

Geoffrey Chaucer
The Canterbury Tales
A Selection

Chosen, Translated and Edited by
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THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE



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*Heere bigynneth the Nonnes
Preestes Tale of the Cok and Hen,
Chauntecleer and Pertelote*

A povre wydwe, somdeel stape in age,
Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,
Biside a grove, stondynge in a dale.
This wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale,
2825 Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf
In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf,
For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
2830 Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
2835 No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
Repleccioun ne made hire nevere sik;
Attemprete diete was al hir phisik,
And exercise, and hertes suffisaunce.
2840 The goute lette hire nothyng for to daunce,
N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed;
Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak –
Milk and broun breed, in which she foond no lak,
2845 Seynd bacoun, and somtyme an ey or tweye,
For she was, as it were, a maner deye.
A yeerd she hadde, enclosed al aboute
With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute,
In which she hadde a cok, hight Chauntecleer.
2850 In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer.

*Here begins the Nun's Priest's Tale of
the Cock and the Hen,
Chanticleer and Pertelote*

Once upon a time, a poor widow, who was getting on in years, lived in a little cottage next to a grove, set in a valley. This widow I'm talking about, from the time that her husband died, patiently lived a very simple life, because her possessions and income were small. Through careful management of what God gave her, she provided for herself and her two daughters. All she had were three large sows, three cows, and also a sheep called Molly. Her bedroom, and living room too, were sooty, and there she ate many a scanty meal. She didn't need any sharp sauce. No delicate morsel passed down her throat. Her diet was in keeping with her peasant cottage. Overeating didn't make her ill. All her medicine was simple diet, and exercise, and contentment of spirit. Gout didn't stop her from dancing, nor did she have a splitting headache from over-indulgence. She drank no wine, white nor red. Her table was mainly served with white and black – milk and plenty of brown bread, boiled bacon, and sometimes a couple of eggs, because she was, so to speak, a kind of dairywoman.

She had a yard, enclosed all round with a wooden fence and a dry ditch outside it, in which she had a cockerel called Chanticleer. In the whole world, he had no equal in crowing.

1. There is a prologue to this tale but it is largely addressed to the Monk, who has told the previous story (not included in this collection). Finally the Host invites the Nun's Priest to tell his tale, telling him that, although he rides on a scruffy and skinny nag, he hopes nevertheless that his story will be cheerful. The Nun's Priest promises that it will be.

His voys was murier than the murie orgon
 On messe-dayes that in the chirche gon.
 Wel sikerer was his crowyng in his logge
 Than is a clokke or an abbey orlogge.
 2855 By nature he knew ech ascencioun
 Of the equynoxial in thilke toun;
 For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,
 Thanne crew he that it myghte nat been amended.
 His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,
 2860 And batailled as it were a castel wal;
 His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;
 Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;
 His nayles whitter than the lylle flour,
 And lyk the burned gold was his colour.
 2865 This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce
 Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce,
 Whiche were his sustres and his paramours,
 And wonder lyk to hym, as of colours;
 Of whiche the faireste hewed on hir throte
 2870 Was cleped faire damoysele Pertelote.
 Curteys she was, discreet, and debonaire,
 And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire
 Syn thilke day that she was seven nyght oold
 That trewely she hath the herte in hooold
 2875 Of Chauntecleer, loken in every lith;
 He loved hire so that wel was hym therwith.
 But swich a joye was it to here hem synge,
 Whan that the brighte sonne gan to sprynge,
 In sweete accord, 'My lief is faren in londe!' –
 2880 For thilke tyme, as I have understonde,
 Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge.
 And so bifel that in a dawenyng,
 As Chauntecleer among his wyves alle
 Sat on his perche, that was in the halle,
 2885 And next hym sat this faire Pertelote,
 This Chauntecleer gan gronen in his throte,
 As man that in his dreem is drecched soore.
 And whan that Pertelote thus herde hym roore,

His voice was more cheerful than the merry organ that plays in church on feast-days. His [times of] crowing where he lived were more accurate than a clock, or the great clock on an abbey. He instinctively knew each hour according to the celestial equator of that town, because, when the sun had passed through fifteen degrees, he crowed precisely on the dot. His comb was redder than pure coral, and was crenulated like the walls of a castle. His beak was black, shining like jet. His legs and toes were azure-coloured. His toenails were whiter than a lily, and his colour resembled burnished gold. This noble cockerel had under his control seven hens for his sexual pleasure, who were his sisters and lovers, and remarkably similar to him in colour, of whom the one with the most beautiful throat was called the Beautiful Damsel Pertelote. She had refined manners, was tactful and gracious, was sociable and so beautifully behaved from the time she was a week old that she certainly held Chanticleer's affection, locked in every limb. He loved her so well that he was fully content. But it was so delightful to hear them sing in harmony 'My Beloved has travelled to the Country' at the bright sunrise; for in those days, so far as I can gather, animals and birds could speak and sing.

It so happened, one dawn, as Chanticleer sat among all his wives on his perch, which was in the living-room area, with, next to him, the aforementioned beautiful Pertelote, that Chanticleer groaned in his throat, like someone terribly distressed in his dream. When Pertelote heard him calling out in this way, [. . .]

2890 She was agast and seyde, 'Herte deere,
 What eyleth yow, to grone in this manere?
 Ye been a verray sleper; fy, for shame!
 And he answerde, and seyde thus: 'Madame,
 I pray yow that ye take it nat agrief.
 2895 By God, me mette I was in swich meschief
 Right now that yet myn herte is soore afright.
 Now God,' quod he, 'my swevene recche aright,
 And kepe my body out of foul prisoun!
 Me mette how that I romed up and doun
 2900 Withinne our yeerd, wheer as I saugh a beest
 Was lyk an hound, and wolde han maad areest
 Upon my body, and wolde han had me deed.
 His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,
 And tipped was his tayl and bothe his eeris
 2905 With blak, unlyk the remenant of his heeris;
 His snowte smal, with glowynge eyen tweye.
 Yet of his look for feere almoost I deye;
 This caused me my gronyng, doutelees.'
 'Avoy!' quod she, 'fy on yow, hertelees!
 2910 Allas,' quod she, 'for, by that God above,
 Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love!
 I kan nat love a coward, by my feith!
 For certes, what so any womman seith,
 We alle desiren, if it myghte bee,
 2915 To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free,
 And secree – and no nygard, ne no fool,
 Ne hym that is agast of every tool,
 Ne noon avauntour, by that God above!
 How dorste ye seyn, for shame, unto youre love
 2920 That any thyng myghte make yow aferd?
 Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?
 Allas! And konne ye been agast of swevenys?
 Nothyng, God woot, but vanitee in sweven is.
 Swevenes engendren of replecciouns,
 2925 And ofte of fume and of complecciouns,
 Whan humours been to habundant in a wight.
 Certes this dreem, which ye han met to-nyght,

she was frightened, and said, 'Sweetheart, what is the matter that makes you groan so? What a deep sleeper you are! Dear me, shame on you!'

