‘Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!’
‘What, bryd?’ quod Phebus. ‘What song syngestow?
Ne were thow wont so myrily to synge
That to myn herte it was a rejoysynge
To heere thy voys? Allas, what song is this?’ (IX. 242-47)

At this point, the crow’s manipulative use of language becomes apparent. If the crow had simply been reporting what he saw out of loyalty to Phebus, he would have no doubt kept his account brief. But his long, insulting narrative makes it clear that he is deliberately trying to make Phebus angry:

‘By God,’ quod he, ‘I synge nat amys.
Phebus,’ quod he, ‘for al thy worthynesse,
For al thy beautee and thy gentilesse,
For al thy song and al thy mynstralcye,
For al thy waityng, blered is thyn ye
With oon of litel reputacioun,
Noght worth to thee, as in comparisoun,
The montance of a gnat, so moote I thryve!
For on thy bed thy wyf I saugh hym swyve.' (IX. 248-56)

And if these words weren’t enough to enrage Phebus, he adds a little more fuel to the fire:

By sadde tokenes and by wordes bolde,
How that his wyf had doon hire lecherye,
Hym to greet shame and to greet vileynye,
And tolde hym ofte he saugh it with his yen. (IX. 258-61).

Phebus is so angry that he immediately kills his wife, destroys his musical instruments and breaks his bow and arrows. And then it hits him: The crow is the cause of all this. “‘Traitor,’ quod he, ‘with tonge of scorpion, / [t]hou hast me broght to my confusion’” (271-72). And then Phebus does an interesting thing. He reframes what has just happened, shifting all the blame from his wife to the crow:

O deere wyf! O gemme of lustifheed!
That were to me so sad and eek so trewe,
Now listow deed, with face pale of hewe,
Ful giyteles, that dorste I swere, ywis! (274-77)

This is a reversal of what happens in “The Merchant’s Tale,” when May is caught in the act of adultery by her husband, Januarie, but is able to talk her way out of it. In “The Merchant’s Tale,” it is the wife who reframes the adultery, but nevertheless, in both
cases, the husbands refuse to believe that they have been cuckolded. Fradenburg calls the wife's unfaithfulness with a man of low degree the "undoing of the ruling order" (104). If Phoebus is a type of the ruling order, and the illicit lover is a type of the lower classes, then it seems that by showing the lower classes in the king's bed, Chaucer is likewise "undoing ... the ruling order."

At this point in the tale, Phebus vows to end his own life, but first, he must punish the crow for his disclosure of the wife's unfaithfulness. At least the Manciple seems to think it is a punishment:

And to the crowe, 'O false theef! seyde he,
'I wol thee quite anon thy false tale.
Thou songe whilom lyk a nightingale;
Now shaltow, false theef, thy song forgon,
And eek thy white fetheres everichon,
Ne nevere in al thy lif ne shaltou speke.
Thou and thyn ofspryng evere shul be blake,
Ne nevere sweete noyse shul ye make,
But evere crie agayn tempest and rayn,
In tokenynge that thurgh thee my wyf is slayn.²

²The Bodleian Bestiary credits the crow with the ability to foretell rain.

And now, just when the Manciple seems to think the crow is cruelly punished for saying too much, the crow is really getting what he has wanted all along: his freedom.
Manciple describes the "punishment":

And to the crowe he stirte, and that anon,
And pulled his white fetheres everychon,
And made hym blak, and refte hym al his song,
And eek his speche, and out at dore hym slong
Unto the devel, which I hym bitake;
And for this caas been alle crowes blake. (303-08)

