University of Mohamed Boudief
Department of Letters and English Language
Level/ Second year G 1, 2, and 3
Module: British Literature
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LESSON ONE:

The Anglo-Saxon (Old English) and Medieval Periods (Middle English)

449-1485

Britain's early years were dominated by successive waves of invaders. Among them were the Anglo-Saxons—a people who gave us the first masterpieces of English literature

The Germanic invasions

Very little is known about the Britons, a Celtic people who were the original inhabitants of Britain. They were conquered by the Romans in the first century a.d. and became a part of the Roman Empire. Evidence of this occupation exists in familiar place names ending in *-caster* or *-chester,* a local version of the Latin word for "camp," *castra.* Around the year 410, when the Roman legions were required at home to protect the capital, the peoples of Britain were left unprotected and fell prey to raiding and looting from their neighbours on the Continent.

According to tradition, it was in 449 that the first band of people from the great North German plain crossed the North Sea to Britain and settled in what is now the county of Kent. They were Jutes, from the peninsula of Jutland in Denmark, and they were the first of many Germanic invaders. Following the Jutes came Angles and Saxons. The Britons were no match for the invaders, but they did not retreat to the mountains and moors without a struggle. The legendary King Arthur may have been the leader of the Celtic people who were driven into Wales.

These Germanic tribes brought with them a common language, the ancestor of our present-day English, called Old English or Anglo-Saxon. Together they created the Anglo-Saxon England ("Angle-land") that lasted until 1066, when the Normans led by William, Duke of Normandy, successfully invaded and conquered the country.

During the Anglo-Saxon period, England was not the unified country it is today. Most of this time the land was divided into separate kingdoms, the most important of which were Kent, Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. During the last two centuries of this period, the Anglo-Saxons were compelled to organize themselves to resist further invasions from the Vikings, or Norsemen, whom they called "Danes." King Alfred of Wessex (871-899) was able to unite his people and to force the Danes to the northeast part of

England. Anglo-Saxon England was born in warfare, remained an essentially military society, and came to an end in 1066 because of the superior strategy of another military power - the Normans.

Vikings

The 790s brought the next wave of invaders, a fearsome group of seafaring marauders from the rocky, windswept coasts of Denmark and Norway: the **Vikings.** Shrieking wildly and waving giant battle-axes, Viking raiders looted, killed, and burned down entire villages. At first, they hit and ran; later, finding England a more pleasant spot to spend the winter than their icy homeland, the Danish invaders set up camps and gradually gained control of much of the north and east of the country. In the south, the Danes finally met defeat at the hands of a powerful Anglo-Saxon king known as **Alfred the Great.** Alfred unified the English, and under his rule, learning and culture flourished. The ***Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,*** a record of English history, was initiated at his bidding.

The Norman Conquest

In 1042, a descendant of Alfred's took the throne, the deeply religious **Edward the Confessor.** Edward, who had no children, had once sworn an oath making his French cousin William, duke of Normandy, his heir—or so William claimed. When Edward died, however, a council of nobles and church officials chose an English earl named Harold to succeed him. Incensed, William led his Norman army in what was to be the last successful invasion of the island of Britain: the **Norman Conquest.** Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and on Christmas Day of that year, **William the Conqueror** was crowned king of England.

The Norman Conquest ended Anglo-Saxon dominance in England. Losing their land to the conquerors, noble families sank into the peasantry, and a new class of privileged Normans took their place.

Cultural Influences

Early Anglo-Saxon literature reflected a fatalistic worldview, while later works were influenced by rapidly spreading Christianity.

The Spread of Christianity

Like all cultures, that of the Anglo-Saxons changed over time. The early invaders were seafaring wanderers whose lives were bleak, violent, and short. Their pagan religion was marked by a strong belief in ***wyrd,*** or fate, and they saved their admiration for heroic warriors whose fate it was to prevail in battle. As the Anglo-Saxons settled into their new land, however, they became an agricultural people— less violent, more secure, more civilized. The bleak fatalism of the Anglo-Saxons' early beliefs may have reflected the reality of their lives, but it offered little hope. Life was harsh, it taught, and the only certainty was that it would end in death. **Christianity** opened up a bright new possibility: that the suffering of this world was merely a prelude to the eternal happiness of heaven.