And he answered and said, 'Madam, please don't misunderstand. By God, I dreamt that I was in such a plight just now that my heart is still full of dread. Now,' said he, 'may God interpret my dream favourably, and preserve my body from dreadful prison! I dreamt that I was walking to and fro in our yard, when I saw an animal that looked like a dog, and wanted to seize my body and kill me. Its colour was between yellow and red, and the tips of its tail and ears were black unlike the rest of its hair. Its snout was narrow, and it had two shining eyes. I'm still almost dying with fear. That's certainly what made me groan.'

'Come on!' she said, 'Shame upon you, you coward! Alas,' she said, 'because, by God in heaven, now you've entirely lost my heart and my love! I swear I can't love a coward! There's no doubt about it, women can say what they will, we all desire if possible to have husbands who are brave, wise, generous and tactful – and not some miserly creature, or a fool, or a man scared of every weapon, or a boaster, by God above! Shame upon you, how dare you say to your beloved that anything can make you frightened? Haven't you got a man's heart and a beard? Alas, can it be possible that you are scared of dreams? God knows, dreams are meaningless. Dreams come about through excessive eating, and frequently from internal gases, and from one's combination of humours,² when humours are over-abundant in a person. Doubtless, this dream which you had tonight [. . .]

2. See *General Prologue*, n. 11.

Cometh of the greeete superfluytee
 Of youre rede colera, pardee,
 Which causeth folk to dreden in hir dremes
 2930 Of arwes, and of fyr with rede lemes,
 Of rede beestes, that they wol hem byte,
 Of kontek, and of whelpes, grete and lyte;
 Right as the humour of malencolie
 Causeth ful many a man in sleep to crie
 2935 For feere of blake beres, or boles blake,
 Or elles blake develes wole hem take.
 Of othere humours koude I telle also
 That werken many a man sleep ful wo;
 But I wol passe as lightly as I kan.
 2940 'Lo Catoun, which that was so wys a man,
 Seyde he nat thus, "Ne do no fors of dremes"?
 'Now sire,' quod she, 'whan we flee fro the bemes,
 For Goddes love, as taak som laxatyf.
 Up peril of my soule and of my lyf,
 2945 I conseilte yow the beste – I wol nat lye –
 That bothe of colere and of malencolye
 Ye purge yow; and for ye shal nat tarie,
 Though in this toun is noon apothecarie,
 I shal myself to herbes techen yow
 2950 That shul been for youre hele and for youre prow;
 And in oure yeerd tho herbes shal I fynde
 The whiche han of hire propretee by kynde
 To purge yow bynethe and eek above.
 Foryet nat this, for Goddes owene love!
 2955 Ye been ful coleryk of compleccioun;
 Ware the sonne in his ascencioun
 Ne fynde yow nat repleet of humours hoote.
 And if it do, I dar wel leye a grote,
 That ye shul have a fevere terciane,
 2960 Or an agu that may be youre bane.
 A day or two ye shul have digestyves
 Of wormes, er ye take youre laxatyves
 Of lawriol, centaure, and fumetere,
 Or elles of ellebor, that groweth there,

derives from the great excess of your red bile, by God, which causes people to be frightened in their dreams of arrows, of fire with red flames, of red animals who desire to bite them, of conflicts, and of large and small dogs. Just as, in the same way, the humour of melancholy makes very many people cry out in their sleep because they have been frightened by black bears, or black bulls, or else by black devils who wish to grab them. I could instruct you about other humours, too, that create for many people great upsets in sleep. But I'll skip over the subject as briefly as possible.

'Look at Cato, who was a very wise man,³ didn't he say, "Take no notice of dreams"?

'No, sir,' she said, 'when we fly down from the perches, for the love of God take some laxative. I bet, on my soul's destruction, and on my life, that I'm giving you the soundest advice – I honestly mean that – that you should purge yourself of choleric and melancholic humours. And, because you mustn't delay, and there being no dispensing chemist in this town, I must myself instruct you about herbal remedies for your health and benefit, and I'll find in our yard those herbs that have the natural properties to purge you both by excretion and by vomiting. For the love of God himself, don't neglect this! Your combination of humours is predominately choleric. Be careful that the sun doesn't catch you full of hot humours when it rises. And, should it do so, I bet you a four-penny bit you'll catch a fever that recurs every third day, or a virulent fever that could kill you. For a couple of days, you must take aids to digestion in the form of worms, before you take the laxatives consisting of spurge laurel, centaury and fumitory, or else of hellebore which grows there, [. . .]

3. Cato was supposedly the author of a collection of wise sayings in Latin (though there were also translations). These were frequently used as school texts.

2965 Of katapuce, or of gaitrys beryis,
 Of herbe yve, growyng in oure yeerd, ther mery is;
 Pekke hem up right as they growe and ete hem yn.
 Be myrie, housbonde, for youre fader kyn!
 Dredeth no dreem; I kan sey yow namoore.'
 2970 'Madame,' quod he, 'graunt mercy of youre loore.
 But nathelees, as touchyng daun Catoun,
 That hath of wysdom swich a greet renoun,
 Though that he bad no dremes for to drede,
 By God, men may in olde bookes rede
 2975 Of many a man moore of auctorite
 Than evere Caton was, so moot I thee,
 That al the revers seyn of this sentence,
 And han wel founden by experience
 That dremes been significaciouns
 2980 As wel of joye as of tribulaciouns
 That folk endure in this lif present.
 Ther nedeth make of this noon argument;
 The verray preeve sheweth it in dede.
 'Oon of the gretteste auctour that men rede
 2985 Seith thus: that whilom two felawes wente
 On pilgrimage, in a ful good entente,
 And happed so, they coomen in a toun
 Wher as ther was swich congregacioun
 Of peple, and eek so streit of herbergage,
 2990 That they ne founde as muche as o cotage
 In which they bothe myghte ylogged bee.
 Wherefore they mosten of necessitee,
 As for that nyght, departen compaignye;
 And ech of hem gooth to his hostelrye,
 2995 And took his loggyng as it wolde falle.
 That oon of hem was logged in a stalle,
 Fer in a yeerd, with oxen of the plough;
 That oother man was logged wel ynough,
 As was his aventure or his fortune,
 3000 That us governeth alle as in commune,
 'And so bifel that, longe er it were day,
 This man mette in his bed, ther as he lay,

or euphorbia, or rhamus, or ground-ivy, which grows where it is pleasant in our yard. Peck them up while they are growing and swallow them. By you father's family, husband, cheer up! Don't be scared of some dream. That's all I can say.'

