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## CHAUCER'S ANTI-FABLE :

### REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM IN THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

By Walter Scheps

Although there is almost universal agreement as to the excellence of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, relatively little has been written about the tale as fable,<sup>1</sup> yet it is in the relationship between the tale and the genre of which it is a putative member that much of the humour resides; and it is in the structural relationship between *fabula* and *moralitas* that the profundity of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is made manifest. It will be my purpose in this paper to examine these relationships in some detail, and to demonstrate that Chaucer, by rendering first the *fabula* and then the *moralitas* absurd, calls into question the assumptions which underlie this fable and, by extension, all fables.

Like most of the other *Canterbury Tales*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* begins with the *whilom* incipit (VII, 2822),<sup>2</sup> a device used by many of the other pilgrims to anticipate possible objections to the credibility of their tales. Since the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a beast fable, this kind of justification would seem to be unnecessary were it not for the precedent established by previous narrators. When the Nun's Priest tells us that Chauntecleer sang, "My lief is faren in londe!" (2879) he adds, by way of explanation,

For thilke tyme, as I have understonde,  
Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge . . . (2880-81)

Far from being a satisfactory explanation of the events which are to follow, the Nun's Priest's statement serves only to call attention to its own inadequacy, and, by implication, to the inadequacy of any attempt to justify the conventions of the fable on logical grounds.<sup>3</sup>

The conventions of the fable, as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* demonstrates in great detail, cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny (since they are rationally indefensible), nor can they be presented with perfect consistency (since such consistency is virtually impossible) without being patently absurd. What the typical fable depends upon for its effect then are the simultaneous illusions of rationality and consistency, illusions which the Nun's Priest does his best to dispel.

The convention which underlies all fables is that animals behave as people do, that, in fact, they *are* the people of the fable. But if animals are people, who, in the world of the fable, are the animals? For the Nun's Priest the answer is simply that the distinctions are obscured, the human characters becoming animal-like at the same time that the animals are, at least superficially, humanized. In most fables, however effectively the author humanizes the animals, he rarely expends much

effort on the correlative imbruting of the human characters, sometimes relegating this lesser component of the fable to an allegorical *moralitas*, often ignoring it completely by expeditiously eliminating all human characters from both the *fabula* and the *moralitas*. The Nun's Priest's treatment of the relationship between human and animal characters is, however, prominent throughout the tale.

The first line of the tale introduces us to the "povre wydwe" who, unlike the sheep (2831), cock (2849), hen (2870), or dog (3383) is anonymous,<sup>4</sup> an anonymity which would belong to the animals were the tale something other than beast fable. The description of the widow and her farm becomes increasingly particular until it fixes upon the central character, Chauntecleer (2837ff.).

The transformation of Chauntecleer from a barnyard fowl to the embodiment of human vices and virtues is delicately handled throughout the tale. Especially interesting is the treatment of instinctive knowledge as opposed to both empirical knowledge and erudition.<sup>5</sup> At the very beginning of the description of Chauntecleer, the contrast between the instinctive and the acquired is made clear:

In al the land, of crowyng nas his peer.  
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.  
By nature he knew ech ascensioun  
Of the equynoxial in thilke toun;  
For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,  
Thanne crew he, that it myghte nat been amended. (2850-58)

The treatment of Chauntecleer's crowing serves to emphasize at the outset his most salient characteristic, one which is entirely instinctive and which therefore suggests his animal nature. The organ and the clock, both artificial contrivances, are declared to be inferior to Chauntecleer, whose knowledge of when to crow, we are told, comes "By nature" (2855).

Chauntecleer's dream (2898-2907) presents the same kind of knowledge, since the beast which Chauntecleer describes in such detail fills him with dread even though he has never seen it before. In the ensuing argument on dreams, various kinds of evidence are presented, but as later developments prove, Chauntecleer's initial reaction is the correct one. Included in Chauntecleer's defense of what he believes to be a prophetic dream, are two *exempla*, which in the context of the tale as a whole, can perhaps best be described as human fables told from the beast's point of view. In each, the central characters are human, and their behaviour is intended to illustrate the same moral, namely, "... many a dreem ful soore is for to drede" (3109; cf. 3063). Like the *Nun's Priest's Tale* itself, these human fables begin with the *whilom* incipit (2985), and the complexity which results from the reversal of human and animal roles is indicated by an observation made by one of Chauntecleer's human characters:

Men dreme alday of owles and of apes,  
 And eek of many a maze therwithal;  
 Men dreme of thyng that nevere was ne shal. (3092-94)

What cocks dream about is, as Chauntecleer tries to prove, considerably more significant.

