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The Nun's Priest's Identity and the Purpose of his Tale

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This article reconsiders the matter of the identity of the Nun's Priest and the purpose of the tale he tells. The priest enters *The Canterbury Tales* after the famous portrait of the Prioress in the *General Prologue* where we read, 'Another Nonne with hire hadde she, / That was hir chapeleyne, and preestes thre' (163–64).¹ The lines are problematical. As we are reminded by Florence Ridley, there is the matter of the pilgrim-count: 'if three priests accompany the Prioress, the number of pilgrims listed in the GP is thirty-one; if Chaucer meant the Prioress to have but one attendant priest, the total is twenty-nine.'² The pilgrim count is definitely fuzzy business. The words 'As I lay' (*General Prologue*, l. 20) indicate that Chaucer is already comfortably set up in the Tabard Inn when the 29 pilgrims arrive as night falls. Does that mean we should think of him as pilgrim number 30? Furthermore the use of 'wel' before the number 29 seems to be a modifier indicating 'about' or 'as many as' or 'nearly' ('At nyght was come into that hostelrye / Wel nyne and twenty'; *General Prologue*, ll. 23–24). Perhaps the pilgrim count from the very outset was never meant to be precise. There are also textual issues. The views among textualists descend from the influential librarian of the British Museum, Henry Bradshaw, who maintained that Chaucer left the line unfinished after the word *chapeleyne*, and Edith Rickert, who argued that 'and the preest is thre' was later inserted (and then later miscopied so that 'preest is' became 'preestis'), leaving one priest who also served as chaplain.³ The marginal notation in both the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts, the most reliable of the manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*, however, reads 'Nonne Chapelayne.' It does appear, moreover, that Chaucer meant *three* when he said *three*. Even though the *General Prologue* tells us twenty-nine pilgrims met in the Tabard Inn, there is no evidence of revision in the manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* of the number of priests in attendance to the Prioress. Chaucer could have changed the number if he wanted to, for as Helen Cooper points out in a discussion of the *General Prologue*, 'there is at least a possibility that some parts were written or adapted when the writing of the tales was well advanced.'⁴

¹ All quotations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

² Florence Ridley's note to 'preestes thre' in her explanatory notes to *The General Prologue* portraits of the Second Nun and the Nun's Priest, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 806.

³ *The Text of 'The Canterbury Tales' Studied on the Basis of Known Manuscripts*, ed. by John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, 8 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), ii, p. 428. Cited by Ridley, p. 806.

⁴ Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 27.

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Scholars have tended to regard the priest as part of the Prioress's entourage, whether alone or one of three priests, acting as a protector or confessor of the Prioress and the second nun. John Manly, working from an historical perspective, associated the Prioress with the small convent of St. Leonard's and made a case for the priest as the local parish priest — Manly rejected 'preestes thre' — who served as father-confessor of the convent.⁵ Robert Lumiansky thought the Priest was 'weak in body and fawning in manner', an antifeminist unhappy at 'being under the "petticoat rule" of the Prioress'.⁶ Charles Owen concurred, viewing the Priest as suffering 'the inner conflict of the misogynist employed by a woman'.⁷ Developing these positions, Arthur Broes argued that the rooster, Chauntecleer, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* 'is nothing less than the thinly disguised animal counterpart of the Priest ... through which he can criticize women and enjoy dominance over them'.⁸

No one, as far as I know, has suggested that the priest was left without a specific portrait in the *General Prologue* because Chaucer had conflated him with one of the three clergymen-pilgrims whose full portraits followed shortly after that of the Prioress: that is, the Clerk. That association, I suggest, sheds added light on the purpose of the tale told by the Nun's Priest. Furthermore, by giving his tale such an anonymous title, Chaucer could keep his options open.

The identity of the Nun's Priest

Of the four portraits following immediately after that of the Prioress in the *General Prologue*, two are definitely of priests (the Monk, ll. 165–207 and the Friar, ll. 208–69), one could be that of a priest (the Clerk, ll. 285–308),⁹ and the remaining fourth is a portrait of a merchant (ll. 270–84) so brief at 14 lines as to be almost invisible among 42 lines of monk, 61 lines of friar, and 23 lines of clerk. These three might be the 'preestes thre' who form an entourage around the Prioress and her attendant nun rather than some separate, undescribed, additional priests (or priest). The order of description invites the reader to see the Prioress, second nun, Monk, Friar, Merchant, and Clerk moving near one another on the road to Canterbury. The lecherousness suggested in the Friar's portrait together with the physicality of the Monk-horseman's portrait make it easy, moreover, to imagine that these two priests would be only too ready to ride in close proximity to the Prioress with her glittering good looks. As for the

⁵ *Canterbury Tales*, ed. by John M. Manly (New York: Holt, 1928), p. 509.

