

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

The Nun's Priest's Tale

The Mock-Heroic Style. Writers use a **mock-heroic style** when they write about trivial matters in a style that would be more appropriate for great and important events. The disparity between content and style results in comic effects. For example, imagine describing a vain young man in front of his mirror as if he were participating in a solemn, religious ritual.¹ With total devotion and concentration and hardly breathing at all, Tom carefully applied the comb to the curl that had violated the upper part of his ear . . .

In "The Nun's Priest's Tale," Chaucer uses the mock-heroic style to transform a popular animal fable into a masterpiece of comedy. He describes the barnyard interactions of animals as if he were writing an epic poem. Among the epic elements he borrows are the hero's elaborate boasts, the vivid accounts of battles, and the intervention of supernatural forces. To make his tale even more ridiculous, he includes barnyard debates about controversial issues of the day: fate versus free will and woman as the source of man's misfortune. The contrast between these lofty concerns and the animal debaters is ludicrous but appealing.

Chaucer casts a rooster and hen as his romantic leads, presenting them as if they were the lord and lady of a castle. As master of all he surveys, the rooster Chanticleer is pompous, naive, and thoroughly charming. He struts and preaches, displaying his male ego and sprinkling his conversation with learned classical allusions. Meanwhile, his hen-wife Pertelote is a comically practical heroine. She gives her lord and master advice about his health and, for all his strutting, wields emotional power over him.

The mock-heroic style works best when ridicule is tempered with affection. Chaucer certainly succeeds in this respect. His fondness for his characters, even at their most absurd, comes through in the pleasant and cheerful tone of the tale.

The Nun's Priest's Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

0 Once, long ago, there dwell a poor old widow
5 In a small cottage, by a little meadow
Beside a grove and standing in a dale.
10 This widow-woman of whom I tell my tale
Since the sad day when last she was a wife
15 Had led a very patient, simple life.
Little she had in capital or rent,
20 But still, by making do with what God sent,
She kept herself and her two daughters going.
25 Three hefly sows—no more—were all her showing,
Sooty her hall, her kitchen melancholy,
30 And there she ate full many a slender meal:
There was no *sauce piquante*¹ to spice her veal,
35 No dainty morsel ever passed her throat,
According to her cloth she cut her coat.
40 Repletion² never left her in disquiet
And all her physic was a temperate diet,
45 Hard work for exercise and heart's content.
And rich man's gout did nothing to prevent
50 Her dancing, apoplexy³ struck her not;
She drank no wine, nor white nor red had got.
55 Her board was mostly served with white and black,
Milk and brown bread, in which she found no lack;
60 Broiled bacon or an egg or two were common.
She was in fact a sort of dairy-woman.
65 She had a yard that was enclosed about
By a stockade and a dry ditch without,
70 In which she kept a cock called Chanticleer.
In all the land for crowing he'd no peer:
75 His voice was jollier than the organ blowing
In church on Sundays, he was great at crowing.
80 Far, far more regular than any clock
Or abbey bell the crowing of this cock.
85 The equinoctial wheel and its position⁴
At each ascent he knew by intuition:
90 At every hour—fifteen degrees of movement—
He crowed so well there could be no improvement.

1. sauce piquante
(pē' kant): French for a pleasantly sharp sauce, used for fancy and expensive meals.

2. Repletion (rī plē' shən)
n.: The state of having eaten too much.

3. apoplexy: An old-fashioned term for a stroke.

4. equinoctial . . .
position: Chaucer and his contemporaries accounted for changes in the positions of stars and planets by imagining that the heavens circled the earth once a day, moving fifteen degrees each hour.