No one knows exactly when the first Christian missionaries arrived in Britain, but by a.d. 300 the number of Christians on the island was significant. Over the next two centuries, Christianity spread to Ireland and Scotland, including the Picts and Angles in the north. In 597, a Roman missionary named **Augustine** arrived in the kingdom of Kent, where he established a monastery at **Canterbury.** From there, Christianity spread so rapidly that by 690 all of Britain was at least nominally Christian, though many held on to some pagan traditions and beliefs. **Monasteries** became centres of intellectual, literary, artistic, and social activity. At a time when schools and libraries were completely unknown, monasteries offered the only opportunity for education. Monastic scholars imported books from the Continent, which were then painstakingly copied. In addition, original works were written, mostly in scholarly Latin, but later in Old English. The earliest recorded history of the English people came from the clergy at the monasteries. The greatest of these monks was the **Venerable Bede** (c. 673–735), author of ***A History of the English Church and People.*** When Vikings invaded in the late eighth and ninth centuries, they plundered monasteries and threatened to obliterate all traces of cultural refinement. Yet Christianity continued as a dominant cultural force for more than a thousand years to come.

Anglo-saxon literature

The early literature of the Anglo-Saxon period mostly took the form of lengthy **epic poems** praising the deeds of heroic warriors. These poems reflected the reality of life at this time, which was often brutal. However, the context in which these poems were delivered was certainly not grim. In the great **mead halls** of kings and nobles, Anglo-Saxons would gather on special occasions to celebrate in style. They feasted on pies and roasted meats heaped high on platters, warmed themselves before a roaring fire, and listened to **scops**—professional poets—bring the epic poems to life. Strumming a harp, the scop would chant in a clear voice that carried over the shouts and laughter of the crowd, captivating them for hours on end with tales of courage, high drama, and tragedy

"And sometimes a proud old soldier Who had heard songs of the ancient heroes And could sing them all through, story after story, Would weave a net of words for Beowulf's Victory, tying the knot of his verses Smoothly, swiftly, into place with a poet's

Quick skill, singing his new song aloud While he shaped it ..."

This is how the ***Beowulf*** poet describes the singing of songs during his day. In fact, what is described in these lines is probably very similar to the circumstances under which the poem was originally composed. Anglo-Saxon poetry was an oral art. Poems were not written down until a much later period. Poems were sung, frequently to the accompaniment of a harp. Poets recited well-known poems from memory and at times created new ones. The professional poet, or scop, had a very important function in this society. He was the memory and historian of the tribe. It was he who remembered the important heroes, the kings, the

important battles, and the folklore of the tribe. The oral nature of the poetry probably necessitated a strong beat and alliteration. These poetic devices not only aided the memory, they were the necessary raw materials for free invention. New songs, such as the one that the soldier sings in the passage above, were made out of old matter.

The two most important traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry were the heroic tradition and the elegiac tradition, which mourns the passing of earlier, better times. Onto these traditions were grafted Christian beliefs, which gradually replaced pagan ones. Of the 30,000 lines of Anglo-Saxon poetry that remain to us, the most important single poem is the epic *Beowulf.* Of the great elegiac lyrics, the personal, dramatic "Seafarer" is a good example. It may be that the poems to have survived are the ones that appealed to the monks who finally committed them to writing. There are, however, some light and witty riddles in the early manuscripts that may call this theory into question. To the Anglo-Saxon, the riddle was an intellectual exercise. What do you think is the subject of this one?

I'm prized by men, in the meadows I'm found, Gathered on hill-sides, and hunted in groves; From dale and from down, by day I am brought. Airy wings carry me, cunningly store me, Hoarding me safe. Yet soon men take me; Drained into vats, I'm dangerous grown. I tie up my victim, and trip him, and throw him;

Often I floor a foolish old churl.
Who wrestles with me, and rashly would measure
His strength against mine, will straightway find himself
Flung to the ground, flat on his back,
Unless he leave his folly in time,
Put from his senses and power of speech,
Robbed of his might, bereft of his mind,
Of his hands and feet. Now find me my name,
Who can blind and enslave men so upon earth,
And bring fools low in broad daylight.

The churchmen who wrote verse generally wrote in Latin, though occasionally they included lines in English. (It was from their imitation of church hymns in Latin that the gradual introduction of rhyme into English verse developed.) The earlier prose writers and chroniclers among the Anglo-Saxon churchmen also wrote in Latin. The greatest of these was known as the Venerable Bede (673-735), the most learned and industrious writer of the whole period, author of *A History of the English Church and People* (731), an excellent historical authority of its time. As a historian, Bede is rightly regarded as "the father of English history." Nearly two centuries later, Alfred the Great, the ablest and most remarkable of all English kings, not only became the patron of scholars and educators but also turned author and translator himself after delivering his kingdom from the Danes. Anglo-Saxon prose and history owe most to his influence and his

example. Rather than use Latin, as had been the custom, Alfred promoted use of written English and was responsible for the initiation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,* the first historical record to be kept in English. The briefest study of Alfred's reign makes nonsense of any idea of the Anglo-Saxons as drunken oafs existing in a "Dark Age." Alfred maintained diplomatic relations with all neighbouring kings and princes, sent frequent embassies to Rome, corresponded with the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and may even, as we are told, have sent a mission as far as India. He also formulated a code of law and founded the first English "public schools." A truly great man, Alfred did much to educate a society that, with its social organization and laws, its letters and arts, was far from being barbarous, but, indeed, made an enduring contribution to our civilization.