⁶ Robert M. Lumiansky, 'The Nun's Priest in "The Canterbury Tales"', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 68 (1953), 896–906 (p. 902).

⁷ Charles A. Owen, Jr., 'Crucial Passages in Five of *The Canterbury Tales*', in *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 267.

⁸ Arthur Broes, 'Chaucer's Disgruntled Cleric: The Nun's Priest's Tale', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 78 (1963), 156–62 (p. 158).

⁹ The Middle English word *clerke* derived from both Old English *cleric* (also *clerec*, *clerc*) and Old French *clerc*. The word entered into Old English and Old French from the Latin and Greek words for 'priest' or 'clergyman' (Latin *clericus*, Greek *klerikos*). The two main uses of the word in Middle English were to refer to a clergyman or a scholar. Since most medieval scholars at Oxford and Cambridge were headed for the priesthood, Chaucer's clerk of Oxenford certainly could be. Not all university scholars were ordained. Though we are not told whether or not the Clerk was, we do know that he does not yet have a *benefice* requiring the performance of priestly duties and that neither has he accepted secular employment. The Middle English word, *prest*, came from Old English *preost* by way of Late Latin *presbyter* (derived from Greek *presbyteros*, 'elder'). The primary use of the word in Middle English was to refer to a clergyman in the second of the holy orders (above a deacon and below a bishop) having authority to administer the sacraments and pronounce absolution. From Old English times onward, however, the word could also be used generally to refer to a member of the clerical profession: *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), s.v. *prest* n.3, 1c., a.

bookish clerk, most likely studying to become a man of the church, whether or not he has yet been ordained, he would find it natural enough to position himself near the religious group as the pilgrims travel towards their goal. (It would, however, not have taken him long to realize that the Merchant had more in common with the Friar, Monk, and Prioress than he.) The Canterbury pilgrims include another priest — ‘third’ or ‘fourth,’ depending on whether the Clerk should be counted as a priest — and he, of course, is the Parson, specifically called a *clerk*: ‘he was also a learned man, a clerk’ (l. 480). He, though, is far removed from the Prioress’s portrait in the *General Prologue* and is explicitly said to be travelling in the company of ‘a Plowman, was his brother’ (l. 529). The description of the Parson doesn’t come until after the Franklin, the group including the Haberdasher, Carpenter, Weaver, Dyer and Tapster, and then the Cook, the Shipman, the Doctor of Phisik, the Wife of Bath have all been described. He is not likely to be anywhere near the Prioress.

If we understand ‘preestes thre’ to refer to the Monk, Friar, and Clerk, it is still possible to get 29 pilgrims:

- 1 Knyght
- 2 Squier
- 3 Yemen
- 4, 5 Nonne and ‘hir chapeleyn’
- 6 Monk
- 7 Frere
- 8 Marchant
- 9 Clerk
- 10 Sergeant of Lawe
- 11 Frankeleyn
- 12–16 Haberdasshere, Carpenter, A Webbe, a Dyere, a Tapycer
- 17 Cook
- 18 Shipman
- 19 Doctour of Phisik
- 20 Wif of Bathe
- 21 Persoun
- 22 Plowman
- 23–27 Reeve, Millere, Somnour, Pardoner, Maunciple
- 28 Chaucer
- 29 Hooste.

Chaucer appears to include himself in the count when he adds ‘and myself’ after introducing the last of the portraits:

Ther was also a REVE, and a MILLERE,
A SOMNOUR, and a PARDONER also,
A MAUNCIPIE, and myself ... (*General Prologue*, ll. 542–44).