40 His comb was redder than fine coral, tall
 And battlemented like a castle wall,
 His bill was black and shone as bright as jet,
 Like azure were his legs and they were set
 On azure toes with nails of lily white,
 Like burnished gold his feathers, flanning bright,
 45 This gentlecock was master in some measure
 Of seven hens, all there to do his pleasure.
 They were his sisters and his paramours,
 Colored like him in all particulars;
 50 She with the loveliest dyes upon her throat
 Was known as gracious Lady Pertelote.
 Courteous she was, discreet and debonaire,
 Companionable too, and took such care
 In her deportment, since she was seven days old
 She held the heart of Chanticleer controlled,
 55 Locked up securely in her every limb:
 O such happiness his love to him!
 And such a joy it was to hear them sing,
 As when the glorious sun began to spring,
 In sweet accord *My love is far from lands*⁵,
 60 —For in those far off days I understand
 All birds and animals could speak and sing.
 Now it befell, as dawn began to spring,
 When Chanticleer and Pertelote and all
 His wives were perched in this poor widow's hall
 65 (Fair Pertelote was next him on the perch),
 This Chanticleer began to groan and lurch
 Like someone sorely troubled by a dream,
 And Pertelote who heard him roar and scream
 Was quite aghast and said, "O dearest heart,
 70 What's ailing you? Why do you groan and start?
 Fie, what a sleeper! What a noise to make!"
 "Madam," he said, "I beg you not to take
 Offense, but by the Lord I had a dream
 So terrible just now I had to scream:
 75 I still can feel my heart racing from fear.
 God turn my dream to good and guard all here.
 And keep my body out of durance vile!⁶
 I dreamt that roaming up and down a while
 Within our yard I saw a kind of beast,
 80 A sort of hound that tried or seemed at least
 To try and seize me . . . would have killed me dead!
 His color was a blend of yellow and red,
 His ears and tail were tipped with sable fur
 Unlike the rest: he was a russet cur.
 85 Small was his snout, his eyes were glowing bright.

5. *My love is far from lands*: The refrain of a popular song.

6. *durance vile*: Long imprisonment.

It was enough to make one die of fright.
 That was no doubt what made me groan and swoon."
 "For shame," she said, "you timorous poltroon!"⁷
 Alas, what cowardice! By God above,
 90 You've forfeited my heart and lost my love.
 I cannot love a coward, come what may.
 For certainly, whatever we may say,
 All women long—and O that it might be!—
 For husbands tough, dependable and free,
 95 Secret, discreet, no niggard,⁸ not a fool
 That boasts and then will find his courage cool
 At every trifling thing. By God above,
 How dare you say for shame, and to your love,
 That anything at all was to be feared?
 100 Have you no manly heart to match your beard?
 And can a dream reduce you to such terror?
 Dreams are a vanity, God knows, pure error.
 Dreams are engendered in the too-replete
 From vapors in the belly, which compete
 With others, too abundant, swollen tight.
 105 "No doubt the redness in your dream tonight
 Comes from the superfluity and force
 Of the red choler in your blood. Of course,
 That is what puts a dreamer in the dread
 Of crimsoned arrows, fires flanning red,
 110 Of great red monsters making as to fight him,
 And big red whelps and little ones to bite him:
 Just so the black and melancholy vapors
 Will set a sleeper shrieking, cutting capers
 And swearing that black bears, black bulls as well,
 115 Or blackest fiends are haling him to Hell.
 And there are other vapors that I know
 That on a sleeping man will work their woe,
 But I'll pass on as lightly as I can.
 120 "Take Cato⁹ now, that was so wise a man,
 Did he not say, 'Take no account of dreams'?
 Now, sir," she said, "on flying from these beams,
 For love of God do take some laxative:
 Upon my soul that's the advice to give
 125 For melancholy cholera: let me urge
 You free yourself from vapors with a purge.
 And that you may have no excuse to tarry
 By saying 'this town has no apothecary,
 I shall myself instruct you and prescribe
 Herbs that will cure all vapors of that tribe,
 130 Herbs from our very farmyard! You will find
 Their natural property is to unbind

7. *poltroon* (pəl trōn)
 n.: Coward.

8. *niggard*: Stingy person.

9. *Cato*: A Roman statesman and philosopher (95–46 B.C.) with a reputation for wisdom.

And purge you well beneath and well above.
Now don't forget it, dear, for God's own love!
Your face is choleric and shows distension:

135 Be careful lest the sun in his ascension
Should catch you full of humors,¹⁰ hot and many.
And if he does, my dear, I'll lay a penny
It means a bout of fever or a breath

140 Of tertian ague.¹¹ You may catch your death.
"Worms for a day or two I'll have to give
As a digestive, then your laxative,
Centuary, fumitory, caper-spurge

145 And hellebore will make a splendid purge;
And then there's laurel or the blackhorn berry,
Ground-ivy too that makes our yard so merry;
Peck them right up, my dear, and swallow whole.
Be happy, husband, by your father's soul!
Don't be afraid of dreams, I'll say no more."