Beowulf

English literature begins with *Beowulf.* It is England's heroic epic, a proper beginning for a national literature, but it belongs to everyone because it is profoundly human. The poem shapes and interprets materials connected with the tribes from northern Europe, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who invaded England after the Romans left in the fifth century. Their tribal history is in the poem. It is remote, even monstrous, and yet familiar: "keeping the bloody feud/Alive . . . and paying the living / For one crime only with another" (lines 68-72). It is a history of festering pride, loud talk, and drunken violence, of spies, bloody borders, and raids. But against this dark background the poem presents another kind of history. It is a history in which a stranger comes openly to help rather than covertly to kill and loot, in which eating and drinking and speaking and gift-giving are natural ceremonies uniting young and old, in which heroic strength is wise and generous. It is a history of ideal possibilities.

• The only surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* dates from around 1000, but the work itself was probably composed sometime during the eighth century. The poem, which recounts the exploits of third- or fourth-century Geats and Danes, is doubtless based on earlier unwritten stories that had been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Anglo-Saxons of Britain shared a common group of heroes with other Germanic peoples, and the hero Beowulf certainly has his origins in an earlier, pagan era. The author of the written version that has come down to us seems to have been a Christian. The language of this version is Old English: The translation you will read in Modern English is by the poet Burton Raffel.

Beowulf, like all epic poems, is about a hero who is leader of his people. The action is extraordinary, the hero larger than life. The diction is stately and many of its scenes —the banquet, the battle, the boast, the voyage, and the funeral — are traditional. The general tone of the poem is somber, owing to a vision of evil in the world, a belief in the power of Fate (*Wyrd* is the Old English word for it) to rule human destiny, and resignation to the certainty of death.

The first selection begins during a banquet given by the Danish king, Hrothgar (hfoth'gar) in a new mead-hall called Herot, to commemorate his victories. The mead-hall (or banqueting-hall) is so called because of a popular drink, mead, a fermented liquor made of water, honey, malt, and yeast, which was drunk at banquets and celebrations. Herot is also intended to be a place of peace and community. It is a symbol of the loyalty and interdependence of the lord and his faithful warriors. However, Fate has the monster Grendel in store for the Danes.

Bede, the venerable (673-735)

Bede, the Venerable, was the earliest historian of England and the earliest important prose writer. He was a contemporary of the unknown author of *Beowulf.* Bede, who was a monk, was known in his own day as a man of great scholarship and learning. His books were read and copied all over Europe. The title "Venerable" was added to his name in recognition of his reputation for wisdom, humility, and scholarship. He seems to have travelled little and spent most of his life, beginning at the age of seven, at the monastery of Jarrow. Bede's *History of the English Church and People* was originally written in Latin. However, the translation into Old English, undertaken in the reign of King Alfred the Great, became a classic and helped the people of the emerging English nation to take pride in their past. The *History* itself is more than a chronicle of events. It also contains legends, lives of saints, local traditions, and stories. One can get a fairly accurate picture of the daily life of the people from Bede's history.

"Caedmon of Whitby," the selection included here, tells of a miraculous event in the life of a man many people consider to be the first English religious poet. Caedmon was taken into Whitby Abbey in Northumbria when it was governed by its founder, St. Hilda (658-680), and so his Hymn dates from that period. He may have been the first to use the old heroic verse forms for exclusively religious subjects.

Old English

Just as Britain's fifth-century invaders eventually united into a nation called England, their closely related Germanic dialects evolved over time into a distinct language called English— today called Old English to distinguish it from later forms of the language. **A Different Language** Old English was very different from the language we know today. Though about half of our basic vocabulary comes from the Anglo-Saxon language, a modern English speaker would find the harsh sounds impossible to understand. Some words can still be recognized in writing, though the spelling is a little unfamiliar: for instance, *sc¯oh* (shoe), *hunig* (honey), *milc* (milk), and *faeder* (father). Other words have disappeared entirely, such as *hatheart* (angry) and *gleowian* (joke). Grammatically, the language was more complex than modern English, with words changing form to indicate different functions, so that word order was more flexible than it is now.

The Growth of English

The most valuable characteristic of Old English, however, was its ability to change and grow, to adopt new words as the need arose. While Christianity brought Latin words such as *cloister, priest,* and *candle* into the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, encounters with the Vikings brought *skull, die, crawl,* and *rotten.* The arrival of the Normans in 1066 would stretch the language even farther, with thousands of words from the French.

The Medieval Period:

Historical Context: With the Norman Conquest, England entered the medieval period, a time of innovation in the midst of war.