'Madam,' he said, 'thank you very much for your instruction. But, nevertheless, with regard to master Cato, who has such a great reputation for wisdom: though he told us not be frightened of dreams, one can, by God, read in ancient books by many authors certainly of greater status than ever Cato was, who hold a completely opposite opinion, and who have positively discovered, through experience, that dreams are signifiers equally of happiness and of distress which people have to endure in this mortal life. There's no need to debate it: experience attests to its veracity.

'One of the greatest authors people read recounts that,⁴ once upon a time, two friends went on a pilgrimage, most devoutly disposed, and it so chanced that they arrived at a town where there was such a crowd of people, and also such a shortage of lodgings, that they couldn't find even one cottage where they might both stay. Consequently, they were obliged to part company for that night. And each went to his lodging, and had to accept whatever accommodation he happened to get. One of them was accommodated in a stall at the far end of an enclosure, with the plough-oxen. The other man was – by luck and good fortune, which governs us all, whoever we may be – decently put up.

'It so turned out that, well before daybreak, this man dreamed as he lay in his bed [. . .]

4. The two stories that follow are told by Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.27. The reference is probably to him, though both stories occur also in Valerius, *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 1.7. Cicero's works on rhetoric were immensely influential in the Middle Ages.

How that his felawe gan upon hym calle,
 And seyde, "Allas, for in an oxes stalle
 3005 This nyght I shal be mordred ther I lye!
 Now help me, deere brother, or I dye.
 In alle haste com to me!" he sayde.
 This man out of his sleep for feere abrayde;
 But whan that he was wakened of his sleep,
 3010 He turned hym and took of this no keep.
 Hym thoughte his dreem nas but a vanitee.
 Thus twies in his slepyng dremed hee;
 And atte thridde tyme yet his felawe
 Cam, as hym thoughte, and seide, "I am now slawe.
 3015 Bihoold my bloody woundes depe and wyde!
 Arys up erly in the morwe tyde,
 And at the west gate of the toun," quod he,
 "A carte ful of dong ther shaltow se,
 In which my body is hid ful prively;
 3020 Do thilke carte arresten boldely.
 My gold caused my mordre, sooth to sayn,"
 And tolde hym every point how he was slayn,
 With a ful pitous face, pale of hewe.
 And truste wel, his dreem he foond ful trewe,
 3025 For on the morwe, as soone as it was day,
 To his felawes in he took the way;
 And whan that he cam to this oxes stalle,
 After his felawe he bigan to calle.
 'The hostiler answerede hym anon,
 3030 And seyde, "Sire, your felawe is agon.
 As soone as day he wente out of the toun."
 'This man gan fallen in suspecioun,
 Remembrynge on his dremes that he mette,
 And forth he gooth – no lenger wolde he lette –
 3035 Unto the west gate of the toun, and fond
 A dong-carte, wente as it were to donge lond,
 That was arrayed in that same wise
 As ye han herd the dede man devyse.
 And with an hardy herte he gan to crye
 3040 Vengeance and justice of this felonye:

that his friend called him, and said, "Alas, I shall certainly be
 murdered in the ox-stall where I am lying. Help me, dear
 brother, or I shall die! Come to me at once!" he said. The man
 immediately awoke in terror. But, having woken, he turned
 over and took no more notice of it. It seemed to him that the
 dream had no significance. He slept and dreamt this twice, and
 on the third occasion the friend came, so it seemed, and said,
 "Now I have been murdered. Look at my deep and wide and
 bloody wounds! Get up early in the morning, and at the west
 gate of the town," he said, "you'll see a cart full of manure, in
 which my body is secretly hidden. Have that cart boldly
 arrested. Truth to tell, my gold caused my murder." And he
 told him, with pitiful face, pallid in colour, in every detail how
 he had been killed. Take my word for it, his dream proved true,
 because in the morning, at daybreak, he made his way to his
 friend's lodgings, and, when he arrived at the ox-stall, he called
 out to his friend.

'The owner answered him straight away, and said, "Sir, your
 friend has left. The moment day broke, he went from the town."
 The man, recalling the dream he had dreamt, became sus-
 picious, and he went instantly – he didn't want to delay – to
 the west gate of the town, and discovered the dung-cart, going
 as if to manure the soil, and looking precisely like the descrip-
 tion you've heard given by the dead man. And with emboldened
 heart he cried out for vengeance and punishment for this crime.

"My felawe mordred is this same nyght,
 And in this carte he lith gapyng upright.
 I crye out on the ministres," quod he,
 "That sholden kepe and reulen this citee.
 3045 Harrow! Allas! Heere lith my felawe slayn!"
 What sholde I moore unto this tale sayn?
 The peple out sterte and caste the cart to grounde,
 And in the myddel of the dong they founde
 The dede man, that mordred was al newe.

3050 'O blisful God, that art so just and trewe,
 Lo, how that thou biwreyst mordre alway!
 Mordre wol out; that se we day by day.
 Mordre is so waltsom and abhomynable
 To God, that is so just and resonable,
 3055 That he ne wol nat suffre it heled be,
 Though it abyde a year, or two, or thre.
 Mordre wol out, this my conclusioun.

And right anon, ministres of that toun
 Han hent the carter and so soore hym pyned,
 3060 And eek the hostiler so soore engyned,
 That they biknewe hire wikkednesse anon,
 And were anhangen by the nekke-bon.

'Heere may men seen that dremes been to drede.
 And certes in the same book I rede,
 3065 Right in the nexte chapitre after this –
 I gabbe nat, so have I joye or blis –
 Two men that wolde han passed over see,
 For certeyn cause, into a fer contree,
 If that the wynd ne hadde been contrarie,
 3070 That made hem in a citee for to tarie
 That stood ful myrie upon an haven-syde;
 But on a day, agayn the even-tyde,
 The wynd gan chaunge, and blew right as hem leste.
 Jolif and glad they wente unto hir reste,
 3075 And casten hem ful erly for to saille.
 But herkneth! To that o man fil a greet mervaille:
 That oon of hem, in slepyng as he lay,
 Hym mette a wonder dreem agayn the day.