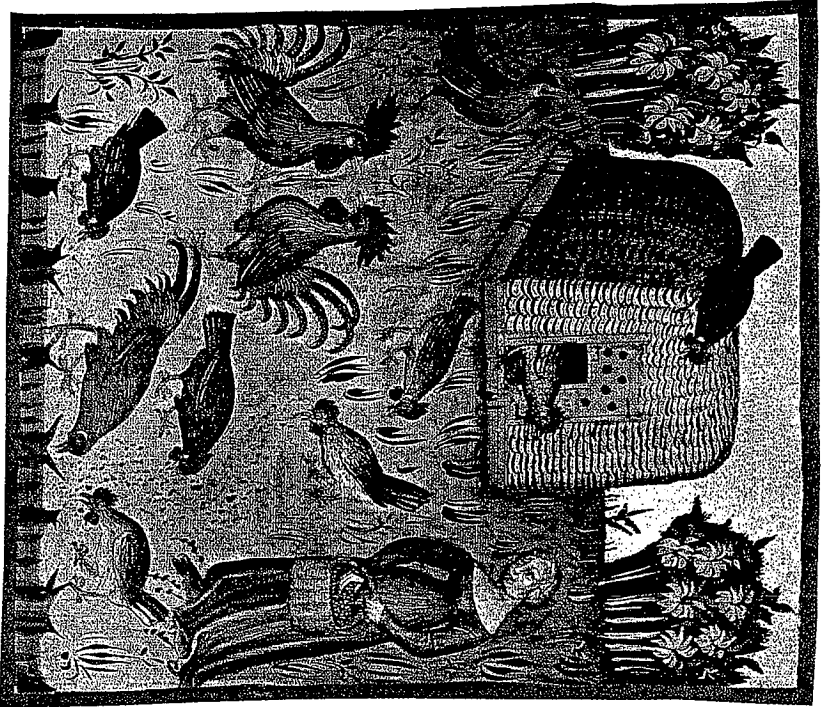
150 "Madam," he said, "I thank you for your lore,
But with regard to Cato all the same,
His wisdom has, no doubt, a certain fame,
But though he said that we should take no heed
Of dreams, by God in ancient books I read
Of many a man of more authority
Than ever Cato was, believe you me,
Who say the very opposite is true
And prove their theories by experience too.
Dreams have quite often been significations
As well of triumphs as of tribulations
That people undergo in this our life.
This needs no argument at all, dear wife,
The proof is all too manifest indeed.

165 "One of the greatest authors one can read
Says thus: there were two comrades once who went
On pilgrimage, sincere in their intent.
And as it happened they had reached a town
Where such a throng was milling up and down
And yet so scanty the accommodation,
They could not find themselves a habitation,
No, not a cottage that could lodge them both.
And so they separated, very loath,
Under constraint of this necessity
And each went off to find some hostelry,
And lodge whatever way his luck might fall.

175 "The first of them found refuge in a stall
Down in a yard with oxen and a plow.
His friend found lodging for himself somehow
Elsewhere, by accident or destiny,

10. humors: People in Chaucer's time believed that bodily fluids called humors were responsible for one's health and disposition. An excess of the fluid called yellow bile resulted in a choleric, or quick-tempered, personality. In lines 108 and 125, Chaucer seems to use the word *choleric* as a synonym for the term *humor*.

11. tertian ague (*tur* shan a' gyōō): A malarial fever.



WOMAN FEEDING CHICKENS
FROM AN ITALIAN MANUSCRIPT (c. 1385)
Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna

180 Which governs all of us and equally.

185 "Now it so happened, long ere it was day,
This fellow had a dream, and as he lay
In bed it seemed he heard his comrade call,
'Help! I am lying in an ox's stall

190 And shall tonight be murdered as I lie.
Help me, dear brother, help or I shall die!
Come in all haste!' Such were the words he spoke:
The dreamer, lost in terror, then awoke.
But once awake he paid it no attention,
Turned over and dismissed it as invention,
It was a dream, he thought, a fantasy.

195 And twice he dreamt this dream successively.
"Yet a third time his comrade came again,
Or seemed to come, and said, 'I have been slain.
Look, look! my wounds are bleeding wide and deep,
Rise early in the morning, break your sleep

And go to the west gate. You there shall see
A cart all loaded up with dung,' said he,
'And in that dung my body has been hidden.

200 Boldly arrest that cart as you are bidden.
It was my money that they killed me for.'

'He told him every detail, sighing sore,
And pitiful in feature, pale of hue.