The Monarchy

After his victory at Hastings, William the Conqueror lost no time taking full control of England. He was a new kind of king—powerful, well-organized, determined to exert his authority down to the smallest detail. Many people resented innovations such as the ***Domesday Book,*** an extraordinary tax record of every bit of property owned, from fish ponds to litters of pigs. Still, no one could deny that William brought law and order to the land, "so that," as one scribe wrote shortly after William's death, "any honest man could travel over his kingdom without injury with his bosom full of gold." Power struggles in the decades after William's death left England in a state of near-anarchy until 1154, when his great-grandson Henry Plantagenet took the throne as **Henry II.** One of medieval England's most memorable rulers, Henry reformed the judicial system by setting up royal courts throughout the country, establishing a system of juries, and beginning to form English common law out of a patchwork of centuries-old practices. Henry's son Richard I, known as **Richard the Lion-Hearted,** spent most of his ten-year reign fighting wars abroad. During his absence, his younger brother, John, plotted against him. The villain of **Robin Hood** legends, **King John** was treacherous and bad-tempered, quarrelling with nobles and raising their taxes until they threatened to rebel. In 1215 he was forced to sign the **Magna Carta** ("Great Charter"), which limited royal authority by granting more power to the barons—an early step on the road to democracy.

As the medieval period drew to a close, war was a near-constant fact of life. The **Hundred Years' War** between England and France began in 1337, during the reign of Edward III. As the war continued on and off for more than a century, England also had to weather several domestic crises, including a terrible plague known as the **Black Death,** which killed a third of England's population. When the war finally ended in 1453, England had lost nearly all of its French possessions. Two rival families claimed the throne—the house of York, whose symbol was a white rose, and the house of Lancaster, whose symbol was a red rose. The fighting that ensued, known as the **Wars of the Roses,** ended in 1485 when the Lancastrian **Henry Tudor** killed the Yorkist king Richard III at Bosworth Field and took the throne as Henry VII. This event marked the end of the Middle Ages in England.

Cultural Influences

Medieval literature is best understood in the context of three powerful influences on medieval society: feudalism, the church, and a code of conduct called chivalry.

- **The feudal system: Feudalism** was a political and economic system that William the Conqueror introduced into England after the Norman Conquest. Based on the premise that the king owns all the land in the kingdom, William kept a fourth of the land for himself, granted a fourth to the church, and parcelled out the rest to

loyal barons, who, in return, either paid him or supplied him with warriors called knights. The barons swore allegiance to the king, the knights to the barons, and so on down the social ladder. At the bottom of the ladder were the conquered Anglo-Saxons, many of whom were serfs—peasants bound to land they could not own.

- **The power of the church:** There was one grand exception to the feudal system's hierarchy: the church. Led by the pope in Rome, the medieval church wielded tremendous power—levying taxes, making its own laws, running its own courts, and keeping kings and noblemen in line with the threat of excommunication. The church owned more land than anyone in Europe, and its soaring stone cathedrals and great abbeys were as impressive as any castle. The church's power did lead to conflicts with the monarchy. When Henry II's archbishop and friend Thomas à Becket began favouring church interests over those of the crown, four knights loyal to the king murdered him. Becket was declared a saint, and his shrine at Canterbury became a popular destination for pilgrims, such as those described in **Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.**
- **Chivalry and courtly love:** Medieval literature, including the famous stories of **King Arthur,** was influenced by another social force as well—the ideals of chivalry and courtly love made popular during Henry II's reign. Henry's wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, brought from French court circles the concept of **chivalry,** a code of honour intended to govern knightly behaviour. The code encouraged knights to be generous, brave, honest, pious, and honourable, to defend the weak and to battle evil and uphold good. It also encouraged knights to go on holy quests such as the Crusades, the military expeditions in which European Christians attempted to wrest the holy city of Jerusalem from Muslim control. Eleanor and her daughter Marie applied chivalric ideals to the relationships between men and women as well. They presided over a "court of love," where lords and ladies would come to be entertained by music and tales of King Arthur and other romantic heroes and argue about the proper conduct of a love affair. **Courtly love** and the concept of chivalry represented ideals rarely met in real life. Yet they served as inspiration for some of the finest literature of the time.

Literature of the Times

Medieval works, such as *The Canterbury Tales* and Arthurian romances, drew from many sources, historical and contemporary, while reflecting the society and ideals of their time.