Harry, the host, however, appears to be excluded since Chaucer continues, ‘there were namo’ (*General Prologue*, l. 544). Even so, by the time we get to line 751 of the *General Prologue*, Chaucer embarks on a portrait of Harry much like all the preceding pilgrim portraits:

A semely man OURE HOOSTE was withalle
For to been a marchal in an halle.
A large man he was with eyen stepe —
A fairer burgeys was ther noon in Chepe —
Boold of his speche, and wys, and wel ytaught,

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And of manhod hym lakkede right naught.
Eek therto he was right a myrie man. (ll. 751–57)

No one can deny that he is very much present on the road and involved in the process of getting to Canterbury. If any pilgrim is to go back to the Tabard, it is he: Harry is the host of the inn, a fact which may put him into a more enduring purgatory than the rest.

There are several similarities that make the Clerk and the priest who tells the *Nun's Priest's Tale* seem interchangeable, almost the same pilgrim. Most obvious are the references to the poor quality of their horses but also there are the facts that both tell tales that place their ideals of womanhood in agrarian settings and both are erudite. In the *Prologue* to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the host, trying to get a tale from the priest that will be merrier than the monk's which precedes it, calls the priest's horse a 'jade' (l. 2812; that is, a nag) which is 'bothe foul and lene' (l. 2813). In the *General Prologue's* description of the Clerk, we read: 'As leene was his hors as is a rake' (l. 287). More important, the Clerk and the Nun's Priest seem to share the same conception of ideal womanhood.

In the tales told by the Clerk and the Nun's Priest worthy women are found on farms. Before the technicolor world of the barnyard is set in motion in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the opening description presents the memorable black-and-white world of the poor widow. The long passage that begins the tale displays the old widow's virtues, her thrift, her care of daughters and animals, the poverty of her home and diet, and her moderate style of living from which spring peace and health:

A povre wydwe, somdel stape in age,
Was whilom dwellyng in a narwe cotage,
Biside a grove, stondyng in a dale.
This wydwe, of which I telle yow my tale,
Syn thilke day that she was last a wyf
In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf,
For litel was hir catel and hir rente.
By housbondrie of swich as God hire sente
She foond hirself and eek hir doghtren two.
Thre large sowes hadde she, and namo,
Three keen, and eek a sheep that highte Malle.
Ful sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle,
In which she eet ful many a sklendre meel.
Of poynaunt sauce hir neded never a deel.
No deyntee morsel passed thurgh hir throte;
Hir diete was accordant to hir cote.
Repleccioun ne made hir nevere sik;
Attempree diete was al hir phisik,
And exercise, and herte suffisaunce.
The goute lette hire nothyng for to daunce,
N'apoplexie shente nat hir heed.
No wyn ne drank she, neither whit ne reed;
Hir bord was served moost with whit and blak—
Milk and broun breed, in which she foond no lak,
Seynd bacoun, and somtyme an ey or tweye,
For she was, as it were, a maner deye. (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 2821–45)

A similar woman in a comparable setting is found in Part Two of the *Clerk's Tale*. We are told that not far from the opulent palace of the Marquis,

There stood a throop, of site delitable
In which that poore folk of that village
Hadden hir beestes and hir herbergage
And of hire labour tooke hir sustenance,
After that the erthe yaf hem habundance. (ll. 197–203)

There Janicula, an old man, lived with his daughter, Griselda, just as the widow lives with her two daughters and animals. His daughter has some of the qualities of the Nun's Priest's widow: she doesn't drink wine, and she doesn't seem interested in genteel life or material pleasure (major concerns of the Nun's Priest's travelling companion, the Prioress):

No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.
Wel after of the welle than of the tonne
She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,
She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese. (*Clerk's Tale*, ll. 204–17)

She works hard on the farm like the widow of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*:

A fewe sheep, spynnyng, on feld she kepte;
She wolde noght been ydel til she slepte.
And whan she homward cam, she wolde bryng
Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte,
The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir lyvyng.
And made hir bed ful harde and nothyng softe. (*Clerk's Tale*, ll. 223–28)

While their ideals of womanhood may be drawn from the peasantry, the Clerk and Nun's Priest belong to an exclusive fraternity whose members lead lives that centre on the scholar's cell.