205 This dream, believe me, Madam, turned out true:
For in the dawn, as soon as it was light,

He went to where his friend had spent the night
And when he came upon the cattle-stall

He looked about him and began to call.
''The innkeeper, appearing thereupon,

210 Quickly gave answer, 'Sir, your friend has gone.
He left the town a little after dawn.'

The man began to feel suspicious, drawn
By memories of his dream—the western gate,

215 The dung-cart—off he went, he would not wait,
Towards the western entry. There he found,

Seemingly on its way to dung some ground,
A dung-cart loaded on the very plan

Described so closely by the murdered man.
So he began to shout courageously

220 For right and vengeance on the felony.
'My friend's been killed! There's been a foul attack,

He's in that cart and gaping on his back!
Fetch the authorities, get the sheriff down

225 —Whosever job it is to run the town—
Help! My companion's murdered, sent to glory!'

'What need I add to finish off the story?
People ran out and cast the cart to ground,

230 And in the middle of the dung they found
The murdered man. The corpse was fresh and new.

'O blessed God, that art so just and true,
Thus thou revealest murder! As we say,

235 'Murder will out.' We see it day by day.
Murder's a foul, abominable treason,

So loathsome to God's justice, to God's reason,
He will not suffer its concealment. True,

Things may lie hidden for a year or two,
But still 'Murder will out,' that's my conclusion.

240 'All the town officers in great confusion
Seized on the carter and they gave him hell,

And then they racked the innkeeper as well,
And both confessed. And then they took the wrecks

And there and then they hanged them by their necks.
'By this we see that dreams are to be dreaded.

245 And in the self-same book I find embedded,
Right in the very chapter after this
(I'm not inventing, as I hope for bliss)

The story of two men who started out
To cross the sea—for merchandise no doubt—

250 But as the winds were contrary they waited,
It was a pleasant town, I should have stated,
Merrily grouped about the haven-side.

A few days later with the evening tide
The wind veered round so as to suit them best:

255 They were delighted and they went to rest
Meaning to sail next morning early. Well,
To one of them a miracle befell.

'This man as he lay sleeping, it would seem,
Just before dawn had an astounding dream.

260 He thought a man was standing by his bed
Commanding him to wait, and thus he said:
'If you set sail tomorrow as you intend

You will be drowned. My tale is at an end.'
'He woke and told his friend what had occurred

265 And begged him that the journey be deferred
At least a day, implored him not to start.
But his companion, lying there apart,

Began to laugh and treat him to derision.¹²
'I'm not afraid,' he said, 'of any vision,
To let it interfere with my affairs:

270 A straw for all your dreamings and your scares,
Dreams are just empty nonsense, merest japes:¹³

Why, people dream all day of owls and apes,
All sorts of trash that can't be understood,
Things that have never happened and never could.

275 But as I see you mean to stay behind
And miss the tide for wilful sloth of mind,
God knows I'm sorry for it, but good day!

280 And so he took his leave and went his way.
'And yet, before they'd covered half the trip
—I don't know what went wrong—there was a rip

And by some accident the ship went down,
Her bottom rent,¹⁴ all hands aboard to drown
In sight of all the vessels at her side.

285 That had put out upon the self-same tide.
'So, my dear Pertelote, if you discern
The force of these examples, you may learn

One never should be careless about dreams,
For, undeniably, I say it seems
That many are a sign of trouble breeding.

290 'Now, take St. Kenelm's life which I've been reading:

¹². derision (dt rízh' an)
n.: Contempt or ridicule.

¹³. japes: jokes.

¹⁴. Rent: Torn.

300 He was Kenulphus' son, the noble King
Of Mercia. Now, St. Kenelm dreamt a thing
Shortly before they murdered him one day.
He saw his murder in a dream, I say.

305 His nurse expounded it and gave her reasons
On every point and warned him against treasons
But as the saint was only seven years old
All that she said about it left him cold.

310 He was so holy how could visions hurt?
"By God, I willingly would give my shirt
To have you read his legend as I've read it;
And, Madam Pertelote, upon my credit,
Macrobius wrote of dreams and can explain us
The vision of young Scipio Africanus,"¹⁵
And he affirms that dreams can give a due
Warnings of things that later on come true.

315 "And then there's the Old Testament—a manual
Well worth your study: see the *Book of Daniel*.
Did Daniel think a dream was vanity?
Read about Joseph too and you will see
That many dreams—I do not say that all—
Give cognizance of what is to befall.

320 "Look at Lord Pharaoh, king of Egypt! Look
At what befell his butler and his cook.
Did not their visions have a certain force?
But those who study history of course
Meet many dreams that set them wondering.
"What about Croesus too, the Lydian king,
Who dreamt that he was sitting in a tree,
Meaning he would be hanged? It had to be.