The action of the fable proper begins at l. 3187, and once again the Nun's Priest emphasizes Chauntecleer's instinctive knowledge: "[He] knew by kynde, and by noon oother loore,/ That it was pryme, and crew with blisful stevene" (3196-97). Chauntecleer's natural or instinctive knowledge is paralleled by that of his antagonist, the fox:

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  
 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,  
 Waityng his tyme on Chauntecleer to falle,  
 As gladly doon thise homycides alle  
 That in await ligen to mordre men. (3215-25)<sup>6</sup>

Although the fox has lived in the grove for three years, he patiently waits for "his tyme on Chauntecleer to falle" before attacking. The reason for his having delayed can be attributed only to instinct, and the fact that he is almost successful indicates how trustworthy this kind of knowledge is.

The Boethian passage which follows (3232-50), serves to point out the uselessness of learned disputation, i.e. acquired knowledge, in instances of this kind. The Nun's Priest himself attests to the irrelevance of his discussion of "symple necessitee" as opposed to "necessitee condicionel!" in relation to the case of the cock and the fox:

My tale is of a cok, as ye may heere,  
 That tok his conseil of hys wyf, with sorwe,  
 To walken in the yerd upon that morwe  
 That he hadde met that dreem that I yow tolde. (3252-55)

The Nun's Priest keeps our attention focused on his animal characters by attributing his misogynistic moral to Chauntecleer (3265-66), whose initial reaction to the fox is described as follows:

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 naturelly a beest desireth flee  
 Fro his contrarie, if he may it see,  
 Though he never erst hadde seyn it with his ye. (3275-81)

Once again, Chauntecleer's instinctive reaction is the correct one, but the fox's flattery causes him to ignore his generic nature and succumb instead to the dictates of his own self-pride.

The reason that the fox is successful, at least initially, is that by resorting to guile he is acting in accordance with *his* natural instincts. His reference to Boethius (3294), in the light of what the Nun's Priest had previously said (3232-55), clearly shows how inimical the fox's interests are to those of Chauntecleer; and Chauntecleer's dilemma, i.e. whether to obey his generic or individual nature, is peremptorily solved for him by the fox:

And daun Russell the fox stirte up atones,  
And by the gargat hente Chauntecleer,  
And on his bak toward the wode hym beer. (3334-36)

This precipitous act, the central action in the tale, causes the chaotic sequence of events which is to result in Chauntecleer's escape: the shrieking of the hens, the alarm of the widow and her daughters, the mad chase involving all the inhabitants of the barnyard, including a swarm of bees, the verbal defiance on the part of the fox, and, finally, the escape of Chauntecleer. Yet, in spite of the apparent lack of order in the description of the chase, there is a logical pattern which emerges, and once again it is based upon the instinctive behaviour that governs the actions of all of the fox's pursuers. Especially significant is the way in which the Nun's Priest has blurred the distinction between his human and animal characters. All behave instinctively, all are equally ineffectual, and, in their verbal responses to Chauntecleer's abduction, they are indistinguishable, the widow and her daughters crying "Out! harrow! and weylaway!/ Ha! Ha! the fox" (3380-81), syllables as meaningless as the barking of the dogs (3386), the quacking of the ducks (3390), or the shrieking of the hens (3360), the last of which had precipitated the chase. The Nun's Priest makes no attempt to distinguish between human and animal responses here because there is no distinction to be made: "And therwithal they skrieked and they howped./ It semed as that hevene sholde falle" (3400-01).