"My companion has been murdered this very night, and he lies
 gaping, face-up, in this cart. I proclaim my grievance to the
 judges," he said, "whose responsibility it is to look after and
 govern this city. Help! Alas! My friend lies murdered here!"
 What more need I comment on this story? The people quickly
 came out and overturned the cart, and in the middle of the
 dung they found the dead man, recently murdered. 'O blessed
 God, so just, so true, see how you always reveal murder! We
 always say, "Murder will out!" Murder is so ghastly and dis-
 gusting in the eyes of God, who is so just and reasonable, that
 he will not permit it to be concealed, even if it remains so for
 one, two or three years. All I can say is that murder will out.
 The town's ministers of justice straight away seized the carter,
 and so painfully tortured him, and so painfully tortured the
 landlord, too, that they at once confessed their wickedness, and
 were hanged by the neck.

'One can see from this that dreams are to be feared. And,
 indeed, I read in the same book, in the very next chapter after
 this one – honestly,⁵ I'm not making this up – how two men
 wanted to make a sea-voyage to a distant country, for some
 particular reason. But a contrary wind had forced them to wait
 in a city that was pleasantly situated by the harbour. But,
 one day towards evening, the wind changed, and blew in the
 direction they wanted. They went to bed, feeling joyful and
 relieved, and planned to set sail very early. But listen! An extra-
 ordinary thing happened to one of the men: that one, as he lay
 sleeping, dreamed a fantastic dream towards dawn. [. . .]

5. *so have I joye or blis* [3066]: literally, 'so may I have joy or happiness',
 but a tag with a general meaning of 'honestly' or 'I promise you'.

3080 Hym thoughte a man stood by his beddes syde,
 And hym comanded that he sholde abyde,
 And seyde hym thus: "If thou tomorwe wende,
 Thow shalt be dreynt; my tale is at an ende."
 He wook, and tolde his felawe what he mette,
 And preyde hym his viage for to lette;
 3085 As for that day, he preyde hym to byde.
 His felawe, that lay by his beddes syde.
 Gan for to laughe, and scorned him ful faste.
 "No dreem," quod he, "may so myn herte agaste
 That I wol lette for to do my thynges.
 3090 I sette nat a straw by thy dremynges,
 For swevenes been but vanytees and japes.
 Men dreme alday of owles and of apes,
 And of many a maze therewithal;
 Men dreme of thyng that nevere was ne shal.
 3095 But sith I see that thou wolt heere abyde,
 And thus forslewthen wilfully thy tyde,
 God woot, it reweth me; and have good day!"
 And thus he took his leve, and wente his way.
 But er that he hadde half his cours yseyled,
 3100 Noot I nat why, ne what myschaunce it eyled,
 But casuelly the shippes botme rente,
 And ship and man under the water wente
 In sighte of othere shippes it bisyde,
 That with hem seyled at the same tyde.
 3105 And therfore, faire Pertelote so deere,
 By swiche ensamples olde maistow leere
 That no man sholde been to recchelees
 Of dremes; for I seye thee, doutelees,
 That many a dreem ful soore is for to drede.
 3110 'Lo, in the lyf of Seint Kenelm I rede,
 That was Kenulphus sone, the noble kyng
 Of Mercenrike, how Kenelm mette a thyng.
 A lite er he was mordred, on a day,
 His mordre in his avysioun he say.
 3115 His norice hym expowned every deel
 His sweven, and bad hym for to kepe hym weel

It seemed to him that a man stood by his bed and commanded him to stay, and spoke thus: "If you leave tomorrow, you will be drowned. I say no more." He woke up and told his friend what he had dreamt, and begged him to delay his journey. He entreated him to stay just for that day. His friend, who was in bed next to him, laughed and mocked him greatly. "No dream," he said, "can put such fear into my heart that I would delay my business. I don't give a straw for your dreams, because dreams are nothing but delusions and tricks [of the mind]. One commonly dreams about owls and monkeys, and of many another confusing matter. One dreams of something that never has existed, or will exist. But, since I see that you want to remain here and are determined to idle away your time, God knows I think it's a pity. So, good day to you!" Thus he took his leave and departed. But before he had sailed half his voyage, I don't know why, or what misfortune caused the disaster, by ill-luck the underside of the ship was ripped apart and everyone was drowned in full view of the other nearby shipping which was sailing on the same tide alongside.

'Hence, beautiful and beloved Pertelote, you can learn from such ancient examples that no one should be too casual about dreams, because I'm telling you – there's no question about it – many a dream is to be greatly feared.

'Look here, I read in the *Life of St Cenhelm*, who was son of the noble King Cenwulf of Mercia, that Cenhelm dreamt about a certain matter. One day, shortly before he was murdered, he saw his murder in a vision. His nurse interpreted every detail of his dream, and warned him to be on his guard [. . .]

For traisoun; but he nas but seven yeer oold,
 And therfore litel tale hath he toold
 Of any dreem, so hooly was his herte.
 3120 By God! I hadde levere than my sherte
 That ye hadde rad his legende, as have I.
 'Dame Pertelote, I sey yow trewely,
 Macrobeus, that writ the avisioun
 In Affrike of the worthy Cipiou,
 3125 Affermeth dremes, and seith that they been
 Warnynge of thynges that men after seen.
 And forthermoore, I pray yow, looketh wel
 In the olde testament, of Daniel,
 If he heeld dremes any vanitee.
 3130 Reed eek of Joseph, and ther shul ye see
 Wher dremes be somtyme – I sey nat alle –
 Warnynge of thynges that shul after falle.
 Looke of Egipte the kyng, daun Pharao,
 His bakere and his butiller also,
 3135 Wher they ne felte noon effect in dremes.
 Whoso wol seken actes of sondry remes
 May rede of dremes many a wonder thyng.
 Lo Cresus, which that was of Lyde kyng,
 Mette he nat that he sat upon a tree,
 3140 Which signified he sholde anhangd bee?
 Lo heere Andromacha, Ectores wyf,
 That day that Ector sholde lese his lyf,
 She dremed on the same nyght biforn
 How that the lyf of Ector sholde be lorn,
 3145 If thilke day he wente into bataille.
 She warned hym, but it myghte nat availle;
 He wente for to fighte natheles,
 But he was slayn anon of Achilles.
 But thilke tale is al to longe to telle,
 3150 And eek it is ny day; I may nat dwelle.
 Shortly I seye, as for conclusioun,
 That I shal han of this avisioun
 Adversitee; and I seye forthermoor
 That I ne telle of laxatyves no stoor,

against treason. But he was only seven years old, and consequently gave little weight to some dream, such an innocent mind did he have. God! I'd give my shirt for you to have read the legend, as I have.