The Age of Chaucer

The most famous writer of medieval times, "the father of English literature," was **Geoffrey Chaucer,** a poet who demonstrated the potential of English as a literary language. Drawing on sources as diverse as French poetry, English songs, Greek classics, contemporary Italian tales, and Aesop's fables, Chaucer masterfully blended old with new, all in the natural rhythms of Middle English, the spoken language of the time. **an English masterpiece** *The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer's best-known work, displays his ability as a storyteller, his keen sense of humour, and his sharp eye for detail. A collection of tales ranging from irreverent to inspirational, it is held together by a **frame story** about a group of pilgrims who pass time on their journey to the shrine of Thomas à Becket by telling stories. The pilgrims' characters are revealed through the stories they tell and their reactions to one another's tales. Though Chaucer apparently intended to have each of the 30 pilgrims

tell 4 stories apiece, he died having completed only 24 of the tales. Chaucer lived during a time of change and turmoil in England. He was born just a few years after the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War and was still a small child when the bubonic plague hit Europe. The Black Death, as it was known, greatly reduced the population, which led to a shortage of laborers. In turn, serfs realized their new value and left the land to work in towns and on neighboring estates. This shift led to the decline of feudalism and the growth of a new middle class, to which Chaucer's family belonged. In addition, the war with France had spurred the re-emergence of the English language among the ruling class. With its cast of characters ranging across British society, from the "perfect gentle Knight" to a common miller, and its use of everyday English rather than elevated Latin or French, *The Canterbury Tales* reflected all of these developments.

Other works: Chaucer was not the only poet of his time to compose in English or to write about ordinary people; **William Langland** did both in his masterpiece *Piers Plowman.*

Features of Chaucer's Writing

Chaucer uses vivid and exact words. His poetry is full of vigour and swiftness. Chaucer's great contribution to English poetry is that he introduced from France the rhyming couplet of iambic pentameter (which was later called the "heroic couplet") to English poetry, and used it in his masterwork. This poetical form gradually took the place of the old alliterative verse form in Chaucer's day. Chaucer is the first great poet who wrote in the current English language. He wrote his poetry using the east midland dialect of England, the dialect of London. So he did much in making the dialect of London the foundation of modern English speech, and in establishing English as the literary language of the country. Chaucer's style in *The Canterbury Tales* is remarkably flexible. His prose, like his vocabulary, is easy and informal. Chaucer is a great satirist, but his satire is not bitter when he pokes fun at the foibles and weaknesses of people.

Introduction to*The Nun's Priest's Tale*

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories in a frame story, between 1387 and 1400. It is the story of a group of thirty people who travel as pilgrims to Canterbury (England). The pilgrims, who come from all layers of society, tell stories to each other to kill time while they travel to Canterbury. According to the General Prologue, Chaucer intended that each pilgrim should tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two tales on the way back. He never finished his enormous project and even the completed tales were not finally revised. Scholars are uncertain about the order of the tales. As the printing press had yet to be invented when Chaucer wrote his works,*The Canterbury Tales* has been passed down in several handwritten manuscripts.

The nun's priest is one of the thirty pilgrims seen gathered at the Tabard Inn. He is a clergyman accompanying the two nuns, the prioress and the second nun. As no woman – not even nuns – were allowed to perform certain essential rites of passage in Christianity, the nuns in the Tale require the services of the male priest.[2] The tale is a fable. There are animal characters interacting with each other in a humane fashion. It also follows the formula of tale within a tale, where smaller anecdotes are nestled within the larger framework of a frame tale. This form of storytelling has been popular across cultures and for a long time. In India, the *Panchatantras* are a classic example of multiple layers of tales within tales.

The Nun's Priest

Whatever the specific conventional and ideological foundations informing the proscription against female clergy, it is clear that communities of nuns in the fourteenth century, like the Benedictine nunnery of St. Leonard's with which Chaucer's Prioress has long been associated, did not enjoy the same autonomy and self-sufficiency as did their monastic counterparts. Nunneries were therefore of necessity compelled to establish a formal relationship with at least one priest. Depending on the size and needs of the convent, the priest could be either a resident of the convent, serving a parish wholly comprising a sizable community of nuns, or he could be the local parish priest in whose territory a smaller convent was located. The larger convents often had several residential priests. Although no ' 'General Prologue" portrait of Chaucer's Nun's Priest is provided (other than the brief and contested line attached to the Prioress's portrait), the exchange between the Host and the Nun's Priest prior to the "Nun's Priest's Tale" (and continued as the "Epilogue") does shed some light on the Nun's Priest both as a representative of his profession and as an individual in late fourteenth-century society. It is ambiguous whether Chaucer's Nun's Priest is a parish priest providing services to Madame Eglentine's convent, or her priest in-residence. That he is a resident of the convent, however, seems more likely in the context of the Canterbury Tales.