325 "Or take Andromache, great Hector's wife,¹⁶
The day on which he was to lose his life
She dreamt about, the very night before,
And realized that if Hector went to war
He would be lost that very day in battle.
She warned him: he dismissed it all as prattle
And sallied forth to fight, being self-willed,
And there he met Achilles and was killed.
The tale is long and somewhat overdrawn,
And anyhow it's very nearly dawn,

330 So let me say in very brief conclusion
My dream undoubtedly foretells confusion,
It bodes me ill, I say. And, furthermore,
Upon your laxatives I set no store.
For they are venomous. I've suffered by them
Often enough before and I defy them.
"And now, let's talk of fun and stop all this.

15. Scipio Africanus
(sɪp' i ɒ aɪ' rɪ kə' nʌs):
A famous Roman general
(237-183 B.C.).

16. Andromache (an
dɹɑm' ə keɪ) . . . wife: She
was the wife of the
greatest warrior in Troy,
Hector, at the time of the
Trojan War.

340 Dear Madam, as I hope for Heaven's bliss,
Of one thing God has sent me plentiful grace,
For when I see the beauty of your face,
That scarlet loveliness about your eyes,

345 All thought of terror and confusion dies,
For it's as certain as the Creed, I know,
Mulier est hominis confusio
(A Latin tag, dear Madam, meaning this:

350 "Woman is man's delight and all his bliss").
For when at night I feel your feathery side,
Although perforce I cannot take a ride
Because, alas, our perch was made too narrow,
Delight and solace fill me to the marrow
And I defy all visions and all dreams!"

355 And with that word he flew down from the beams,
For it was day, and down his hens flew all,
And with a chuck he gave the troupe a call
For he had found a seed upon the floor.
Royal he was, he was afraid no more.
He feathered Pertelote in wanton play
And trod her twenty times ere prime of day.
Grim as a lion's was his manly frown

360 As on his toes he sauntered up and down:
He scarcely digned to set his foot to ground
And every time a seed of corn was found
He gave a chuck, and up his wives ran all.
Thus royal as a prince who strides his hall
Leave we this Chanticleer engaged on feeding
And pass to the adventure that was breeding.

365 Now when the month in which the world began,
March, the first month, when God created man,
Was over, and the thirty-second day
Thereafter ended, on the third of May
It happened that Chanticleer in all his pride,
His seven wives attendant at his side,
Cast his-eyes upward to the blazing sun,
Which in the sign of *Taurus* then had run,

370 His twenty-one degrees and somewhat more,
And knew by nature and no other lore
That it was nine o'clock. With blissful voice
He crew triumphantly and said, "Rejoice,
Behold the sun! The sun is up, my seven,
Look, it has climbed forty degrees in heaven,
Forty degrees and one in fact, by this.
Dear Madam Pertelote, my earthly bliss,

375 Look at those blissful birds and how they sing!
Look at those pretty flowers, how they spring!

385 Solace and revel fill my heart!¹⁷ He laughed.
But in that moment Fate let fly her shaft:

Ever the latter end of joy is woe.
God knows that worldly joy is swift to go.
A rhetorician¹⁷ with a flair for style

390 Could chronicle this maxim in his file
Of Notable Remarks with safe conviction.
Then let the wise give ear: this is no fiction
My story is as true, I undertake,

As that of good Sir Lancelot du Lake!¹⁸
Who held all women in such high esteem.
Let me return full circle to my theme.
A coal-tipped fox of sly iniquity!¹⁹

395 That had been lurking round the grove for three
Long years, that very night burst through and passed
Stockade and hedge, as Providence forecast,
Into the yard where Chanticleer the Fair

400 Was wont, with all his ladies, to repair.
Still, in a bed of cabbages, he lay
Until about the middle of the day
Watching the cock and waiting for his cue,

405 As all these homicides so gladly do
That lie about in wait to murder men.
O false assassin, lurking in thy den!
O new Iscariot, new Ganeloni!

And O Greek Sinon,²⁰ thou whose treachery won
Troy town and brought it utterly to sorrow!
O Chanticleer, accused be that morrow
That brought thee to the yard from thy high beams!

410 Thou hadst been warned, and truly, by thy dreams

17. rhetorician (ret' e rish' an) n.: A person skilled in public speaking or writing.