The Clerk has studied logic and philosophy at Oxford and thinks more than he speaks, a quality which the Host suspects might interfere with the storytelling competition:

This day ne herde I of youre tonge a word.
I trowe ye studie aboute som sophyme;
But Salomon seith 'every thyng hath tyme.' (*Prologue of the Clerk's Tale*, ll. 4–6)

The host turns to him, nonetheless, for 'som murie thyng,' just as he will later turn to the Nun's Priest for merriness after the dreary *Monk's Tale*, but warns the Clerk to avoid needless erudition or complex rhetoric in the company of the ordinary folk who are the Canterbury pilgrims:

Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,
Keepe hem in stoor til so be ye endite
Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.
Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,
That we may understonde what ye seye. (*Prologue of the Clerk's Tale*, ll. 16–20)

The erudition of the Nun's Priest, left undescribed in the *General Prologue*, has to be inferred from the tale he tells. His broad knowledge of medieval medicine is apparent in the dialogue about dreams the Priest gives Chauntecleer and Pertelote and in Pertelote's enumeration of the many curative herbs to be found right in the barnyard: *lawriol*, *centaure*, *ellebor*, *katapuce*, and *gaitrys berys* (ll. 2963–65). References to Boece (l. 3242), Bradwardyn (l. 3442), Augustyn (l. 3441), the Physiologus (l. 3271), kyng Priam (l. 3358), Eneydos (l. 3359) suggest reading not just in philosophy but also in classical and medieval secular literature. The Clerk, it will be recalled, learned the tale he told in Padua from Italy's poet laureate, Petrarch. To be sure, the Priest's reference to *Eneydos* and the mock heroic style of his beast fable itself indicate that he is familiar with romance literature of the day as well as classical epic or, at least, legends

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derived from epic. No wonder in the eleven lines shared among the voices of the Host, Nun's Priest, and the narrator, Chaucer, which precede the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, there are so many words suggesting joy and gladness:

'Com neer, thou preest, com hyder, thou sir John!
Telle us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade.
Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade.
What thogh thyn hors be bothe foul and lene?
If he wol serve thee, rekke nat a bene.
Looke that thyn herte be murie everemo.'
'Yis, sir,' quod he, 'yis, Hoost, so moot I go.
But I be myrie, ywis, I wol be blamed.'
And right anon his tale he hath attamed,
And thus he seyde unto us everichon,
This sweete preest, this goodly man sir John. (Emphasis mine; *Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 2810–20)

The fact that there is no direct description of the Nun's Priest in the *General Prologue* makes it tempting to wonder if that might be because the Clerk is so shortly to be fully described. Perhaps the scholarly clerk with no ecclesiastical benefice who rides on his undernourished horse is the pilgrim whom we should imagine as travelling to Canterbury in service to the Prioress. Serving as the Prioress's protector could be as good a job as the poor clerk has been able to find. Even today scholars unsure of their futures often are resourceful in uncovering inexpensive ways to travel. The title of the tale — *The Nun's Priest's Tale* — also conspires to keep the identity of the priest vague.¹⁰ Could the generic title be Chaucer's way of keeping a sort of bookmark on a tale that might be kept in reserve for the Clerk to tell if there were ever to be enough complete tales to give each pilgrim two stories for the return trip as well as two for the trip to Canterbury ('ech of yow ... shal telle tales tweye / To Caunterbury-ward ... / And homward he shal tellen othere two'; *General Prologue*, ll. 792–94)?¹¹ But why hasten to compose a spare tale for the Clerk rather than some other pilgrim? The pilgrim Chaucer already has two stories: the *Tale of Thopas*, his 'tale of myrthe', (*Sir Thopas*, l. 706) in rhyme; and *The Tale of Melibee*, his 'tretys lyte' (*Sir Thopas* endlink, l. 963), in prose. Chaucer's *Sir Thopas* is a parody of old-fashioned tail-rhyme romances, while the *Tale of Melibee* is a moral treatise. Together the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale* repeat the pattern of pairing an ideal tale with a satiric one found in the two tales Chaucer gave himself (although *Thopas* is left incomplete and its author-persona may not get the joke). The tale told by the clerk is generally regarded as an ideal tale told by an ideal scholar, while the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is universally admired as a high-spirited satire, perhaps the greatest of all the Canterbury Tales.¹² It is told

¹⁰ The sense of 'prest' intended in the title, *The Nonnes Preestes Tale*, could be the general one referring to 'any officeholder in the church.' See *MED* n.3, 1c.,a. It should be noted, however, that CT NP B. 4637 — 'Sire Nonnes Preest ... yblessed be thy breche and euery stoon' — is used as an illustration of the noun *prest* used figuratively in a phrase to mean 'a priest serving as chaplain to a nunnery or group of nuns.'

