



DEBATE ON DREAM IN CHAUCER'S "THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE"

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ABSTRACT

Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale", a widely-recognized comic narrative, works on varied scholastic issues and sustains its ingenuity by spotlighting both medieval and modern aspects. As a classic instance of Chaucer's mature work the bestiary comments on diverse themes such as married love, learning from everyday life, medieval debate on dreams, man's relation to fortune and free will. In it, Chaucer amalgamates the theological idea of dream with the scientific one—the two prominent origins of dream. The author has cunningly employed the dream allegory here to foreground some deeper truth, i.e., the human ways of failing to see what is wrong. Through this dream-debate, Chaucer illuminates his comic vision towards life, his tempered handling of familial domesticity, and a side-by-side commentary upon classical and scientific rationales in order to offer moral lessons. This paper aims to explore the dream-debate between Chauntecleer and Pertelote, the husband and the wife, which stands as a key argument to the poem.

Key words: allegory, bestiary, comic narrative, comic vision, dream debate

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Dryden's supreme eulogy "[h]ere is God's plenty" (13) tersely delimitates Chaucer's charisma to limn the whole medieval scenario; he is the true reservoir of the Fourteenth century England. Geoffrey Chaucer's (1340-1400) "The Nun's Priest's Tale" (c. 1392¹), a widely-recognized comic narrative, works on varied scholastic issues and sustains its ingenuity by spotlighting both medieval and modern aspects. As a classic instance of Chaucer's mature work the bestiary comments on diverse themes such as married love, learning from everyday life, medieval debate on dreams, man's relation to fortune and free will. The use of dream

allegory in poems had become a standard convention during Chaucer's time. Chaucer's early long poems, such as *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, followed the same tradition too. He was well acquainted with the *Romance of the Rose* (or, *Roman de la Rose*), a fourteenth century French poem of courtly love and dream tradition. But, unlike Guillaume's romantic intervention or Jean de Meun's cynical treatment of dream, Chaucer treats it with sophistication, metaphor and heraldic colours.

"The Nun's Priest's Tale", a mock-epic, is a story of animal world commenting on human follies

and foibles. Behind this naïve façade, however, the much discussed issue of Chauntecleer's dream is unfolded. In an early spring morning Chauntecleer, a cock, sees a terrible dream of a hound-like beast roaming in the yard and trying to seize him. Lady Pertelote, the dearest among Chauntecleer's seven wives, considers this to be the result of over diet, and chides her husband for paying heed to such trifle matter. She advises him laxative and prescribes digestives:

“Take Cato 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. . . .
 (“The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”120-21)

Chauntecleer graciously thanks his wife, but insists that his dream is prophetic and supports his argument with references to Cato, St. Kenelm, Daniel and Joseph from Old Testament, and other sources:

‘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,
.
Dreams have quite often been
significations. . . . (150-59)

Since his male ego is hurt and questioned by his lady-love, Chauntecleer's puerile mind discarded the divine warning. Needless to say, Lady Pertelote's tactful advancement to divert her husband's mind and to make him disregard the implications of dream by holding that she can no longer love a coward is nothing but to deviate imaginative Chauntecleer: “You've forfeited my heart and lost my love./ I cannot love a coward, come what may” (90-91). Pertelote's incessant verbal onrush demoralizes Chauntecleer's confidence. To the extremist, Chauntecleer has to consume cowardice remarks such as “[h]ave you no manly heart to match your beard?” (100). That his dream ultimately proves to be a real one is not my main purpose; rather the debate over dream between Chauntecleer and Pertelote, the husband and the wife, is what the paper intends to explore.

In this fable, as Payne corroborates, “two [main] opinions respecting the origins of dreams are expounded: one, that they are caused by the state or disposition of the body; the other, that they have a supernatural significance, foretelling future events” (47). For Payne, the former is physical and can therefore be defined as materialistic. It is put in the mouth of Dame Pertelote, who is a plain, prosaic creature, with her mind fixed on material things. The latter is the outcome of the occult or supernatural, and is ascribed to Chanteceleer, whose imaginative nature is contrasted with her wife. From his red-coral-like comb to azure toes, from burnished gold feathers to lily-white nails Chuntecleer is demonstrated as a knight figure whose physical elegance is not only an advantage to relish seven wives but also reminder of prince-like virtuosity. Still, his conflicting view as against his most lovable wife Pertelote is well evinced. Curry pens:

The fair ‘damoysele Pertelote’, however courteous, debonair, and companionable she may be, is by nature practical of mind and unimaginative; from the top . . . to the tips . . . she is a scientist, who has peered into many strange corners of medical lore. That egotist, Chauntecleer, imaginative and pompously self-conscious, would like to pass as a philosopher and a deep student of the occult. (115)

Ruggiers in his article “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” from *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (1965) has given an interesting interpretation—philosophical yet comic; he sees this debate from an angle of conjugal domesticity. By employing the debate between the husband and the wife, as for instance, Chauntecleer began conversing with Pertelote with respect and politeness and ends in arrogance, Chaucer peeps into household and makes a free-play of daily chore.