The escape itself is accomplished through Chauntecleer's reversion to his generic role ("In al his drede unto the fox he spak," 3406), and the fox's momentary lapse from instinctive behaviour (3414) enables Chauntecleer to fly "heighe upon a tree" (3416), an action which balances, and atones for, his earlier descent from the beams (3172; cf. 2942, 3339). The Nun's Priest's reference to Fortune (3403-04) anticipates the relative positions of cock and fox (i.e. in the tree and on the ground respectively), which, once they have been attained, conclude the *fabula* and provide the setting for the *moralitas* to follow.

As has often been noted, there are four explicitly stated morals at the end of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, one assigned to Chauntecleer, one to the fox, and two to the Nun's Priest. That any fable should produce as many as four significantly different morals is surprising in itself; if we add to these the moral *sententiae* which appear in the body of the tale, the total number of moral statements, about ten, is so high that some attempt at explanation must be made. Included among the various moral

judgments made throughout the *Nun's Priest's Tale* are: "Mordre wol out" (3052, 3057), perhaps an ironic echo of the *Prioress's Tale*,<sup>7</sup> "many a dreem ful soore is for to drede" (3109; also 3063), "Mulier est hominis confusio" (3164) along with Chauntecleer's ironic gloss, "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis" (3166), "evere the latter ende of joye is wo" (3205), and "Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde;/ Wommanes conseil broughte us first to wo" (3256-57).

Obviously, any fable which can produce as many different morals as the *Nun's Priest's Tale* does cannot be considered typical. Furthermore, the various morals of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* tend to be not, as one would expect, complementary, but rather contradictory, either directly or implicitly. Chauntecleer's comments on women (or wives) are mutually exclusive; "Mordre wol out" is irrelevant to the action of the tale,<sup>8</sup> as is "the latter ende of joye is wo" (unless, of course, one takes the fox's point of view), and the Nun's Priest's observations on women's advice are robbed of their authority by being attributed to Chauntecleer (3265-66) whose apparent ambivalence had already been noted.

When we come to the morals at the end of the tale, we seem to have a clearer statement of the moral thrust of the fable, but once again appearances are deceptive. From Chauntecleer's point of view, the moral of the tale is: ". . . he that wynketh whan he sholde see,/ Al wilfully, God lat him never thee!" (3431-32), a view which is rather different from that stated by the fox: "Nay . . . but God yeve hym meschaunce,/ That is so undiscreet of governaunce/ That jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees" (3433-35). The Nun's Priest appears to clarify matters by adducing a moral which seems to support Chauntecleer's: "Lo, swich it is for to be reccheles/ And negliget, and truste on flaterye" (3436-37); but, in fact, what he says could be applied with equal justification to the fox, who, like Chauntecleer, has been reckless, negligent and subject to flattery (3407-17).

The fourth, and last, moral is the most perplexing of all:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,  
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,  
Taketh the moralite, good men.  
For seint Paul seith that al that writen is,  
To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;  
Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (3438-43)

Far from being an exhortation to apply the methods of allegorical exegesis,<sup>9</sup> the Nun's Priest's words point out the impossibility of applying them judiciously. "Taketh the moralite," he says, but which of the many morals presented in the tale are we to select? The multiplicity of contradictory and irrelevant morals has attenuated the force of each, and to choose one instead of another is to order complex reality, even if it is only barnyard reality, in an arbitrarily simplistic way. When the Nun's Priest advises us to take "the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille," we can make sense of the admonition only if we interpret it as being ironic.<sup>10</sup> In dealing with Scripture or with the traditional fable, the distinction between fruit and chaff is easily made,<sup>11</sup> but in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* it is virtually impossible

to tell one from the other. Just as the distinction between human and animal behaviour has been deliberately blurred throughout the tale, so too is the traditional distinction between *fabula* and *moralitas*.

As we have seen, the Nun's Priest takes great pains to keep before us consistently the various categories on which his tale is based. The most obvious of these, and the one which is most important to the tale as fable, is the generic. Here we see the characters as exclusively typical and representative, the poor widow, the cock which like all cocks is afraid of foxes, the fox which like all foxes uses guile, the hen which like all hens cackles and scolds, the barking dogs, quacking ducks, honking geese, etc. With the exception of Chauntecleer, and to a lesser extent, the fox, they operate only on this categorical level, and therefore their behaviour is both completely instinctive and entirely predictable.