'I tell you the truth, Madam Pertelote, Macrobius, who wrote *The Vision of the Noble Scipio Africanus*, gives his support to the validity of dreams, and says that they are forewarnings of things that people later encounter. And, moreover, I beg you, look at Daniel in the Old Testament [and see] whether he considered dreams to be meaningless. Read about Joseph, too, and you'll see there whether dreams are sometimes – I don't suggest all of them – forebodings of things that will later transpire. Look at lord Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and his baker and butler too, [and see] whether they didn't experience the effects of dreams. Whoever searches out the chronicles of various kingdoms may read many a marvellous matter concerning dreams. Look at Croesus who was King of Lydia: didn't he dream that he sat in a tree, which signified that he would be hanged? See how Andromacha, wife of Hector, dreamed, on the night before the day on which Hector was to lose his life, that he would be killed if he went into battle that day. She warned him, but to no avail – in spite of that, he went to fight and was immediately slain by Achilles. But that's far too long a tale to tell, and furthermore it's near daybreak. I mustn't delay. Just to sum up, I'll put it briefly: I shall have misfortune on account of this vision. And I tell you moreover that I pay no regard to laxatives, [. . .]

3155 For they been venymes, I woot it weel;
 I hem diffye, I love hem never a deel!
 'Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this.
 Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,
 Of o thyng God hath sent me large grace;
 3160 For whan I se the beautee of youre face,
 Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,
 It maketh al my drede for to dyen;
 For al so siker as *In principio*,
Mulier est hominis confusio –
 3165 Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
 "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis."
 For whan I feele a-nyght your softe syde –
 Al be it that I may nat on yow ryde,
 For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas –
 3170 I am so ful of joye and of solas,
 That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem.'
 And with that word he fley down fro the beem,
 For it was day, and eke his hennes alle,
 And with a chuk he gan hem for to calle,
 3175 For he hadde founde a corn, lay in the yerd.
 Real he was, he was namoore aferd.
 He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme,
 And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryde.
 He looketh as it were a grym leoun,
 3180 And on his toos he rometh up and down;
 Hym deigned nat to sette his foot to grounde.
 He chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounde,
 And to hym rennen thanne his wyves alle.
 Thus roial, as a prince is in his halle,
 3185 Leve I this Chauntecleer in his pasture,
 And after wol I telle his aventure.

Whan that the month in which the world bigan,
 That highte March, whan God first maked man,
 Was compleet, and passed were also,
 3190 Syn March [was gon], thritty dayes and two,
 Bifel that Chauntecleer in al his pryde,
 His sevene wyves walkynge by his syde,

because they are poisons, as I well know. I despise them! I don't like them a bit!

'Now let's talk about cheerful things, and stop all this. Madam Pertelote, so may I have joy, God has sent me a great blessing in one matter – namely, when I see the beauty of your face, you are so scarlet-red around your eyes, it makes all my fear perish. For, just as valid as "In the beginning . . ." is [the text] "*Mulier est hominis confusio*". Madam, the meaning of this Latin is "Woman is man's joy and his complete happiness".⁶ Therefore, when I feel your soft side at night – even though I can't have sex with you, because, unfortunately, our perch is so narrowly constructed – I am so full of joy and contentment that I despise both vision and dream.'

And, having said that, he flew down from the rafter, as it was daytime, so too did all his hens, and he summoned them with a cluck, because he had found a grain of corn lying in the run. He was regal. He wasn't frightened any more. He embraced Pertelote with his wings twenty times, and before six in the morning had sex with her as frequently. He looked like a fierce lion. He walked on tiptoe to and fro – he was too proud to set his foot upon the earth. He clucked when he found the grain of corn, and then all his wives came running to him. Thus, royal as a prince in his hall, I leave this Chanticleer in his field, and afterwards I'd like to tell you what happened to him.

When the month in which the world began (which is called March, when God first created mankind) was over, and another thirty-two days had passed since the end of March, it so happened that Chanticleer in all his pride, his seven wives walking next to him, [. . .]

6. *In principio* is the opening of St John's Gospel; this text was thought to be magical (cf. *General Prologue*, 254). *Mulier est hominis confusio* (Latin) means 'Woman is man's downfall', a frequently quoted comic definition of woman. Some scholars consider Chauntecleer's mistranslation of this phrase to be an indication of his ignorance. More likely it is a sly joke on his part, because he knows Pertelote cannot understand Latin.

3195 Caste up his eyen to the brighte sonne,
 That in the signe of Taurus hadde yronne
 Twenty degrees and oon, and somewhat moore,
 And knew by kynde, and by noon oother loore,
 That it was pryme, and crew with blisful stevene.
 'The sonne,' he seyde, 'is clomben up on hevene
 3200 Fourty degrees and oon, and moore ywis.
 Madame Pertelote, my worldes blis,
 Herkneth thise blisful briddes how they synge,
 And se the fresshe floures how they sprynge;
 Ful is myn herte of revel and solas!
 But sodeynly hym fil a sorweful cas,
 3205 For evere the latter ende of joye is wo.
 God woot that worldly joye is soone ago;
 And if a rethor koude faire endite,
 He in a cronycle saufly myghte it write
 As for a sovereyn notabilitee.
 3210 Now every wys man, lat him herkne me;
 This storie is also trewe, I undertake,
 As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,
 That wommen holde in ful greet reverence.
 Now wol I torne agayn to my sentence.
 3215 A col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee,
 That in the grove hadde woned yeres three,
 By heigh ymaginacioun forncast,
 The same nyght thurghout the hegges brast
 Into the yerd ther Chauntecleer the faire
 3220 Was wont, and eek his wyves, to repaire;
 And in a bed of wortes stille he lay
 Til it was passed undren of the day,
 Waitynge his tyme on Chauntecleer to falle,
 As gladly doon thise homycides alle
 3225 That in await liggen to mordre men.
 O false mordreour, lurkyng in thy den!
 O newe Scariot, newe Genylon,
 False dissymulour, o Greek Synon,
 That broghtest Troye al outrely to sorwe!
 3230 O Chauntecleer, acursed be that morwe

looked up at the bright sun, which had run a little more than twenty-one degrees into the sign of the Bull, and knew instinctively, without further instruction, that it was six o'clock, and he crowed with a happy voice. 'The sun,' he observed, 'has climbed forty-one degrees, and indeed more, in the sky. Madam Pertelote, my worldly joy, hear how these happy birds sing, and look how the fresh flowers grow. My heart is full of joy and contentment!' But suddenly a tragic accident befell him – for unhappiness always follows happiness. God knows, earthly joy soon passes away, and, if an author could compose beautifully, he could assuredly record it as a matter of supreme importance. Now let every wise person listen to me. This story is, I swear, as true as the book of Lancelot of the Lake, which women greatly esteem. Now I'll get back to my story.