18. Sir Lancelot du Lake: The most celebrated of King Arthur's knights of the Round Table.

19. iniquity (i nik' wi te) n.: Wickedness.

20. Iscariot . . . Ganelon . . . Sinon: Each of these men was famous for betrayal. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus Christ; Ganelon betrayed Charlemagne's greatest knight, Roland; and Sinon convinced King Priam to bring the Trojan horse, filled with Greek troops, into Troy.



THE MAN'S PRIEST
DETAIL FROM THE ELLESWERE
MANUSCRIPT
The Huntington Library, San Marino,
California

415 That this would be a perilous day for thee.
But that which God's foreknowledge can foresee

Must needs occur, as certain men of learning
Have said. Ask any scholar of discerning:
He'll say the Schools are filled with altercation

420 On this vexed matter of predestination!²¹
Long banded by a hundred thousand men.
How can I sift it to the bottom then?
The Holy Doctor St. Augustine shines

425 In this, and there is Bishop Bradwardine's
Authority. Boethius²² too, decreeing
Whether the fact of God's divine foreseeing
Constrains me to perform a certain act

—And by "constrant" I mean the simple fact
Of mere compulsion by necessity—
430 Or whether a free choice is granted me
To do a given act or not to do it

Though, ere it was accomplished, God foreknew it.
Or whether Providence is not so stringent
And merely makes necessity contingent.

435 But I decline discussion of the matter:
My tale is of a cock and of the clatter
That came of following his wife's advice
To walk about his yard on the precise

440 Morning after the dream of which I told.
O woman's counsel is so often cold!
A woman's counsel brought us first to woe,
Made Adam out of Paradise to go

445 Where he had been so merry, so well at ease.
But, for I know not whom it may displease
If I suggest that women are to blame,
Pass over that: I only speak in game.

450 Read the authorities to know about
What has been said of women: you'll find out.
These are the cock's words, and not mine, I'm giving:
I think no harm of any woman living.

455 Merrily in her dust-bath in the sand
Lay Pertelote. Her sisters were at hand
Basking in sunlight. Chanticleer sang free,
More merrily than a mermaid in the sea

(For *Physiologus*²³ reports the thing
And says how well and merrily they sing).
And so it happened as he cast his eye
Towards the cabbage at a butterfly

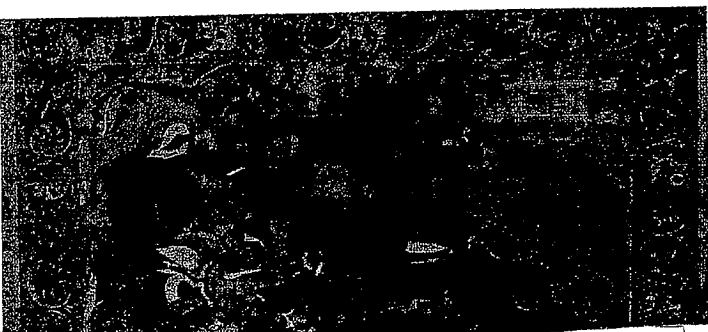
460 It fell upon the fox there, lying low.
Come woe was all inclination then to crow.
"Cok cok," he cried, giving a sudden start.

21. predestination (p: des' to nah' shan) n.: The idea that God arranges beforehand everything that will happen.

22. Bishop Bradwardine's . . . Boethius' (bo e' the asj: Bishop Bradwardine was a well-known theologian of Chaucer's time. Boethius (A.D. 480-524) was a famous Roman philosopher.