Although the Prioress holds the superior position in her convent, the rituals of the nunnery would be contingent on the services supplied by the Nun's Priest. Despite his crucial service to the convent, however, the Priest is in the service of the Prioress, her subordinate in social status, and hence it is he who is identified as her traveling companion; she is not the Priest's Nun, but rather he is the Nun's Priest. That a priest would accompany nuns on a pilgrimage as well as provide clerical services for their convent is appropriate for a priest's vocation in the fourteenth century. For in addition to providing his services as a confessor, a priest accompanying nuns on a pilgrimage would serve as a kind of bodyguard, a deterrent against those who might attempt to rob, rape, or otherwise abuse the nuns. Outside the relative security of the convent walls, the two nuns would be vulnerable and unprotected. On the Canterbury pilgrimage, moreover, the two nuns and the Wife of Bath are the only three women present in a company of perhaps thirty-three pilgrims. The disproportionate numbers alone hint at the risks to which the women might be exposed, especially if one considers the more vulgar and impulsive members of the group such as the Miller or Summoner. Late fourteenth-century nuns were discouraged, or even forbidden, to travel unless absolutely necessary, and in fact nuns were specifically forbidden to go on pilgrimages, if the York decrees of 1195 and 1318 were still to be observed. Still, nuns did in fact venture outside their convents, and if Madame Eglentine chooses to disobey the bishop's injunction against frivolous travel, she nonetheless adheres to the stipulation that nuns not travel alone. Indeed, the burly and virile Nun's Priest—in the Host's words, "See, whiche braunes hath this gentil preest, / So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest! / He loketh as a sperhauk with his yen" (VII.3455-3457) ["See, such brawn has this gentle priest, / So great a neck, and such a large breast! / He looks as a sparrow hawk with his yen"]—would make a formidable enough bodyguard for the nuns, especially given that most, though not all, of their fellow Canterbury Tales pilgrims seem decent and restrained enough.

The Tale

The three main characters are the rooster Chauntecleer, his chief spouse, the hen Pertelote, and a fox named Russell. The narrative opens with Chauntecleer having a bad dream about being captured by a predator. He shares

this information with Pertelote, who dismisses it as a meaningless dream, emphasising that all dreams are meaningless and this specific dream must have been caused by the imbalance of red choler, one of the different 'humours' or fluids inside the body. Therefore she urges her husband to take a dose of laxative and restore a healthy balance of said fluids inside his body. Chauntecleer is not convinced and sticks to his belief that dreams are premonitions of actual things to come, and should be taken seriously. Both husband and wife tell smaller anecdotes supporting their respective views. But when night falls, the fox Russell does not attack Chauntecleer directly but tries to entrap him with clever words. He declares that he only wishes to listen to Chauntecleer's legendary singing. He also professes to be aware of the rooster's father's singing, and Chauntecleer's pride blinds him. He tries to sing with all his might, closing his eyes and straining his neck. Russell promptly grabs the rooster's neck and starts to run away. The noise alerts the whole neighbourhood. Humans and animals chase the fox. At this point Chauntecleer stokes the pride of his captor, and says that he trusts Russell is only taking him to a quiet place in order to better enjoy his singing. It would be just to tell these clueless chasers what his real intention is. Russell the fox agrees and opens his mouth to speak, and Chauntecleer quickly escapes to a treetop. The fox tries to sway him once more, but in vain. Chauntecleer affirms that he will not be fooled again, and Russell laments that he deserves to lose his prize because he did not know when to keep his mouth shut. These affirmations become the morals of the tale, and the gathered company of pilgrims is pleased, as is shown in the epilogue.

Chauntecleer in his argument against the meaninglessness of dreams brings up references from history, mythology and folklore. The wide range of information matches with the priest's vocation, as it was standard requirement that priests be trained in multiple disciplines. Overall, the tale emerges as a layered narrative showing contemporary England in various facets, but in a lighter tone than many of the other tales by the nun's priest's co-pilgrims.

Analysis

Conventionally, the beast fable is considered to be a short story with an explicit moral, stated at the end as a maxim. Characters of these stories are personified animals with human characteristics that are always easily understood. Language of the conventional fables is simple, not elevated like in The Nun's Priest'sTale. Allegory was often used in order to express the diversity of human character and worldly wisdom. Chaucer's usage of this familiar XIV century genre differs from the accepted norms of the time as he gives a variety of expansions which complicate the interpretation of the tale. The most important difference from the traditional usage of the beast fable is that in The Nun's Priest's Tale there is almost no human interaction with the animals. Focus on the widow and her estate at the beginning of the tale is quickly transferred to the rooster Chauntecleer and his beloved hen Pertelote. This swift change is used mostly to contrast the widow's poor and humble life style with Chauntecleer's pompous, lavish and rich one.

After a realistic presentation of the setting the narrative continues with the highly allusive description of the protagonist and his wives. Medieval writer of the fable often used this form to practice sophisticated rhetoric, so did Chaucer. He gives us the super chickens, Chauntecleer and Peretelote who are familiar with philosophy and rhetoric and a simple fable becomes a live conflict between two psychologically depicted and extraordinary characters. But, traditional beast fables pictured things as they are, not as they ought to or could be.