Since Phebus could sing beautifully and was beautiful to look at, he thought he was severely punishing the crow by taking these attributes from him. He judges the crow by his own standards. Phebus's singing voice and physical beauty define him; he assumes they define the crow too. White feathers and a beautiful singing voice mean nothing to a freedom-loving crow. His speaking voice has served its purpose, so it no longer means anything to the crow either. When Phebus takes the crow out of his golden cage, he is giving him just what a crow would want: freedom. In "The Nun's Priest's Tale," the Priest at times seems to be arguing for predestination, yet, in the end, Chauntecleer the Cock is able to exercise his free will to extricate himself from the jaws of the fox, thereby altering his destiny. So, it would seem that Chaucer, if not the Nun's Priest, believes in freewill, at least in the context of that particular tale. I think he believes in it in the context of "The Manciple's Tale" too. Though the Manciple gives a final, and rather ominous, warning to "[k]epe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe" (362), I think Chaucer has another moral in mind. After all, the crow did gain his freedom, and what crow in his right mind would prefer a golden cage, white feathers and a singing voice to freedom? The crow is
only punished if we look at the tale from Phebus’s point of view, and I do not believe Chaucer ever intended for us to look at it that way. That is why he ends the tale with these words: “thenk upon the crowe” (362). If we think upon Phebus, we will see the crow’s glorious (and delightful) emancipation as punishment; but if we think upon the crow, we will see that the freedom to be true to one’s nature, whether noble or common, is what this tale is celebrating.
Conclusion

Each of Chaucer's talking bird tales admonishes readers to be true to nature and to use speech carefully, and each tale uses satire to make its point. Rowland says that animal fables, popular long before Chaucer's time, "grew satiric under medieval influence" (2). Fisher explains how Chaucer's satire differs from the type found in complaint literature:

The voice of complaint literature is monotonous and impersonal, striving, like the Christianity it espouses, always to be sober and reasonable. The delight of Chaucer's voices is their variety and individuality--their urbanity, irony, malevolence, raillery, scurrility, cynicism. (130)

And what could be more delightfully satiric than Chaucer's talking birds, holding forth like tiny rhetoricians?

But why birds? There are several reasons why birds make ideal protagonists for these three tales. First of all, birds can fly. Because of the ability to fly, they are, in a sense, able to reach heaven, something humans cannot do. The fact that birds are not readily containable or controllable has always made them fascinating to people. So if Chaucer wanted to choose characters that would be interesting to his audience, birds were an excellent choice.

In addition to the ability to fly, birds have another attribute that makes them perfect for these tales: language. Birds are often referred to as having their own language. Hens are known for their conversation-like cackling and clucking, and
countless varieties of birds are known for their distinctive songs and calls. So birds, already associated with language, make ideal protagonists for these tales concerning language.

Birds also place distance between the truths Chaucer tells and the characters he tells it through. If the talking birds in these tales, who sometimes represent the noble class, had been people, they would have most likely been offensive to the nobility (and dangerous for Chaucer.) Chaucer's ability to point out truth without offending in these tales is very much like his ability to maintain political alliances without offending those with opposing loyalties. Strohm explains how these two aspects of Chaucer's life work together:

Part of Chaucer's success may have been based on an ability to mobilize in his political choices those qualities that readers have found in his literary choices, including even-handedness and receptivity to opposed points of view. (40-41)

And even if Chaucer had not had to worry about offending the court, his characters would not have been as sympathetic if they were human. But by endowing animals with human characteristics, even negative characteristics, Chaucer brings sympathy to characters who might otherwise have been unsympathetic. Chaucer's decision to use talking birds in these tales is further evidence of his amazing ability to question, criticize and entertain, all at one time, with no noticeable shift between the three functions.

The talking birds of "The Squire's Tale," "The Nun's Priest's Tale" and "The
Manciple's Tale also showcase Chaucer's talent for creating individual voices. Fisher says that "Chaucer ennobled English, but he also broadened it by showing its adequacy for sophisticated discourse, and particularly for mimesis—the representation of reality through language" (69). In the characters of the falcon, the cock and the crow, we see Chaucer creating individual voices so realistically that we can almost forget that Chaucer is the one doing the talking.

It is apparent throughout The Canterbury Tales that Chaucer understood human nature quite well. But due to his close relationship with the court, he understood the nobility in an especially intimate way, and this is never more apparent than in his talking bird tales. Sir Philip Sidney, who lived in the sixteenth century, makes a comment about Chaucer, in relation to Troilus and Cressid, that I think applies to The Canterbury Tales as well, particularly the talking bird tales: "[T]ruly I know not, whether to mervaile more, either that he in that mistie time, could see so clearely, or that wee in this cleare age, walke so stumblingly after him" (quoted in Fisher 156). Chaucer's clever use of talking birds to question the nobility and examine issues of language and truth, as well as his propensity for blending criticism with delight, demonstrate the truth of this statement.
Works Cited


Travis, Peter W. "Chaucer's Trivial Fox Chase and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381."