However, Chauntecleer is not an ordinary cock. In crowing and in potency – qualities which characterize the species – he has no peer, and, as a most illustrious cock, he is described in terms which, given the nature of the fable, ought to be appropriate, but which are, in fact, only ludicrous. To interpret the high-style descriptions of Chauntecleer as mock-heroic and nothing more is to distort their function, which is not only to parody the monk's notion of tragedy, or to show the disparity between an illustrious cock and illustrious men, but also to point up the inherent limitations of the fable which, if it were taken seriously, would force us to accept the identity of human and animal behaviour. Once we agree that stories about animals can tell us something about human nature, not by analogy but by allegorical identification, we are forced to see, as the Nun's Priest so brilliantly points out, the typological resemblance between the betrayal of Chauntecleer and the betrayal of Roland, of Troy, and even of Christ (3226-29).<sup>12</sup> That we refuse to see the resemblance as anything but comically bathetic – and this it surely is – does not necessarily mean that the resemblance is illogically or hyperbolically stated; on the contrary, our refusal means primarily that we are unwilling to accept the logical consequences of our voluntary acquiescence to the dictates of the fable. The mock-heroic description of Chauntecleer represents, in effect, the *reductio ad absurdum* of the *fabula*, and thus complements the plethora of morals which constitutes a *reductio* of the *moralitas*.

Because Chauntecleer is such an illustrious cock, we see him in the rhetorical company of illustrious men. But because he is also a character in a very atypical beast fable, he should be simultaneously individualized and universalized, individualized so that we care about what happens to him, universalized so that we can apply to our own lives the didactic lesson to be learned from his behaviour. On this individual-universal level,<sup>13</sup> Chauntecleer must be made to appear a kind of gallinaceous Everyman. Just how the Nun's Priest is to accomplish this synthesis is demonstrated in the dispute between Chauntecleer and Pertelote on the nature of dreams. Prior to the beginning of the argument, Chauntecleer's eminence has already been established, so that when Pertelote appears we would be justified in expecting a courtly conversation between a lord and his lady. What we see instead is the archetypal situation of, in this case, the literally henpecked husband who,

like Pluto in the *Merchant's Tale* and, in a somewhat different situation, Saturn in the *Knight's Tale*, capitulates not because he is convinced of the inferiority of his position, but only because he wishes to restore domestic tranquillity.

The argument itself utilizes virtually every kind of evidence, from Chauntecleer's human fables to Pertelote's herbological lore and its application to the theory of bodily humours. As we have seen, however, evidence of whatever kind is beside the point, just as the Nun's Priest's Boethian discussion is beside the point, because the danger which threatens Chauntecleer is generic and thus requires an instinctive reaction by him if he is to save himself from his natural enemy. The ambivalence between Chauntecleer as beast and Chauntecleer as emblematic man is nowhere better seen than in this section of the tale. The arguments used by Chauntecleer and Pertelote, irrelevant as they turn out to be, are not in themselves invalid; they are merely inapplicable to a situation which involves a natural predator and his prey.

In opposition to the perilously easy identification of men and beasts which the beast fable ordinarily requires us to make, the Nun's Priest demonstrates a profound understanding of the grave inadequacy of such an identification, and thus he refuses to make it complete.<sup>14</sup> By involving his animal characters in learned disputation, he anthropomorphizes them; but, by making their arguments irrelevant to the central action of the fable, he in effect returns them to the level of beasts. A beast which acts in accordance with reason is, quite obviously, no longer a beast; conversely, a creature which normally acts according to instinct is one for whom reason is superfluous, even dangerous. The first of these characterizations is to be found in most beast fables, but it is the second which the Nun's Priest employs throughout his tale in describing Chauntecleer. Similarly, the Boethian passage, like the argument concerning the origin and nature of Chauntecleer's dream, is one which in some other context, say the *Knight's Tale* or *Troilus and Criseyde*, would have to be taken seriously; but the citation of Augustine, Boethius, and Bishop Bradwardine (3241-42) in connexion with Chauntecleer's descent from the "bemes" is palpably intrusive, and points up, once again, the folly of identifying human and animal concerns.