The true humans in The Nun's Priest's Tale are animals, super intellectual ones and they represent almost all human qualities – love, consideration, affection, wisdom, knowledge, power of speech, beauty etc. Animals do behave as humans in this story, but all their foibles are also human ones. Beast fables usually develop the story through action and their animals are portrayed simply as animals – talking animals, but in The Nun's Priest's Tale chickens are described as human characters who think throughout the situation and have a vast general knowledge. The focus of this story is not on the action of the common characters but on the discussion about who is right. All these departures from conventional fables make The Nun's Priest's Tale almost the parody of that genre. Large part of the tale, actually, represents an educated discussion on dreams because a widely used genre in medieval literature was a Dream vision. This form was basically used to avoid the medieval literary restrictions, because the narrator could express more liberal ideas through the dream, without fear of being judged or even punished for them. Traditionally, the dreamer would learn from a dream a meaningful truth or receive the definitive impulse that was very important for his present state of mind and it was usually done by God. In the dream he would have a guide figure towards the truth or some knowledge. In Chauntecleer's dream there is no guide figure and Chaucer again inverts the standard usage of this genre. The audience didn't witness the dream, it becomes familiar with it through the telling of Chauntecleer, mostly because Chaucer wanted the audience to find the meaning of the dream for themselves. The dream episode occupies most of the story. Through the discussion between Pertelote and Chauntecleer about the meaning of dreams and their role in the real life, Chaucer displays his philosophical knowledge. But since it is portrayed through the lips of chickens it gains totally different role in the story. Chickens discussing on medieval notions of philosophy, medicine, astrology and psychology produce a story of wit, irony, mockery and finally, but not the least important, sympathy.

During the Middle Ages dreams were considered as evil and their images were seen as temptations from the devil. The Bible alone has approximately seven hundred references to dream as a divine revelation. In The Nun's Priest's Tale two different views on the origin and significance of dreams are presented and through the discussion of chickens the illustration of medieval genre exemplum is given. Since stated examples have a moral purpose to it, they can also be seen as sermons. Pertelote stands on a ground view that dreams do not have a meaning and uses Cato's words to prove that. "Lo Cato, which that was so wise a man, Said he not thus: `Ne do no force of dreams'?" (Chaucer, 2003: p. 220) She thinks that Chauntecleer's dream of a beast wanting to eat him is a product of his indigestion and suggests that he should be healed with some herbs. Chauntecleer's description of the importance and prediction of dreams in an ample monologue is much elaborate and supported with several examples from life and the Bible. Those examples are mostly based upon the Boethian ideas and the well known medieval themes of Fortune, Fate, Freedom and Providence. All the stories that Chauntecleer uses to sustain the notion of dreams as omens, make us believe that he will be considerate and cautious about his own dream.

> "And therefore, faire Pertelote so dear,
> By such examples old yet mayst thou lere
> That no man shoulde be too reckeless
> Of dreams, for I say thee doubteless,
> That many a dream full sore is for to dread." (Chaucer, 2003: p. 223)

But he chooses to reject his own conviction because the beautiful face of his wife made all the fears disappear and thus Pertelote forced him in submission. The only way in which Chauntecleer can prove his masculinity is through simple copulation. His expressed knowledge through rhetorical and philosophical examples seems useless

at the end and we become aware that he only used it in order to impress Pertelote and prove her wrong. Since he rejected the dream warning, although he won the verbal battle, he had to be punished, but he managed to escape due to his inborn intelligence that has nothing to do with a dream vision.

The beast fables always ended with explicit moral, easily understood by the audience. But in The Nun's Priest's Tale there is more than one moral and they are not clearly stated. Priest evades telling us the correct lesson and advice because he wants us to find them for ourselves. The ones that obviously impose are to be aware of flattery, pride, influence and inconsiderate talking. Chaucer makes his moral conclusion more diverse and therefore more human. The moral actually depends on one's point of view. If we are searching for it through the rooster's experience we will learn not to be over proud and not to believe in flattery. Fox's experience will teach us not to speak when we ought to be quiet, and Pertelote's not to change someone's convictions if you are not absolutely sure that you are right.