A fox with black markings, full of cunning evil, which had lived for three years in the copse, with elaborately planned strategy, broke through the hedges into the yard that very night, to the place where the beautiful Chanticleer and his wives were accustomed to make their way. And he lay motionless in a bed of cabbages till it was after nine o'clock in the morning, biding his time to pounce on Chanticleer, just as these murderers, who lie in wait to kill, like to do. O false murderer, lurking in your hiding-place! O new Judas Iscariot, new Ganelon, the dishonest hypocrite! O Greek Synon, who brought about the total destruction of Troy!⁷ O Chanticleer, cursed be that morning

7. Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ; Ganelon betrayed Roland in the *Chanson de Roland*; Synon persuaded the Trojans to accept the wooden horse, which, unknown to them, was filled with armed Greeks.

That thou into that yerd flaugh fro the bemes!
 Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes
 That thilke day was perilous to thee;
 But what that God forwoot moot nedes bee,
 3235 After the opinioun of certein clerkis.
 Wisse on hym that any parfit clerk is,
 That in scole is greet altercacioun
 In this mateere, and greet disputioun,
 And hath been of an hundred thousand men.
 3240 But I ne kan nat bulte it to the bren
 As kan the hooly doctour Augustyn,
 Or Boece, or the Bisshop Bradwardyn,
 Wheither that Goddes worthy forwityng
 Streyneth me nedely for to doon a thyng –
 3245 'Nedely' clepe I symple necessitee –
 Or elles, if free choys be graunted me
 To do that same thyng, or do it noght,
 Though God forwoot it er that I was wroght;
 Or if his wityng streyneth never a deel
 3250 But by necessitee condicioneel.
 I wol nat han to do of swich mateere;
 My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,
 That tok his conseil of his wyf, with sorwe,
 To walken in the yerd upon that morwe
 3255 That he hadde met that dreem that I yow tolde.
 Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;
 Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo
 And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
 Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese.
 3260 But for I noot to whom it myght displese,
 If I conseil of wommen wolde blame,
 Passe over, for I seyde it in my game.
 Rede auctours, where they trete of swich mateere,
 And what they seyn of wommen ye may heere.
 3265 Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne;
 I kan noon harm of no womman divyne.
 Faire in the soond, to bathe hire myrily,
 Lith Pertelote, and alle hire sustres by,

when you flew down from the rafters into the yard! You had been fully warned in your dreams that that day was a dangerous one for you. But what God foresees *has* to happen, according to the opinion of some academics – anyone who is a good scholar will confirm that there is [at present] much dispute about it in the university, and a hundred thousand people have argued about it [in the past]. But I can't winnow it to the grain – as can the holy Doctor Augustine, or Boethius, or Bishop Bradwardine⁸ – as to whether the true foreknowledge of God of necessity forces me to do some particular act (by 'necessity' I mean 'simple necessity'), or on the other hand, if I have the free-will to do that same thing, or not to do it, even though God had foreknowledge of it before I was created; or whether the fact that he had foreknowledge doesn't compel me except through 'simple necessity'. I don't want to get involved in such subjects: as you will hear, my story is about a cock who unhappily took his wife's advice to walk in the farmyard on that morning when he dreamt the dream I recounted to you. Women's words of advice are very often disastrous. The advice of a woman brought about our initial misery, and forced Adam to leave Paradise, where he had been happy and fully contented. But, because I don't know whom I may be upsetting if I find myself blaming women's advice, forget it, because I was only joking. Read the authors in the passages where they discuss such topics, and you can hear what they have to say about women. These are the words of the cock – they're not mine. I can find no wrong in any woman.

Pertelote lies comfortably in the sand taking a pleasant dust-bath, and all her sisters are close by [. . .]

8. St Augustine (354–430) considered that God allows mankind some free-will; Boethius makes the distinction between simple necessity (e.g. that everyone will die) and conditional necessity (e.g. that someone decides to sit on a bench); Thomas Bradwardine (c. 1290–1349) was a theologian, Fellow of Merton College, Oxford, and subsequently Archbishop of Canterbury, who held the Augustinian view of free-will.

3270 Agayn the sonne, and Chauntecleer so free
 Soong murier than the mermayde in the see
 (For Phisiologus seith sikerly
 How that they syngen wel and myrily).
 And so bifel that, as he caste his ye
 Among the wortes on a boterflye,
 3275 He was war of this fox, that lay ful lowe.
 Nothyng ne liste hym thanne for to crowe,
 But cride anon, 'Cok! cok!' and up he sterte
 As man that was affrayed in his herte.
 For natureelly a beest desireth flee
 3280 Fro his contrarie, if he may it see,
 Though he never erst hadde seyn it with his ye.
 This Chauntecleer, whan he gan hym espye,
 He wolde han fled, but that the fox anon
 Seyde, 'Gentil sire, allas, wher wol ye gon?
 3285 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
 3290 Was oonly for to herkne how that ye synge.
 For trewely, ye have as myrie a stevene
 As any aungel hath that is in hevene.
 Therwith ye han in musyk moore feelynge
 Than hadde Boece, or any that kan synge.
 3295 My lord youre fader – God his soule blesse! –
 And eek youre mooder, of hire gentillesse,
 Han in myn hous ybeen to my greet ese;
 And certes, sire, ful fayn wolde I yow plese.
 But, for men speke of syngyng, I wol seye –
 3300 So moote I brouke wel myne eyen tweye –
 Save yow, I herde nevere man so synge
 As dide youre fader in the morwenynge.
 Certes, it was of herte, al that he song.
 And for to make his voys the moore strong,
 3305 He wolde so payne hym that with bothe his yen
 He moste wynke, so loude he wolde cryen,

in the sunshine, and the noble Chanticleer sang more cheerfully than the mermaid in the sea (for Phisiologus⁹ truly tells us how excellently and happily they sing). And it so chanced that, as he observed a butterfly among the cabbages, he became aware of the fox, who was crouching down. He had no wish to crow then, but he cried out at once 'Cluck! Cluck!' and jumped up like a man who has been heartily scared, because every animal instinctively wants to flee from its enemy if it catches sight of him, even if it had never previously set eyes upon him.