23. Physiologus: A book on nature written in Latin meter.

As one who feels a terror at his heart,
 For natural instinct teaches beasts to flee
 The moment they perceive an enemy.
 Though they had never met with it before.
 This Chanticleer was shaken to the core
 And would have fled. The fox was quick to say
 However, "Sir! Whither so fast away?
 Are you afraid of me, that am your friend?
 A fend, or worse, I should be, to intend
 You harm, or practice villainy upon you:
 Dear sir, I was not even spying on you!
 Truly I came to do no other thing
 Than just to lie and listen to you sing.
 You have as merry a voice as God has given
 To any angel in the courts of Heaven:
 To that you add a musical sense as strong
 As had Boethius who was skilled in song.
 My Lord your Father (God receive his soul!),
 Your mother too—how courtly, what controul!—
 Have honored my poor house, to my great ease:
 And you, sir, too, I should be glad to please.
 For, when it comes to singing, I'll say this
 [Else may these eyes of mine be barred from bliss],
 There never was a singer I would rather
 Have heard at dawn than your respected father.
 All that he sang came welling from his soul
 And how he put his voice under controul!
 The pains he took to keep his eyes tight shut
 In concentration—then the tip-toe strut,
 The slender neck stretched out, the delicate beak;
 No singer could approach him in technique
 Or rival him in song, still less surpass.
 I've read the story in *Burnel the Ass*,²⁴
 Among some other verses, of a cock
 Whose leg in youth was broken by a knock
 A clergyman's son had given him, and for this
 He made the father lose his benefice.
 But certainly there's no comparison
 Between the subtlety of such an one
 And the discretion of your father's art
 And wisdom. Oh, for charity of heart,
 Can you not emulate your sire and sing?"
 This Chanticleer began to beat a wing
 As one incapable of smelling treason,
 So wholly had this flattery ravished reason.
 Alas, my lords! there's many a sycophant²⁵
 And flatterer that fill your courts with cant



CHAUCER RECITING THOMAS &
 CRESSIDA BEFORE A COURT GATHERING
 (FRONTISPIECE)
 Corpus Christi College

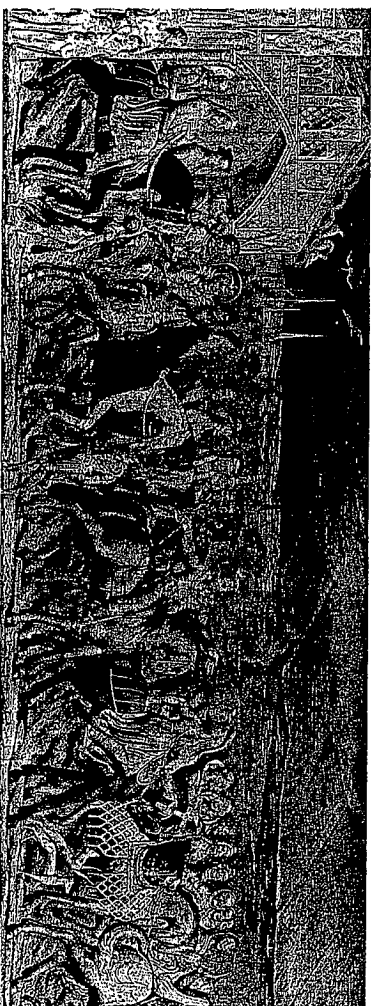
24. *Burnel the Ass*: A twelfth-century poem in which a rooster gains revenge after being mistreated by a priest's son.

25. *sycophant* (sik' a fanl) n.: A person who seeks favor by flattery influential people.

And give more pleasure with their zeal forsooth
 Than he who speaks in soberness and truth.
 Read what *Ecclesiasticus*²⁶ records
 Of flatterers. 'Ware treachery, my lords!
 This Chanticleer stood high upon his toes,
 He stretched his neck, his eyes began to close,
 His beak to open: with his eyes shut tight
 He then began to sing with all his might.
 Sir Russel Fox then leapt to the attack,
 Grabbing his gorge he flung him o'er his back
 And off he bore him to the woods, the brute,
 And for the moment there was no pursuit.
 O Destiny that may not be evaded!
 Alas that Chanticleer had so paraded!
 Alas that he had flown down from the beams!
 O that his wife took no account of dreams!
 And on a Friday too to risk their necks!
 O Venus, goddess of the joys of sex,
 Since Chanticleer thy mysteries professed
 And in thy service always did his best,
 And more for pleasure than to multiply
 His kind, on thine own day is he to die?
 O Geoffrey, thou my dear and sovereign master²⁷
 Who, when they brought King Richard to disaster
 And shot him dead, lamented so his death,
 Would that I had thy skill, thy gracious breath,
 To chide a Friday half so well as you!
 (For he was killed upon a Friday too.)
 Then I could fashion you a rhapsody
 For Chanticleer in dread and agony.
 Sure never such a cry or lamentation

26. *Ecclesiasticus*: Not Ecclesiastes, but a book of proverbs included with the Apocrypha in the Authorized Version of the Bible.