¹¹ Afterwards Harry tells the Franklin that the plan was for each pilgrim to tell a tale or two. By the time it is the Parson's turn to tell a tale, Harry is content with every pilgrim having told one tale (*Parson's Prologue*, 'Every man, save thou, has told his tale', l. 25).

¹² In this light it may be worth observing that Robert Kilburn Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1906), p. 208, and T. W. Craik, *The Comic Tales of Chaucer* (New York: Barnes and Noble 1964), p. 81n, saw the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as a revelation of Chaucer in *propria persona*. Alfred David also suggests something close to this when he observes that the Nun's Priest is a character who represents a moment of fusion with 'a particular persona of Chaucer the artist.' He goes on to add, 'One may even draw an analogy between the position of the Priest, whose background is obviously humble, a spiritual guide to the ladylike nuns of St. Leonard's and

by a 'sweete preest' (*Prologue of The Nun's Priest's Tale*, l. 2820). Surely the adjective *sweete* would describe the quiet, gentle Clerk of whom the Host had earlier commented:

Ye ryde as coy and stille as dooth a mayde
Were newe spoused, sittinge at the bord. (*Prologue of the Clerk's Tale*, 2–3)

As the collection of *Canterbury Tales* stands, there are two clear possibilities: either the Clerk told two tales as Chaucer himself did or the Clerk told only the tale of Griselda and some other anonymous priest told the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. If the latter is, indeed, the case, we can at the very least imagine the Clerk within earshot of the telling of the beast fable and understanding perfectly what the purpose of a kindred spirit was in telling such a tale.¹³ In the argument which follows, I by no means wish to suggest that the relation of the Nun's Priest to his tale cancels any of the numerous readings of the tale which has been seen in isolation as a superb beast fable and viewed in the context of the *Canterbury Tales* as a tale that subverts themes that run throughout the work.¹⁴

The purpose of the priest's tale

It is easy to view the *Nun's Priest's Tale* as the 'sweete' priest's acerbic yet witty commentary on his travelling companion, the Prioress. Like Chaucer the Pilgrim who describes the Prioress in the *General Prologue*, the Priest is fully aware of the degree to which she values the graces and trappings of cultivated life. With the very first line of his tale he immediately begins to displace the Prioress's standards with his own by opening the *Nun's Priest's Tale* with the description of the life of the old widow whose spiritual and moral values he shares. Whereas the Prioress sought to evade what were to her the constraints of a nun's life, by decorating the nun's habit, for example, by pleating its wimple (*General Prologue*, l. 151), wearing a cloak 'ful fetys' (*General Prologue*, l. 157) and choosing a rosary made of coral, green stones, and 'gold ful sheene' (*General Prologue*, l. 160), the poor widow 'In pacience ladde a ful symple lyf' (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, l. 2826). One can just imagine the Prioress's thoughts having heard that part of the *Clerk's Tale* which gives the account of how the Marquis arranges for clothing and jewels to transform a peasant girl into a courtly lady for her wedding day:

...this markys hath doon make
Of gemmes, set in gold and in asure,
Brooches and rynges, for Griseldis sake;
And of hir clothynge took he the mesure. (*Clerk's Tale*, ll. 253–56)

Doubtless the Priest and probably the Clerk, too, have had the opportunity to observe the Prioress's reaction at close range.

The Priest uses the poor widow's world as a referential frame which contrasts with and stands outside of the turbulence contained in the barnyard, which itself frequently provides instances of obvious identity with the Prioress. Within the barnyard world, the courtly values

the position of Chaucer as a poet writing for the ladies of the English Court': *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 224.

¹³ This individuating approach may seem to run against Jill Mann's analysis of the conventional ingredients of the pilgrim portraits in *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), and H. Marshall Leicester's argument that the tales give voices to their tellers and not the other way round in *The Disenchanted Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). My reading of these primary texts, nonetheless, moves that way.

