

Canterbury Tales

Nuns' Priest's tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This Canterbury tale has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912, reprinted 1973. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press. With reference to The Riverside Chaucer, 2008 Edition. Oxford University Press.

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The prologue of the Nonnes Preestes Tale

‘Ho!’ quod the knight, ‘good sir, namore of this, that ye han seyde is right y-nough, y-wis, and moche more, for litel hevynesse is right y-nough to moche folk, I gesse – ‘Hey!’ exclaimed the knight. ‘Good sir, no more of this! What you have said is quite enough – in fact, I would say, too much. A small amount of grief is enough for most people. For myself, I think it’s a great shame when someone who’s enjoyed wealth and comfort loses it all suddenly. It’s a huge pleasure to hear of its opposite, in fact. If a man who has been poor better himself and climbs up the social ladder, has some good luck and ends up living in prosperity – a thing like this is a pleasure to hear, to my way of thinking, and makes for a much better tale.’

‘I totally agree!’ exclaimed our host. ‘By the bell of Saint Paul’s, you’re right! This monk chimes on and on about “fortune overshadowed by a cloud” or I don’t know what, another tragedy or some other crap he just told us about, but by God, it’s no help to complain about things which have been and gone and can’t be changed, or to go on and on about them like this, and it’s a pain, as you have said, to have to listen to it.’

‘Sir Monk, may God bless you, but no more of this. Your tale is annoying us all. Such talk is not worth a butterfly. There is no pleasure to be gained from it. Therefore Sir monk, Sir Peter rather, I plead with you, tell us about something else. If it wasn’t for the clinking of all the bells hanging from your bridle, by the King of Heaven who died for us all, I would have drifted off to sleep before now and fallen off my horse! Even if the mud had been a foot deep beneath me. Then you would certainly have been wasting your breath, for as you clerics say: “It’s pointless giving a sermon to an empty church.” I’m able to get the gist of anything that is well-explained to me, so why don’t you say something about hunting?’

‘No,’ replied the monk. ‘I can’t be bothered any more. Let someone else have their go, for I have finished.’

‘Come here then, Sir priest, come over here Sir John,’ said the host to the nuns’ priest, rather roughly and insistently. ‘Tell us something that will make us laugh. Be upbeat,

Chauntecleer is a fine cock and rules over his hens in the farmyard with amiable lust. Perhaps curiously, Chauntecleer possesses not only his lovely hens but the wisdom of a scholar as well, and the book-learning of a scholar to boot – for this was a time when birds and animals could speak, the Nuns’ Priest assures us. And luckily for Chauntecleer! For when, following an erudite discussion with his partner on the perch concerning the nature of dreams and whether any credence should be given to them, he is carried off by a fox and needs to be able to talk his way out of this life-threatening predicament, he is able to do so using not only his own wit but a fox’s cunning as well.

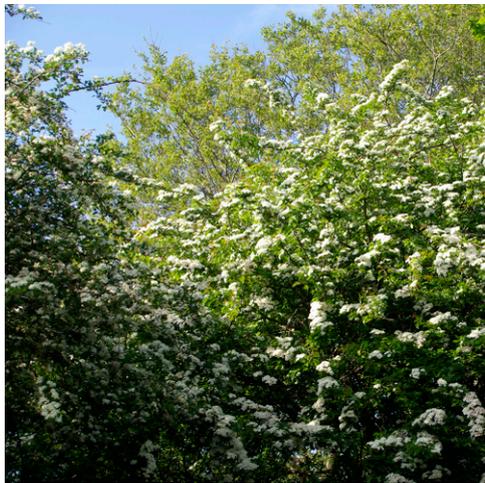
This tale from the Nuns’ Priest follows the tale from the Monk in all versions, and is another of Geoffrey’s Canterbury Tales – a collection of short stories each recounted from the mouth of a pilgrim on the way to Saint Thomas Becket’s shrine in Canterbury Cathedral.

although I can see you're riding an old nag; but so what if your horse is mangy and thin? If he serves your purpose, he's good enough, so be in good spirits.'

'Yes, sir,' replied the nuns' priest. 'Yes, host, I will be merry, may good luck come to me, or else I will annoy you all, I understand this.' Then he began his tale and spoke out to everybody, this sweet priest, Sir John.