Since Chauntecleer's manly vanity is hurt, he attempts to superimpose his manliness over his wife by introducing other philosophers' views to contest Cato, as propounded by his wife, and that dreams indeed have certain validation. Chauntecleer concludes his argument alluding to a story that “[t]hings may lie hidden for a year or two,/ But still ‘[m]urder will out,’. . . .” (“NPT” 226-27). The second moral Chauntecleer delivered is that one should not

disregard dreams because that might lead the person into trouble: "That many are a sign of trouble breeding" (279). Chaucer's argument is based on the opinion that dreams are ominous and may have fatal consequence. In addition, early morning dream conveys much significance. He adds by introducing the tragic fate of St. Kenelm, the king of Mercia, who was killed by the murderer he had dreamt of. Chaucer declares that his dream is not resulted from "an upset in his humours" (Coote 66); rather it bears much significance.

Whereas Pertelote's assessment of dream is nothing but vanity, Chaucer contests her by alluding to Biblical references. He contends that Daniel in *Book of Daniel* did hardly consider dream as vanity. The other classical references Chaucer incorporates are meant to reinforce his counter argument, that his early morning dream does certainly have prophetic signification, therefore his tempest-tossed mind, instead of settling in prescribed laxatives, feels endangered vis-à-vis venomous future. It must be remembered that Pertelote's medicated remedy to her husband is purely based on her scientific bent of mind. By highlighting this conflict between Chaucer and Pertelote Chaucer categorically foregrounds the central conflict between science and theology, the modern and the medieval. Pertelote surely advised her husband Chaucer the much-needed laxative, but did she mean to ignore the dream completely? She thought that her husband's dream is caused by natural deficiency; therefore her inability to realize its implication is understandable. Besides the two major interpretations as discussed already, dream in the medieval time was also thought to be divinely inspired, that it conveys some prophetic significance, and morning is favourable occasion for prophetic dream. For Pertelote, dreams have no significance; it arises purely from malfunction of the belly ("NPT" 104):

'No doubt the redness in your dream to-night
Comes from the superfluity and force
Of the red cholera in your blood. Of course.
That is what puts a dreamer in the dread . .
. . (106-09)

Dame Pertelote, like a caring wife, prescribes Chaucer herbs from their farmyard which will cure, as she assumes, the latter's constipation completely. By stating dream as a vain thing and Chaucer's behavior as nonsensical, Pertelote goes on to expound the view of many old physicians as to "what kind of bodily conditions engender dreams of a particular kind" (Payne 47). This view is shortly stated by the great medical authority, Galen. According to the old medical theory, the state of body can be determined by four humours—Sanguis (blood), cholera (yellow bile), Melancholia (black bile: earthy element) and phlegm. The gracious Pertelote, however 'courteous', 'debonair', and 'companionable' she may be, from top to toe she looks like a scientist, who has peered into many strange corners of medical lore. The egotist, Chaucer, imaginative and pompously self-conscious, appears as a philosopher and a devoted student of the occult. The debate is inevitable. Pertelote's opinion is well founded when the dream is a 'somnia naturale'; Chaucer's claims are undeniable when the vision is a true 'somnia coeleste'.

Pertelote, enthusiastic enough, knows many more wonders about the effects of humours upon dreams—for example, that a super-abundance of blood produces dreams in which a man beholds 'red' objects. . . or seems to be 'swimming in blood' and so on. Any medieval mind would detect the warning of dream. When Pertelote prescribes doctoral remedy for her husband she is correct in that, but she lets the underlying prophecy pass by. Contrarily, Chaucer's stirring love for his wife clouds his intellect and he ignores his visionary warning. His male heart gets immersed into his dame's earthly beauty. His stirring love for his lady-love soon winks his present reason, as in supreme ecstasy, Chaucer's knightly virtue rejoices:

"Of one thing God has sent me plenteous grace,
For when I see the beauty of your face,
That scarlet loveliness about your eyes,
All thought of terror and confusion dies." ("NPT" 340-43)

Flattery plays a pivotal role in this poem. In fact, flattery accentuates Chaucer to his forthcoming misfortune. Interestingly the same flattery stands as

a safe guard for him when the fox Don Russel, deceived by flattery, opened his mouth by mistake. No wonder, the moral of the story is told, that it (flattery) crushes self-restraint, blunts vision, and blinds reason:

The reversal of Fortune by which Chauntecleer's native wit brings about his escape gives us some clue as to the relation of man's reasoned actions to the providential plan. The flattery by which he himself deceived his wife was superseded by that of the fox; now again, the laying on of flattery and praise for the sake of personal safety wins the cock his freedom . . . (Ruggiers 233)

In "The Nun's Priest's Tale" Chaucer amalgamates the theological idea of dream with the scientific one—the two prominent origins of dream. The author has cunningly employed the dream allegory in this mature work to foreground some deeper truth, i.e., the human ways of failing to see what is wrong. His excellence lies in mature handling of human nature and delicacy, genial sense of ridiculing human frailty, occasional employment of moral lessons, and conjugal familiarity tinged with ironic tones and comic nuances. Chaucer innate comic accomplishment of receiving the world never deserts his creativity. As a result, readers cannot but indulge in easy delights. Through this dream-debate, Chaucer illuminates his comic vision towards life, his tempered handling of familial domesticity, and a side-by-side commentary upon classical and scientific rationales in order to offer morals such as to "take the grain and let the chaff be still" ("NPT" 630).

Note:

1. According to Weber State University, the most probable date of its composition is 1392. For more information, visit the following link:

<http://faculty.weber.edu/dkrantz/en4620/Medieval/Chaucer/NPT_1ec.html>.

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