¹⁴ See, for example, Jill Mann, 'The Speculum Stultorum and the Nun's Priest's Tale', *The Chaucer Review*, 8

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of the Prioress with their emphasis on wealth as well as her pretention find a satiric echo in Pertelote, the chicken who is the rooster's favorite concubine. Pertelote is 'Curteys . . . discreet, and debonaire, / And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire' (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 2871–72). The priest's description of her is intended to recall that of the Prioress in the *General Prologue* that depicts her as being 'ful plesaunt, and amyable of port', someone who

. . . peyned hire to countrefete cheere
Of court, and to been estallich of manere,
And to ben holden digne of reverence. (*General Prologue*, ll. 138–41)

Much of the power of the priest's mocking satire comes from just this fact of the identification of the nun with a chicken. Pertelote's rooster lover, Chauntecleer, keeps her henlike glory before the reader as he gloats:

. . . whan I se the beautee of youre face,
Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre yen,
It maketh al my dred for to dyen. (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 3160–62)

Furthermore, Chauntecleer is used by the Priest to indicate that when the Prioress shows herself off as a woman capable of moral outrage in her telling of the sentimental tale about the young Christian boy who is killed by Jews and cast into a latrine to die that — capable of moral outrage — is exactly what she is not. (The old widow of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* frame, on the other hand, puts no moral stance on display yet is recognizable as a person of real conscience). The Priest has Chauntecleer refer to a story similar to the *Prioress's Tale* and gives the rooster a phrase that exactly repeats the nun's histrionic exclamation about the murder of the little clergeon: 'Mordre wol out' (*Prioress's Tale*, l. 576). Chauntecleer's story, alluded to in the course of his discussion of dreams, concerns the murder of a man by robbers who throw his dead body into a dung heap. The lines of commentary about the murder which are given to Chauntecleer by the Priest mockingly imitate the Prioress's storytelling style:

Mordre wol out, that se we day by day,
Mordre is so wlatson and abhomynable
To God, that is so just and resonable,
That he ne wol nat suffre it heled be,
Though it abyde a yeer, or two, or thre.
Modre wol out, this my conclusioun. (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 3052–57)¹⁵

Chauntecleer surrounded by Pertelote and her sister hens suggests the Priest in company with the Prioress and the nun 'chapelayne'. But even before the reader gets to the barnyard chickens, much in the opening portrait about the widow's life — which, though a framing device, is still part of the tale — plays off against what is known about the Prioress. As with the parody (and deflation) of the Prioress's courtly bearing achieved through its mirror image in Pertelote mentioned above, when the old widow's meals are said to be slight and without sauce or fancy food, the Priest intends us and his fellow pilgrims to remember the nun's attention to feeding with elegance:

(1974–5), 262–82 and Alan T. Gaylord, 'Sentence and Solas in Fragment VII of the Canterbury Tales: Harry Baily as Horseback Editor', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 82 (1967), 226–35.

¹⁵ There is a reminder of *The Clerk's Tale* as well in Chauntecleer's story of the murder, for the victim is lodged overnight in a place that recalls the humble home Griselda shared with Janicula of which the Clerk said, '. . . hye God somtyme senden kan/His grace into a litel oxes stalle' (*Clerk's Tale*, ll. 206–7). The victim, who is one of two pilgrims, is lodged in what is described as 'a stalle,/Fer in a yeerd, with oxen of the plough' (*Nun's Priest's Tale*, ll. 2996–97). His companion pilgrim has a dream in which the victim calls to him saying, 'Allas, for in an oxes stalle/This nyght I shal be mordred ther I lye!' (l. 3005). If the Clerk were telling the tale, the echo would

She leet no morsel from hir lippes falle,
Ne wette hir fyngres in hir sauce depe.
Wel koude she carie a morsel and wel kepe
That no drope ne fille upon hire breste. (*General Prologue*, ll. 128–31)

Again, the effect is to undercut what the Prioress means to be a grace. The humble ‘broun breed’ (*Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, l. 2844) of the widow’s table which feeds her and her daughters is less good than the ‘wastel-breed’ (*General Prologue*, l. 147) with which the Prioress feeds her hounds. Deflation again. Because the Priest in his poverty, signaled by the nag he rides, identifies with the life of the admirable old woman, he thus appropriates the moral high ground from the very outset of his taletelling. And later — after the matter of Chauntecleer’s troubling dream is taken up on the very narrow perch where he has trouble making love to Pertelote, and the hen’s interpretation proves wrong and that of her husband, the rooster, right — at the very moment the predatory fox enters the beast fable to capture the cock, the Priest seizes upon the opportunity to make an anti-feminist statement:

Wommennes conseils been ful ofte cold;
Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo,
And made Adam fro Paradys to go,
Ther as he was ful myrie and wel at ese. (*Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, ll. 3256–58)