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

A poor widow, somewhat stooped with age, once lived in a little cottage beside a wood, in a valley. Ever since her husband had died she had led a simple and patient life, for her possessions were few and her income was small. By the little skill that she



had at husbandry, she supported herself and her two daughters by keeping three large sows, three cows and a sheep called Moll. Her bedroom and her living room, where she laid out her meagre meals, were filthy with soot. She served no spicy sauces – no fancy dishes passed down her throat! Her simple fare was in proportion to her wealth.

She was never ill through over-eating though. A moderate diet was the only medicine she needed, along with exercise and contentment with what she had. She was never prevented from dancing by an attack of the gout! She never had a hangover, never drank wine, neither white nor red, but served mostly black and white at her trestle table, that is to say, milk and wholemeal bread, of which there was no shortage, smoked bacon and sometimes an egg or two, for she was something of a poultry-keeper.

She had a paddock, enclosed with a wattle fence with a dry ditch outside, in which she kept a cockerel whose name was Chauntecleer. In all the land of crowing there was none his equal. His voice was merrier than the merry organ that rings out from a church on Mass days. When he crowed from the henhouse, the sound was more reliable than that of a clock, or even a great timepiece in an abbey. He knew intuitively when the equinoctial wheel had risen another fifteen degrees – then he would crow like there was no tomorrow! His comb was redder than a perfect coral and crenulated like the battlements on a castle wall. His beak was black and shone like jet, his legs were a shiny deep-blue and so were all his toes. His toenails were whiter than a lily and his body shone like burnished gold.

This noble cock had seven hens to look after and to do all his will with; they were his sisters and his lovers and very similar to him in colour. The most daintily patterned on her throat was a young hen called Pertelote. She was courteous, friendly, well-groomed and well-spoken, and since seven days old had been so pretty that she had captured the

heart of Chauntecleer. She made him very happy and it was a joy to hear them singing together when the dawn broke: 'My love has gone fighting overseas,' or some such popular refrain; for at this time, as I understand, animals and birds could speak and sing.

One day, just as the sun was rising, Chauntecleer was sitting on his perch amongst all his wives when he began to make a horrible noise with his throat, as though he was having a nightmare. Pertelote was roosting next to him and when she heard this she was astonished and said: 'Oh dearest, what's making you groan like this, what's the matter? You're normally a very good sleeper, for shame!'

'My dear,' he replied. 'By God, I just dreamed that I was in such danger that my heart is still going like the clappers! God, let that dream foretell nothing serious! Don't be upset, but I dreamed I was strutting up and down in our yard when I saw an animal very like a dog who wanted to seize me in his jaws and kill me – he was an orangey-red in colour and both his ears and his tail were tipped with black, his nose was small and he had two glowing eyes. I nearly died with fright when he looked at me. That, I should imagine, was the reason I was groaning.'

'Away with you!' exclaimed Pertelote. 'You should be ashamed of yourself! Alas, by God above, you've now lost all my affection and all my love, you weakling. I cannot love a coward. Whatever any woman may say, we all desire our men, if we can, to be intelligent, generous, courageous, trustworthy, willing to spend a little on us but no fool with money, no gambler and certainly not someone who jumps out of his skin at the sight of a breadknife! How can you bring yourself to admit, in front of the one you love, that a dream has frightened you? Alas! Are dreams so frightening? What kind of a man are you? A dream is nothing but a conceit. Dreams are caused by overeating, by flatulence or by one of the four humours in a person's body being out of balance.'

'Without doubt, this dream which you have just had is because of an excess of your red bile, which causes folk to have nightmares about arrows and licking flames, great red beasts chasing after them, bloody conflict or the piglets of wild boars; just as the humour of melancholy causes a sleeping man to cry out in fear of black bulls and black bears, or devils in black.'

'I could explain to you the other humours as well, which also cause nightmares, but I don't want to dwell on it. Look, Cato, who was such a wise man, warned us to take no heed of dreams. So when we fly off these beams, for God's love, take a laxative! I'll stake my life that this is the best thing that you can do. Purge yourself of choler and melancholy; and in order to do so quickly, since there is no apothecary in this village, I shall guide you to all the necessary herbs myself, all the ones that will be beneficial and do you the most good. They are all growing in our yard and they will expel what needs to be expelled, both in your phlegm and in your stool. Make sure you do it, though, for God's love! Your complexion looks awfully choleric. And be careful that the hot sun doesn't find you full of these red humours, for if it does, you'll catch a fever that might be the death of you. I'll lay a groat on it.'