When we come to the fox, the relationship between human and animal, or individual and generic behaviour is, if anything, even more complicated than it is in the case of Chauntecleer. The fox is traditionally associated with guile and treachery, but a distinction between instinctive as opposed to rationally conceived guile is one which only a metaphysician could find useful, and the Nun's Priest, in spite of the exigencies of the situation, declines even to suggest what such a distinction might be. The arguments which the fox uses, while they are replete with ironic allusions, and while they seem to be applicable only to Chauntecleer, could easily be adapted to any other confrontation between cock and fox.

The appeal of the traditional beast fable tends to derive from its simplistic view of reality, a view which perceives both brazen rascality and naive innocence but almost nothing in between. When we enter into the world of the fable, we are prepared to encounter animal behaviour which proceeds from generic characteristics and which can be interpreted in terms of our own ethical standards. Ordinarily, the



fable limits itself to one central action, the moral consequences of which are then disclosed to us by the fabulist speaking either in his own voice or in the voices of his animal characters. The world of the fable, while it may be roughly similar to our own, is far enough removed from the daily reality with which we contend that we voluntarily give up the power to make our own moral judgments and thus tacitly assume that the single action of the fable leads to an equally monistic moral. The attitude of the fabulist is therefore essentially paternalistic; given mutual consent on the moral system to be applied, he explicitly states the moral to be deduced from his fable.

In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the smoothly functioning machinery of the fable is reduced to wreckage. The differences between animals and human beings, instead of being ignored as they are in fables generally, are constantly kept before us by means of the Nun's Priest's attempts to explain them away. These differences are ironically treated also in the fables within a fable, wherein the characters and the fabulist exchange their usual roles, and in the chase sequence where they break down completely. They are most sharply defined, however, in the distinction between generic and acquired knowledge, the former necessary for the survival of animals but useless to an understanding of human relationships, the latter essential for our survival but superfluous to the characters in a beast fable.

The Nun's Priest's depiction of Chauntecleer represents an even more radical departure from the typical fable. Illustrious as he is, Chauntecleer cannot possibly represent the great mass of men; but given the underlying assumptions of the fable, the Nun's Priest pursues them to their inevitable, if absurd, conclusion in his comparison of Chauntecleer to Roland, Troy, and Christ. By forcing us to see that a veritable paragon among roosters is yet but a barnyard fowl, the Nun's Priest calls into question the very basis of the fable's existence, for if Chauntecleer is comparable to neither Roland nor Christ, then the fox cannot be typical of either Ganelon or Judas, and, by extension, no animal can be emblematic of any man, let alone Everyman.

But the *fabula*, no matter how entertaining or instructive it may be, is ultimately but a vehicle for the *moralitas*, and it is in his treatment of the *moralitas* that the Nun's Priest is most destructive. The notion that any action, however simple, can lead to one and only one moral judgment is effectively exploded by the ingenious expedient of describing just such an action and then drawing several contradictory morals from it, none of which can be excluded on logical grounds. Obviously, the cock and the fox can be expected to moralize the same situation in different, even mutually exclusive ways, and the very fact that they do so indicates the impossibility of making an absolute moral judgment, even in so apparently uncomplicated a situation as that which the tale presents. If we follow our natural inclination and accept Chauntecleer's moral, we are forced to reject the moral offered by daun Russell in spite of the fact that, the difference in point of view excepted, both morals are rhetorically and ideologically similar. In effect, Chauntecleer and Russell have learned precisely the same thing, i.e. to obey their natural instincts, a moral which, however useful it may be to animals which are generically defined, is utterly useless

for human beings who are defined individually. In short, the morals offered by the cock and fox are not absolute judgments at all but relative ones.

The admonitions of the Nun's Priest (i.e. "Taketh the moralite; Taketh the fruyt") suggest the ultimate in relative judgments and negate the possibility of any moral synthesis. By offering advice of this kind, the Nun's Priest abdicates his role as fabulist and demands that we do precisely what the beast fable requires that we not do: namely, deduce the moral for ourselves, a demand which can be met in an almost infinite number of ways. If the distinction between chaff and fruit is not made, then the distinction between *fabula* and *moralitas* is incapable of being made as well, and consequently the fable as a viable and meaningful narrative form is invalidated.