There is a striking reversal in the beast fable of the relationship between the Prioress and the Priest: whereas the Priest is critical of and feels superior to the Prioress, Chauntecleer is passionate about Pertelote to the point of uxoriousness. When Chauntecleer’s lust for Pertelote leads him to wittily and purposefully mistranslate the Latin ‘*Mulier est hominis confusio*’ (l. 3164) as ‘Womman is mannes joye and al his blis’ (l. 3166), the mistranslation manages at once to signal the rooster’s submission to his desire for the hen and the Priest’s needling the Prioress for her poor language skills. Having unwisely ignored his own view of the dream as a prophetic one and having allowed his guard to drop as a result of Pertelote’s insistence that the dream arose from mere indigestion, Chauntecleer is ensnared by the flattery of the fox. The priest, however, depicts his rooster as intelligent enough to learn from his mistakes — at least the one about the dangers of flattery. Once he has escaped from the mouth of the fox and flown to the safety of the branches of a tree, Chauntecleer resists the fox’s entreaties to come down:

‘Nay thanne’, quod he, ‘I shrewe us bothe two.
And first I shrewe myself, both blood and bones,
If thou bigyle me ofter than ones.
Thou shalt namoore, thurgh thy flaterye,
Do me to synge and wynke with myn ye;
For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see,
Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee!’ (*Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, ll. 3426–32)

As a beast fable the tale the Priest tells must have a moral: that appears to be not only that a man who ‘wynketh, whan he sholde see’ (l. 3431) risks death, but also that a man who learns from his mistakes can triumph — a merry story, indeed.

The Priest’s moral is directed more at *mankind* than *humankind*, for there is no change of fortune for Pertelote who continues to be Chauntecleer’s concubine, as she has been ‘Syn thilke day that she was seven nyght oold’ (*Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, l. 2873). Thus to the Host, the Priest of the *Epilogue* looks a winner, a Priest triumphant, rooster-like with “So greet a nekke,

be a sign of playful wit; on the other hand, if the Nun’s Priest were some other clergyman, the reason for the association is ambiguous but no less interesting.

The Nun's Priest's Identity and the Purpose of his Tale

and swich a large breest!' (l. 3457), a veritable 'trede-foul' (l. 3451) like Chauntecleer. To sum up then, the purpose of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is to offer indirect criticism of the Prioress by showing how like Pertelote she is and how *unlike* the widow, which is to say, *unlike* the Priest, since he feels spiritually akin (as would the Clerk as well) to the old widow. The related theme of the dangers of listening to the counsel of women, a common antifeminist thread in clerical writing and, therefore, fitting to the character of a clergyman, seems to suggest that the Prioress — as a woman and, most especially, for all her specific private weaknesses — is probably not a good convent head and should certainly be regarded as intellectually inferior to her Priest. The Prioress is so obviously flawed as a nun that she deserves what she gets as a target of satire whether from a Clerk who is as glad to teach as he is to learn or from a Priest worthy to be a spiritual guide.¹⁶ This said, there is something unattractively bullying and smug about satirists even when their criticism is so indirect, so artful, so light as to leave their targets oblivious of the fact that they have been hit. The satirist must always have that quality which keeps Harry in awe of the Clerk and the Nun's Priest sure of what he is doing in his tale — 'his monolithic certainty'.¹⁷

This new reading of the problematical 'preestes three' in the *General Prologue* has attempted to give a greater sense of identity to the anonymous Nun's Priest by suggesting that Chaucer conflated him with another clergyman: the Clerk. This association helps shed more light on the Nun's Priest's relationship to the tale he tells. It is my hope that I have contributed something to unpicking a notorious problem.¹⁸

¹⁶ This section of the essay suggests the Prioress as a context for understanding the outlook and satire of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Peter W. Travis's study, *Disseminal Chaucer* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) mentions the *Prioress's Tale* three times and brings it together with the *Nun's Priest's Tale* only when citing Helen Cooper's remark about language, 'If the Prioress's Prologue had declared the inadequacy of words to express spiritual meaning, the Nun's Priest's Tale demonstrates how rhetoric can be manipulated to endow the most trivial of barnyard events with epic significance': *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 186.

¹⁷ The term was coined by Alvin Kernan in *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 22.

¹⁸ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the New Chaucer Society Congress held at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, July 2004.