So did Chanticleer desire to flee when he saw him, had not the fox said at once, 'Noble sir, alas, where are you going? Are you afraid of me, who am your friend? Now, indeed, I would be worse than a devil if I wished you harm or offence. I haven't come to spy on your secrets; rather, to be honest with you, the reason for my visit was simply to hear how you sing, because, quite frankly, you have as cheerful a voice as any angel in heaven. And above all that, you have more musical sensitivity than Boethius¹⁰ had, or any other singer possesses. My lord your father – God bless his soul! – and your mother too, courteously visited my house, to my great delight. And certainly, sir, I would very much like to do something to please you. But, because one is talking about singing, I would like to say – so let me enjoy my two eyes¹¹ – with the exception of yourself, I have not heard anyone sing in the morning to compare with your father. He certainly sang entirely from the heart. And, in order to make his voice more powerful, he put so much into it that he had to close both eyes, so loudly did he cry out. [. . .]

9. Either the title of a bestiary, or its author. It was well known and describes animals, real or mythical, whose attributes illustrate allegorically Christian truths.

10. Boethius's *De Musica* ('Concerning Music') was a standard university textbook.

11. *So moote I brouke wel myne eyen tweye* [3300]: literally, 'so may I well enjoy my two eyes', a tag, like *so moot I thee* ('so may I thrive'), which is usually no more than an intensive, 'indeed'. I have translated literally here, however, because the idea of being blinded by flattery is the moral of this tale, and is Chanticleer's final judgement on his foolishness.

And stonden on his tiptoon therwithal,
 And strecche forth his nekke long and smal.
 And eek he was of swich discrecioun
 3310 That ther nas no man in no regioun
 That hym in song or wisdom myghte passe.
 I have wel rad in "Daun Burnel the Asse,"
 Among his vers, how that ther was a cok,
 For that a preestes sone yaf hym a knock
 3315 Upon his leg whil he was yong and nyce,
 He made hym for go lese his benefice.
 But certeyn, ther nys no comparisoun
 Bitwixe the wisdom and discrecioun
 Of youre fader and of his subtiltee.
 3320 Now syngeth, sire, for seinte charitee;
 Lat se; konne ye youre fader countrefete?'
 This Chauntecleer his wynges gan to bete,
 As man that koude his traysoun nat espie,
 So was he ravysshed with his flaterie.
 3325 Allas, ye lordes, 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 flaterie;
 3330 Beth war, ye lordes, of hir trecherye.
 This Chauntecleer stood hye upon his toos,
 Strecchyng his nekke, and heeld his eyen cloos,
 And gan to crowe loude for the nones.
 And daun Russell the fox stirte up atones,
 3335 And by the gargat hente Chauntecleer,
 And on his bak toward the wode hym beer,
 For yet ne was ther no man that hym sewed.
 O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!
 Allas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!
 3340 Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!
 And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.
 O Venus, that art goddesse of plesaunce,
 Syn that thy servant was this Chauntecleer,
 And in thy servyce dide al his poweer,

And he stood on tiptoe, too, and stretched out his long, slender neck. He was so perceptive that there was no one in his district who could surpass him in singing or in wisdom. I have carefully studied, among the verses of *Lord Burnell, the Ass*,¹² [a story] in which there was a cock: because the son of a priest struck it on the leg when it was young and delicate, it caused him to lose his church living. But, positively, there is no comparison between your father's wisdom and judgement and the cunning of that cockerel. Now, for St Charity's sake, sir, sing! Let's see whether you can emulate your father!

Chanticleer beat his wings – like a person who can't recognize treachery – so greatly was he carried away by flattery.

Alas, lords, there is many a false flatterer and many a smooth-tongued deceiver in your courts, who please you much more, I dare swear, than a man who tells you the truth. Read Ecclesiastes about flattery.¹³ Be on your guard, lords, against their treachery.

So Chanticleer stood high up on his toes, stretching out his neck. He kept his eyes closed, and he crowed loudly for that special occasion. And Lord Russell, the fox, sprang up instantly, and seized Chanticleer by the throat, and carried him off on his back towards the woods, for, as yet, no one was giving chase.

O destiny that is inevitable! Alas, that Chanticleer flew from the rafters! Alas, that his wife set no store by dreams! And all this whole disaster happened on a Friday.

O Venus, who are the goddess of sexual pleasure, given that Chanticleer was your servant and strove to do everything possible to serve you, [. . .]

12. A satirical beast fable (c. 1180).

13. There are a number of Old Testament texts which warn against flattery, including Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus and Proverbs.

- 3345 Moore for delit than world to multiplie,
 Why woldestow suffre hym on thy day to dye?
 O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,
 That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
 With shot, compleynedest his deeth so soore,
 3350 Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,
 The Friday for to chide, as diden ye?
 For on a Friday, soothly, slayn was he.
 Thanne wolde I shewe yow how that I koude pleyne
 For Chauntecleres drede and for his peyne.
 3355 Certes, swich cry ne lamentacion
 Was nevere of ladyes maad whan Ylion
 Was wonne, and Pirrus with his streite swerd,
 When he hadde hent kyng Priam by the berd,
 And slayn hym, as seith us *Eneydos*,
 3360 As maden alle the hennes in the clos,
 Whan they had seyn of Chauntecleer the sighte.
 But sovereynly dame Pertelote shrighthe
 Ful louder than dide Hasdrubales wyf,
 Whan that hir housbonde hadde lost his lyf
 3365 And that the Romayns hadde brend Cartage.
 She was so ful of torment and of rage
 That wilfully into the fyr she sterre
 And brende hirselves with a stedefast herte.
 O woful hennes, right so criden ye
 3370 As whan that Nero brende the citee
 Of Rome cryden senatoures wyves
 For that hir husbondes losten alle hir lyves –
 Withouten gilt this Nero hath hem slayn.
 Now wole I turne to my tale agayn.
 3375 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 cok away,
 3380 And cryden, 'Out! Harrow and weylaway!
 Ha, ha! The fox!' and after hym they ran,
 And eek with staves many another man.

more for sexual pleasure than with the intention of procreation, why did you allow him to die on your day of the week?

O Geoffrey,¹⁴ dear and renowned master, who, when your venerated King Richard was killed by an arrow, wrote a sorrowful lament. Why haven't I your power of expression now and your erudition to chide this Friday as you did? For, indeed, he was slain on a Friday. Then I would demonstrate how I could write a lament for Chanticleer's fear and for his suffering.