‘For a day or two you shall take digestives in the form of worms, before you take your laxative, which will consist of centaury, fumaria or else hellebore that grows nearby, laurel or failing that, sloes, and ground ivy, which both grow in our yard. Peck them up where they are growing and swallow them down. Cheer up, husband, by your father’s kin! Fear no dream. I’ve nothing more to say.’

‘Madam, thank you for that,’ replied Chauntecleer. ‘Nevertheless, regarding Cato, who was so renowned for his wisdom, although he advised us not to worry too much about dreams, one can read in numerous old books about men who were of higher standing even than Cato and who say exactly the opposite. They found through experience that dreams are highly significant and foretell both the joy and the tribulation that people will have to endure on this Earth. There is no reason to argue about it, for it can be proved.’

‘One of the greatest writers who ever lived tells of two fellows who once went on a pilgrimage, in good spirits, and chanced to come into a town where there were so few inns and so many people looking for places to stay the night that they couldn’t find so much as a cottager willing to take them both in. So, through necessity, they had to separate and try to make their own arrangements. Each found a hostel, one in a barn with plough-oxen, the other well enough within the town but quite a long way from his companion, as chance fell – or fortune, which governs all our lives.’

‘Long before dawn, this man who had found a comfortable place to stay, lying in his bed, dreamed that his companion was calling to him: “Alas! I’m going to be murdered tonight in this ox’s stall! Help me, before I die! Come quickly!”

‘This man woke out of his sleep in a panic, but when he had come to, he turned over and went back to sleep again, considering it to be just a dream. He chose to ignore it. Twice this happened. Then a third time his companion appeared to him in a dream and said: “Now I have been killed. Look at my dreadful wounds! Get up early in the morning and go to the west gate of this town and there you will see a cartload of dung. My body is hidden at the bottom of it. Seize possession of this cart. I was murdered for my gold, needless to say.”

‘In this dream, the fellow’s companion went on to tell him exactly how he had been slain, his face piteous and pale as he did so. And believe me, this dream turned out to be true. The next morning, as soon as the sun had risen, the man made his way to where his friend had stayed the night and when he came to the ox’s stall he began to shout for him. The innkeeper came out and said: “Sir, your companion has gone. He left at dawn.” This made the man suspicious and, remembering his dream, went to the west gate of the town where he saw a dung cart, looking as though it was bound straight for dungland, exactly as his dead companion had described it. Gathering his courage, the man cried for vengeance and justice for this felony. “My companion was murdered last night!” he cried out to those nearby. “He is lying dead at the bottom of this cart. I call upon the officials who rule this city. Alas! My friend lies here slain!”

‘What more is there to say? The people rushed out, overturned the cart and in the middle of all the shit and straw they found the dead man, murdered, his wounds still fresh.

‘Oh blissful God, so faithful and just, how you always see to it that a murderous act is uncovered! Murder will always be revealed, we see proof of this every day. Murder is so loathsome and so abominable to God, who is so just and reasonable, that he never allows it to remain undiscovered for long; although it might lie so for a year or two, or even three. But murder will always be uncovered!

‘Straight away, the town officials seized the carter and tortured him, and the innkeeper as well, so brutally that they quickly admitted to the crime and were hanged.

‘Here, then, is proof that dreams are to be feared.

‘And in this same book, in the very next chapter, I’ve read that two men once wished to go overseas for some reason, to a distant country, but were held up by an adverse wind which prevented them from setting out. They were forced to stay in some city or other next to a port; but one day, in the evening, the wind veered and began to blow in the direction they wanted, so they went to bed very happy indeed, with the intention of getting up early the next morning to set sail. But to one of them came a great marvel during the night.

He dreamed just before morning that a man stood beside his bed and instructed him to wait: “If you set sail tomorrow,” this man cautioned, “you will be drowned. That is all.” When he woke up, he told his companion about this dream, advising that they should take heed and delay their voyage for a day or two. His companion however, who was in the bed next to his, began to laugh and make fun of him. “No dream will ever make my heart so timid that I allow it to influence my affairs,” he said. “I don’t give



a straw for your dreams. Dreams are just fictions and conceits. Men dream all the time about owls and apes and a million other ridiculous things; they dream of things that never were and never shall be. But since I can see that you intend to remain here today and wilfully miss the tide, God knows, I think it is a pity. Goodbye.”