What we have then in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, I believe, is not, as is so often stated, Chaucer's experimentation with the beast fable but his destruction of it, i.e. an anti-fable, just as *Sir Thopas* is an anti-romance. That this destruction strikes us as essentially comic is the result of Chaucer's apparent acceptance of the fable on its own terms and his scrupulously logical examination of these terms. For a poet capable of the rich complexity of the *Canterbury Tales*, the beast fable must have seemed a sterile, if perhaps innocuous, form inherently incapable of representing even the most circumscribed aspects of human experience. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is funny primarily because it is a fable which in all its parts takes itself seriously, and, by so doing, reveals the inadequacy of the genre which it nominally represents.

#### NOTES

- 1 Important exceptions are the essays by Stephen Manning, "The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude toward Fables," *JEGP*, LIX (1960), 403-16; J. Burke Severs, "Chaucer's Originality in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*," *SP*, XLIII (1946), 22-41, and R. T. Lenaghan, "The Nun's Priest's Fable," *PMLA*, LXXVIII (1963), 300-07.
- 2 This and all other textual references are to the second revised edition of F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1957). Among the exceptions are those tales told in angry response to other tales (*Reeve's Tale*, *Summoner's Tale*) and those which have immediate moral or doctrinal applicability (*Melibee*, *Parson's Tale*).
- 3 It should be noted that the "failure" of the Nun's Priest to make his argument convincing calls into question the adequacy of similar explanations given by the other pilgrims; more particularly, his argument is superfluous, given the definition of *fabula* (a fictitious narration of events which could not have taken place) in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and elsewhere. See Lenaghan, *op. cit.*, 302.
- 4 This is noted in passing by T. W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer* (London, 1964), p. 75.
- 5 Paul Ruggiers suggests that the meaning of the tale "has to do, in one sense, with the way in which reason and instinct are embattled," but he does not develop this idea further. *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison, 1965), p. 184.

- 6 The significance of the comparison at 3224-25 should not be overlooked; the potential murder of a cock, in keeping with the inverted nature of Chauntecleer's fables, is likened to the murder of men by those who lie in wait for that purpose. Other anthropomorphic similes appear at 2884-85, 3277-78, 3322-26.
- 7 See Arthur T. Broes, "Chaucer's Disgruntled Cleric: *The Nun's Priest's Tale*," *PMLA*, LXXVIII (1963), 161.
- 8 Although not, of course, to the story of the two pilgrims. Yet even here there is some confusion, since the fabulist (Chauntecleer) tells us that the moral which his fables illustrate is significantly different: "Heere may men seen that dremes been to drede" (3063).
- 9 See, for example, D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1963), p. 252; Charles Dahlberg, "Chaucer's Cock and Fox," *JEGP*, LIII (1954), 277-90; Mortimer J. Donovan, "The Moralite of the Nun's Priest's Sermon," *JEGP*, LII (1953), 498-508.
- 10 Stephen Manning, *op. cit.*, is close to the mark when he says that Chaucer is "poking fun at those who felt that a poem had to have some moral . . ." (416).
- 11 Just as the Man of Law makes it in his tale (II, 701).
- 12 For Bernard F. Huppé (*A Reading of the "Canterbury Tales"*, rev. ed., Albany, N.Y., 1967, p. 179) "the analogy breaks down," since the fox can hardly be said to betray Chauntecleer. Whether Chaucer picks up the concept of betrayal from the *Roman de Renart* (Branch II, 11. 165-76) is debatable, but it must be remembered that there are two analogies in operation here; and, given the preeminence of the humans to whom Chauntecleer is compared, it is not so much the analogy but rather our credulity which breaks down. Of course, the typology is bad, but even good typology, as in the implied comparison of Chauntecleer and Adam (3256-59), becomes ludicrous in the context of a fable.
- 13 The generic level is universal only for poor widows, cocks, foxes, and the other types presented in the tale.
- 14 As Charles Muscatine says, "Fable respects the boundary between animal fiction and the human truth it illustrates. But the whole spirit of this poem is to erase or at least to overlap the boundaries: animal and human, fiction and truth severally join and separate, change partners and flirt here." *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964), p. 239.