Such a shouting and wailing was certainly never made by the ladies when Ilium was captured – and when Pyrrhus with his drawn sword had seized King Priam by the beard and slain him, as the *Aeneid* tells us – as all the hens made in the run when they saw what had happened to Chanticleer. But, chief of all, Madam Pertelote screamed much louder than did the wife of Hasdrubal when her husband lost his life when the Romans burnt Carthage.¹⁵ She was so full of anguish and frenzy that she purposely leapt into the fire, and with unerring resolve burnt herself.

O unhappy hens, in that very same way did you scream as did the wives of the senators when Nero burnt the city of Rome, because all their husbands had lost their lives. Nero had slain them, innocent though they were. Now I'd like to return to my story.

This virtuous widow, and also her two daughters, heard these hens scream and lament, and they rushed outside at once and saw the fox making off towards the copse, and carrying the cockerel on his back. They shouted, 'Help! Alas and alack! Hey, there! The fox!' and they ran after him, as did also many other people armed with sticks. [. . .]

14. Geoffrey de Vinsauf, who wrote *Poetria Nova*, the standard textbook on rhetoric. As an example of a panegyric lament over the dead, Vinsauf composed a poem on the death of Richard Lionheart, which occurred on a Friday (the day of Venus).

15. Hasdrubal's wife hurled herself and her children into the flames, rather than be taken prisoner by the Romans.

3385 Ran Colle oure dogge, and Talbot and Gerland,
 And Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand;
 Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,
 So fered for the berkyng of the dogges
 And shoutyng of the men and wommen eeke
 They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke.
 3390 They yolliden as feendes doon in helle;
 The dokes cryden as men wolde hem quelle;
 The gees for feere flowen over the trees;
 Out of the hyve cam the swarm of bees.
 So hydous was the noyse – a, benedicitee! –
 Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
 3395 Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
 Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
 As thilke day was maad upon the fox.
 Of bras they broghten bemes, and of box,
 Of horn, of boon, in whiche they blewe and powped,
 3400 And therwithal they skriked and they howped.
 It semed as that hevene sholde falle.

Now, goode men, I prey yow herkneth alle:
 Lo, how Fortune turneth sodeynly
 The hope and pryde eek of hir enemy!
 3405 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!
 3410 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!"'
 The fox answerde, 'In feith, it shal be don.'
 3415 And as he spak that word, al sodeynly
 This cok brak from his mouth delyverly,
 And heighe upon a tree he fleigh anon.
 And whan the fox saugh that the cok was gon,
 'Allas!' quod he, 'O Chauntecleer, alas!
 3420 I have to yow,' quod he, 'ydoon trespas,

Our dog, Colle, with Talbot and Garland, and Malkyn¹⁶ brandishing her distaff, ran [after him]. The cow and calf, and even the hogs ran, so frightened were they by the barking of the dogs, and by the yells from men and women, too. They ran so fast that they reckoned that they'd have a heart attack. They screamed like devils in hell. The ducks quacked as if they were being killed. Geese flew over the trees in terror. A swarm of bees emerged from the hive. So ghastly was the noise – God bless us all! – that Jack Straw and his followers certainly never made such strident shouts when they were set upon killing the Flemings¹⁷ as were made that day in pursuit of the fox. They brought trumpets of brass and boxwood, of horn, of bone, on which they blew and puffed, and they screamed and yelled too. It seemed as if the sky would fall down.

Now, all you good people, listen, I beg you. See how Fortune suddenly reverses the hope and also the self-congratulation of her foe! The cock, which was lying scared stiff on the fox's back, spoke to the fox and said, 'Were I such a creature as you, sir, I would, so help me wise God, say, "Go away, you proud peasants, the lot of you! May you all catch the plague! Now that I've reached the edge of the wood, the cock is staying here, do what you will. In point of fact, I'm going to eat him straight away."'

The fox replied, 'Yes, I'll do that!' And as he said that sentence, the cock suddenly made an agile exit from his mouth, and at once flew high up into a tree. And when the fox saw that he'd got away, he said, 'Alas! O Chanticleer, woe is me! I have behaved badly towards you, [. . .]

16. Talbot and Garland are dogs' names; Malkyn is a diminutive of the name Maud or Matilda, sometimes used contemptuously to refer to a servant woman.

17. Jack Straw was leader of the Peasants' Revolt (1381). When they marched on London, they killed many of the immigrant Flemish cloth-makers.

In as much as I maked yow aferd
 Whan I yow hente and broghte out of the yerd.
 But, sire, I dide it in no wikke entente.
 Com down, and I shal telle yow what I mente;
 3425 I shal seye sooth to yow, God help me so!
 'Nay thanne,' quod he, 'I shrewe us bothe two.
 And first I shrewe myself, bothe blood and bones,
 If thou bigyle me ofter than ones.
 Thou shalt namoore thurgh thy flaterye
 3430 Do me to synge and wynke with myn ye;
 For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see,
 Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!
 'Nay,' quod the fox, 'but God yeve hym
 meschaunce,
 That is so undiscreet of governaunce
 3435 That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees.'
 Lo, swich it is for to be recchelees
 And necligent, and truste on flaterye.
 But ye that holden this tale a folye,
 As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
 3440 Taketh the moralite, goode men.
 For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
 To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
 Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille.
 Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,
 3445 As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
 And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen.

Heere is ended the Nonnes Preestes Tale

in that I have frightened you when I seized you and removed you from the yard. But, sir, I did not act with malicious intention. Come down, and I'll explain what I had in mind. God help me, I'll be honest with you!

'Oh no,' he said, 'I curse us both. First, I curse myself, blood and bones, if I let you trick me more than once. You're not going to flatter me into singing and closing my eyes. May God never allow the man to prosper who closes his eyes when he should be watching!'

'No,' said the fox, 'but may God give misery to anyone who is so foolishly ill-disciplined as to talk stupidly when he should be keeping his mouth shut!'

You see what comes of being careless and unwary, and trusting flattery.

But those of you who think this is a silly story about a fox, a cock, and a hen, extract the moral, good people. For St Paul says that everything that is written has certainly been written for our instruction.¹⁸ Take the grain and leave the chaff alone. Now, God of goodness, if it be Your will, as my Lord¹⁹ tells us, make us all good people, and bring us to His heavenly bliss! Amen.

Here ends the Nun's Priest's Tale

18. See Romans 15:4.

19. This could mean Christ or the Nun's Priest's lord bishop.