‘He wished his companion good day and went off to the ship. But before the vessel had completed half the voyage, I don’t know what kind of error of navigation occurred but the ship’s bottom ran aground and she sank, taking all on board with her. This happened within sight of some of the other ships that had sailed on the same tide. And therefore, Pertelote my dear, you can see that there are many examples in old books that warn us to take dreams seriously. I tell you, there are some dreams you would be wise to take heed of.

‘Lo! Take the life of Saint Kenelm. He was the son of Kenulf, and the King of Mercia, and he saw his own murder in a dream. He dreamed that he was going to be murdered

and then he was, His nurse explained the dream's significance to him, for he was only seven years old, and urged him to be very vigilant; but being young and inexperienced, and also very holy, he made light of it. I would give my shirt that you had read his story, as I have.

'And Dame Pertelote, what about Macrobius? He related a dream that once came to Scipio Africanus and warned us that such dreams are meaningful and can predict the future. Look in the Old Testament at the Book of Daniel and see if he considered dreams to be worthless! Read about Joseph, and you will see that dreams are sometimes – not all the time I grant you – but sometimes a warning of things to come. Consider Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, his baker and the man in charge of all his wine and beer. Did they not come to form any opinions about dreams? Anyone who reads the stories from a host of different countries will find many marvellous things said about dreams.

'What about Croesus, who was the King of Lydia? – didn't he dream once that he sat upon a tree, which signified that he was going to be hanged? And what about Andromache, the wife of Trojan Hector? She dreamed that her husband was going to be killed if he went into battle, and the very next day he was. She warned him, but to no avail. Hector went out to fight, regardless, and Achilles slew him. But this whole story is too long to tell, and besides, it's nearly dawn so I haven't any more time. But I conclude that something nasty is going to happen to me if I'm not careful, and I don't give a fig for any of your laxatives; they are all poisonous and I defy them. I don't like them at all.

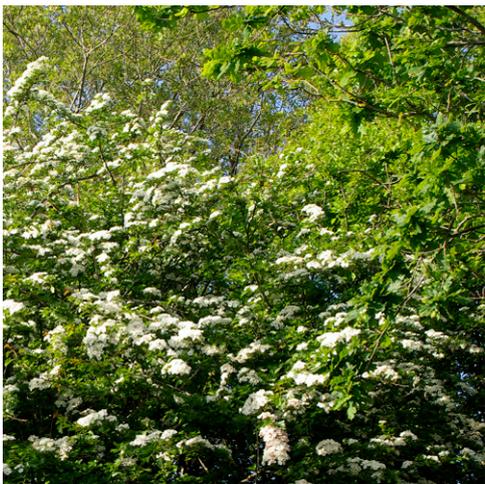
'So let us stop all this and speak about something pleasant. Madam Pertelote, God has graced me with one thing above all others that I can prize, for when I see the beauty of your face and the scarlet red around your eyes, I think upon the Latin phrase *In principio mulier est hominis confusio*, which you may take to mean: "Woman is man's joy and all his bliss". It makes my fear disappear completely when I feel your soft feathers beside me at night, although – alas! – I cannot screw you because this perch is too narrow. But I am so full of joy and well-being that I defy all dreams.'

With this, he flew off the beam with all his hens, for dawn was breaking. Soon, with a "cluck cluck", he called them all over to where he was standing, because he had found some grain on the ground. He felt like a royal prince and all his fear was forgotten. He mounted Pertelote twenty times before the morning was half over and strutted about on his toes like a proud lion, never deigning once to put his feet flat upon the earth. He clucked when he found some corn scattered amongst the chicken shit and all his wives came running up to him. But I shall leave this regal cock Chaucer in his pasture, like a prince in his hall, and move on to his adventure.

When the month in which the world began, which is called March, was over, and, in fact, this third day of May had arrived, it happened that proud Chaucer, his seven wives now walking beside him, cast up his eyes to the bright sun, which had travelled a little over twenty-one degrees into the sign of Taurus. And he knew by in-

stinct, and by no other means, that it was now precisely nine o'clock in the morning, so he gave out a beautiful cock-a-doodle-doo. 'The sun has climbed forty-one degrees above the horizon, and a little more,' he cried. Then: 'Madam Pertelote,' he said. 'Listen to the beautiful singing of these birds and look at these lovely flowers growing on the ground. My heart is full of joy!'