27. O Geoffrey . . .
 master: Geoffrey de Vinsaul, twelfth-century author of a book on rhetoric.



540 Was made by ladies of high Trojan station,
 When Ilium fell and Pyrrhus with his sword
 Grabbed Priam by the beard, their king and lord,
 And slew him there as the Aeneid tells,²⁸
 As what was uttered by those hens. Their yells
 545 Surpassed them all in palpitating fear
 When they beheld the rape of Chanticleer.
 Dame Pertelote emitted sovereign shrieks
 That echoed up in anguish to the peaks
 550 Louder than those extorted from the wife
 Of Hasdrubal,²⁹ when he had lost his life
 And Carthage all in flame and ashes lay.
 She was so full of torment and dismay
 That in the very flames she chose her part
 And burnt to ashes with a steadfast heart.
 555 O woeful hens, louder your shrieks and higher
 Than those of Roman matrons when the fire
 Consumed their husbands, senators of Rome,
 When Nero burnt their city and their home,
 Beyond a doubt that Nero was their bale!³⁰
 560 Now let me turn again to tell my tale:
 This blessed widow and her daughters two
 Heard all these hens in clamor and halloo
 And, rushing to the door at all this shrieking,
 565 They saw the fox towards the covert streaking.
 They saw the fox towards the covert streaking,
 And, on his shoulder, Chanticleer stretched flat.
 "Look, look!" they cried, "O mercy, look at that!
 Hal! Hal! the fox!" and after him they ran,
 And stick in hand ran many a serving man;
 570 Ran Coll our dog, ran Talbot, Bran and Shaggy,
 And with a distaff in her hand ran Maggie,
 Ran cow and calf and ran the very hogs
 In terror at the barking of the dogs:
 575 The men and women shouted, ran and cursed,
 They ran so hard they thought their hearts would burst,
 They yelled like fiends in Hell, ducks left the water
 Quacking and flapping as on point of slaughter,
 580 Up flew the geese in terror over the trees,
 Out of the hive came forth the swarm of bees:
 So hideous was the noise—God bless us all,
 Jack Straw and all his followers in their braw!³¹
 585 Were never half so shrill, for all their noise,
 When they were murdering those Flemish boys,
 As that day's hue and cry upon the fox.
 They grabbed up trumpets made of brass and box,
 Of horn and bone, on which they blew and pooped,
 And therewithal they shouted and they whooped

28. **Sure never . . .**
Aeneid tells: A
 reference to the
 destruction of Troy as
 described in the Roman
 poet Virgil's Aeneid.

29. **Hasdrubal** (haz' drub
 bal): A Carthaginian
 general.

30. **bale:** Evil, harm.

31. **Jack Straw . . .**
brawl: Jack Straw was
 one of the leaders of the
 Peasants' Revolt (1381).

590 So that it seemed the very heavens would fall.
 And now, good people, pay attention all.
 See how Dame Fortune quickly changes side
 And robs her enemy of hope and pride!
 595 This cock that lay upon the fox's back
 In all his dread contrived to give a quack
 And said, "Sir Fox, if I were you, as God's
 My witness, I would round upon these clods
 And shout, 'Turn back, you saucy bumpkins all!
 600 A very pestilence upon you fall!
 Now that I have in safety reached the wood
 Do what you like, the cock is mine for good;
 I'll eat him there in spite of every one.'"
 605 The fox replying, "Faith, it shall be done!"
 Opened his mouth and spoke. The nimble bird,
 Breaking away upon the uttered word,
 Flew high into the tree-tops on the spot.
 And when the fox perceived where he had got,
 610 "Alas," he cried, "alas, my Chanticleer,
 I've done you grievous wrong, indeed I fear
 I must have frightened you: I grabbed too hard
 When I caught hold and took you from the yard.
 But, sir, I meant no harm, don't be offended,
 Come down and I'll explain what I intended;
 615 So help me God I'll tell the truth—on oath!
 "No," said the cock, "and curses on us both,
 And first on me if I were such a dunc
 As let you fool me oftener than once.
 Never again, for all your flattering lies,
 620 You'll coax a song to make me blink my eyes;
 And as for those who blink when they should look,
 God blot them from his everlasting Book!"
 "Nay, rather," said the fox, "his plagues be flung
 On all who chatter that should hold their tongue."
 625 Lo, such it is not to be on your guard
 Against the flatterers of the world, or yard,
 And if you think my story is absurd,
 A foolish trifle of a beast and bird,
 630 A fable of a fox, a cock, a hen,
 Take hold upon the moral, gentlemen.
 St. Paul himself, a saint of great discerning,
 Says that all things are written for our learning;
 So take the grain and let the chaff be still.
 And, gracious Father, if it be thy will
 As saith my Savior, make us all good men,
 And bring us to his heavenly bliss.
 Amen.