But happiness always ends in woe, God knows. Worldly joy is always short-lived. An orator, if he could write his speeches down, might record this in a chronicle as a fact. Let every wise man listen to me. This story is as true, I swear, as the one about Sir Lancelot of the Lake that women hold in such reverence. But I'll return to what I was saying, for something terrible is about to happen.



A fox, who was full of sly iniquity, had been living in the wood nearby for three years and had cunningly put into motion a plan which involved breaking through the hedge at night and concealing himself in the yard where Chauntecleer and all his wives were accustomed to going. That very night he had put this plan into action and now he lay in a bed of stinging nettles, as the morning wore on, waiting for an opportunity to pounce, as do all these murderers who lie in wait for their victims.

Oh faithless murderer, lurking in your hideout! Latter-day Judas Iscariot! Imitator of that Greek traitor Sinon, who persuaded King Priam of Troy to let in the wooden horse! Oh Chauntecleer, a curse on that morning that you flew into the yard from the beams. Your dream had warned you that this day was going to be perilous. But that which God foresees must necessarily happen, I suppose; at least, this is the opinion of certain clerics, and you may recall to mind, those of you who are learned, those great arguments and discussions that take place in the universities amongst many hundreds of men. I haven't the intelligence to analyse them myself, or to thresh out the wheat from the chaff like the holy doctor Saint Augustine, or Ancius Boethius, or Bishop Thomas Bradwardyne of Oxford University, but whether God's commendable foreknowledge constrains me necessarily to do a thing – which I could call simple necessity – or else, whether I have a free choice to do this thing or not, even though God knows what I am going to do before I do it, or whether God knows only the things that I might do, although I am not bound to do all of them – I won't go into any of this, for my tale is about a cockerel. Unfortunately, Chauntecleer took his wife's advice, if not her laxatives. He disregarded his dream and went strutting about in his yard. Women's advice is often wrong. A woman's advice brought us sorrow at the very beginning and caused Adam to have to leave Paradise, where he had been very comfortable and happy. But since I don't know whom I might offend if I disparage the advice of women, I will quickly move on. I'm only joking. Read what other authors have said on this subject. These are the cockerel's words, not mine. I see no harm in women, myself.

Pertelote lay basking happily in the sun, in the dirt, alongside all her sisters. Chauntecleer, without a care in the world, sang as happily as a mermaid – for Physiologus tells us for certain that mermaids are fine singers and enjoy singing. And it happened that, as Chauntecleer glanced at a butterfly that was sitting on a weed, he suddenly became aware of the fox. At once, he lost all inclination to cry cock-a-doodle-doo but instead yelled cok, cok, cok and recoiled like a man who has been terrified by something.

Naturally, an animal's instinct is to run away from his predator when he sees it, even though he may never have seen one like it before, but the fox said: 'Noble Sir, alas, where are you going? Are you afraid of me? I am your friend. If I intend you any harm or suffering may the devil take me. I haven't come to worry you but only to hear you crow. Your voice is as beautiful as that of an angel in heaven and you have more feeling for music than had Boethius, or any other singer. Your esteemed father – God bless his soul – and also your mother, have visited my house, much to my great delight



and I am very anxious that I should pay you a similar complement. Whatever men may say of singing, I would maintain – I'll wager my very eyesight on it! – that, except for you, I have never heard anyone sing as well as your father did in the morning; he sang truly from the heart. And to make his voice even stronger and louder, he would close both his eyes, stand on the tips of his toes and stretch out his slender neck as far as it would go.

'No man anywhere, in any district, could surpass your father in singing, nor in intelligence. I have read amongst the verses in *Burnel the Ass* how there was a cockerel who, because he had been kicked by a priest's son when he was young and incautious, made that priest lose his benefice as a result of it. But certainly, there is no comparison between that cockerel's subtlety and your father's wisdom and discretion. So sing for me, Sir. By Saint Charity, let's see if you're as good as your father.'

Chauntecleer began to beat his wings; he was completely taken in by all the flattery and failed to see the treachery that was taking place. Alas, you lords, there are many treacherous flatterers in your courts and many sycophants who often please you more, by my faith, than a person who tells you the truth. Read Ecclesiastes on this subject of flattery and beware of it, my lords.

Chaunticleer stood high upon his toes, stretched out his neck, shut his eyes and began to give a marvellous crow when Russell the fox rushed out, seized him by the throat, threw him over his back and made off steadily and measuredly towards the woods, for there was nobody running after him.

Oh destiny, which may not be avoided! Alas, that Chauntecleer flew from the beams of the henhouse! Alas that Pertelote made light of dreams!

This all happened on a Friday. Oh Venus, goddess of sensuality, since Chauntecleer was your servant and did his utmost to honour you, laboured tirelessly in your service and more for pleasure than to populate the world, I should imagine, why do you allow him to die on your own special day? Oh Geoffrey de Vinsauf, dear sovereign master – who when your worthy King Richard was killed by an arrow composed a beautiful lament for him – why cannot I now emulate your eloquence and erudition in castigating Friday, as you did? – for King Richard I was killed on a Friday. Certainly, the screaming and wailing made by the ladies of Troy when it was captured was not equal to the noise made by all the hens in the yard when they saw what had happened to Chauntecleer. Pertelote screamed louder than did Hasdrubal's wife when her husband was slain, Carthage burned by the Romans and she was so full of anger and sorrow that she ran wilfully into the flames and immolated herself. Oh woeful hens, you cry like the senators' wives when Nero burned the city of Rome! For Nero killed all his senators without mercy. But I will return to my tale.

This poor widow and her two daughters heard all their hens making a terrible noise, rushed outside and saw the fox carrying away Chauntecleer.

'Oi!' they cried. 'Help! Oh no, a fox! Oi! Hey there!' and began to run madly after the thief. Men with sticks joined in the chase, Talbot, Garland and Malkin with large sticks in their hands, and Collie the dog. All the cows, calves and even the pigs scattered in fright, bellowing and snorting like fiends in hell as the dogs barked wildly and the men shouted and the women as well, and the ducks quacked and squealed as though they were about to be slaughtered. The geese flew over the trees, and a swarm of bees came out of their hive. The noise was dreadful! God bless us, even Jack Straw and his followers, during the Peasant's Revolt, never shouted so shrilly nor made such a noise as was directed that day towards this fox. Brass trumpets and wooden bugles, hunting horns and bone pipes were blown and pooped, and everyone shrieked and whooped and hooted until it seemed as though the heavens would come crashing down. But listen, everybody. Lo! How fortune can suddenly change.

This cock, lying upon the fox's back, despite his terror, began to speak: 'Sir, if I were you, I would shout (may God help me) "go back, you arrogant peasants! I hope a plague falls on you! I've now reached the edge of this woodland and you can wager whatever you like on the matter, but this cock is going to stay with me! I'm going to eat him."'

'That's a good idea,' replied the fox, and as he said this, the cock broke free from the fox's mouth and with a desperate flapping, flew high up into a tree. When the fox saw that he had lost him: 'Alas!' he cried, 'Oh Chauntecleer, alas! I have offended you! I made you fearful when I seized you and carried you away from the yard, but Sir, I did it with no malicious intent. Come down and I will tell you why I did it. I will tell you the truth, so God help me.'

‘No,’ replied Chauntecleer, ‘for then both you and I would deserve my curse, since you’ve already tricked me once. You won’t get me to crow for you again with my eyes closed and my neck stretched out. Anyone who shuts his eyes when he ought to be looking carefully around doesn’t deserve to prosper, and may God see to it that he doesn’t!’

‘No, and may God curse anyone who opens his mouth when he should keep it shut!’ replied the fox.

So you see, this is what happens when you allow yourself to fall prey to flattery. But all those of you who think that this tale is just a foolish fable about a fox, a cock and a hen, be aware of the moral of the story, good men. Saint Paul wrote that all that is written is there for our instruction. Take the heart of the matter, and let the rest blow away like chaff in the wind.

Now God, if it is your desire, make us all into good men and grant us heaven at last. Amen.

Epilogue

‘Sir Nuns’ Priest,’ said our host. ‘God bless the seat of your pants and each one of your balls! This was a merry tale of Chauntecleer. By my faith, if you were not of the clergy I bet you would be a proper breeding-fowl, having hens to keep you satisfied to the number of seven times seventeen and more – yes! Do you see the muscles on this noble priest, his great neck and manly chest? His eyes are like a sparrow-hawk’s! His complexion is like an artist’s pigments, and there’s no need to augment them with colours from Portugal! May fortune smile upon you, sir, for this tale.’

Then, with a merry laugh, he turned to another of the pilgrims.