Furthermore, in the framework of the fable, Chaucer gives parodies of epic poetry and courtly love seen in medieval romances. The epic heroes are often described as super-humans, who are involved in great battles in which they have to fight with almost supernatural strength to prevail the obstacles. Chaucer uses the convention of epic and courtly love poetry for humorous purposes. The main characters in our tale are described in terms better suited to the highly-born characters than chickens. Chaucer ascribes to Pertelote qualities expected of a lady in conventional love affair. She is sociable, reasonable, polite, sweet and sexual. She wants of Chauntecleer to accept all knightly qualities like wisdom, bravery and love and not to be afraid of simple dream that is just a product of his indigestion. Description of the Chauntecleer from the beginning of the tale resembles the one of a hero or a knight. The colors used to describe Chauntecleer remind us of the images of nobility. His chests are as red as coral, his beak is black and shiny, claws are as white as lily and his body the color of burnished gold. He is described by the sublime noble and heroic characteristics especially since he has a superior role in the entire society represented. First of all, he is the only man in the world of women and secondly he has the direct power over the entire community as he declares when their days begin and end with his majestic crowing. He is proud, superbly educated, sure of himself, great lover of seven hens, but truly devoted to one, Pertelote. He lives an ample life in singing, philosophical discussions and making love. His name, in French, means the one who sings clearly. But, Chaucer takes the trivial, natural and everyday event of snatching the rooster by the fox Don Russell to make out of this story an epic mockery through the high-styled and elevated language used normally in an epic poetry. He compares the turbulent and frightened hens that chase the fox who snatched Chauntecleer to the Roman senator's wives on the night that Nero burned Rome. Confusion and noise of the entire household in chase of the fox is also compared with the Peasant's rebellion and Chauntecleer`s situation with that of Priam, king of Troy. Mentioning the Peasant's rebellion to compare the noise of the chase is the first utilization of some actual and contemporary historical event in The Canterbury Tales, but it is used as a parody concerning the context. Chaucer made the chase of the fox to resemble the battle and accordingly the language used to describe it is elevated and rhetorical just like in epic tales, but since it is used for the description of natural and ever existing strife between the animals, it gains a humorous overtone

This approach towards love is very similar to those used in fabliaux, medieval genres that represent a comic, indecent tale with a plot that usually involves a cuckolded husband depicted through the lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. These stories were most often satirical towards conventional morality and institutions. Aside from the open sexual relationship of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, they act as a true married couple with deep and varied emotions towards each other. They get angry at each other, they advise each other and flatter

each other, make love to each other but in their treatment towards each other there is no metaphysical nor idealized love. Everything in their relationship is quite normal and human. There is no typical medieval women's subordination to men in this relationship; on the contrary, the domination of woman is accented as Pertelote manages to convince Chauntecleer that his dream has no meaning. Reacting to his fear about the dream she behaves as a stereotype off a nagging wife. Chauntecleer is stubborn but he relies on her rationality. Their relationship without social distinction between the spouses and without ideal courtly treatment is ironically almost the most real one of all Chaucer's relationships represented in The Canterbury Tales.

The end of the story is realistic, neither white nor black. What made Chauntecleer easy target to the fox was his pride, carelessness and enjoyment in flattery. The pride also made him defend his attitude toward the dreams. Sly fox used its flattering tongue to convince the rooster not to be afraid because the fox came in peace to hear his majestic and all around the country famous voice. However, Chauntecleer managed to save himself from the jaws of the fox using the same persuasive devise. He convinced the fox to show its pride and self-assurance and brag of its success, taunting the pursuers. By opening his mouth to do that, Chauntecleer escaped and flew on the tree not letting the fox convince him again to trust him. Although Chauntecleer was aware of the prediction of the dream, he also knew that everything is in God's hands.

But, as a digression, priest himself talks about mistake that Chauntecleer made when he trusted a woman. Because of the woman's advice Adam had left the Paradise. Medieval people thought that Adam fell for Eve's attraction and was blinded by his own sensuality, so was Chauntecleer. He let his infatuation with Pertelote to cloud his judgment. Bible interpreters of that time accentuated gluttony, pride and lust as main reasons of Adam's fall. All these sins can be spotted in Chauntecleers`s behavior. This comparison of Chauntecleer and Adam made many critics search for much deeper allegory in this story. Indeed, the text of The Nun's Priest's Tale is full of allusions to the Fall of Man. Some critics went even further in identification of Chauntecleer's captivity and salvation with the crucifixion and resurrection of the Jesus Christ and the fox's temptation with the Satan's who challenged Jesus to demonstrate and prove his godliness by jumping from the top of the temple. The only difference is that Chauntecleer fell under the influence of fox, unlike Jesus. In the medieval art, Eden was usually represented as an enclosed garden and Chauntecleer does live in blessedness with his wife in a fenced yard with his enemy ravening. Furthermore, the tree became a salvation for the Chauntecleer when he flew on it escaping the fox, but was a damnation and death for Jesus. If we consider this story to be a religious allegory, that is most unlikely, we can see in Chauntecleer`s experience the medieval ideas on men's temptation, fall and salvation.

Middle English

Along with political and cultural upheaval, the Norman Conquest led to great changes in the English language. Despite their Viking origins, by 1066 the Normans spoke a dialect of Old French, which they brought to England.

Status Talk: Norman French became the language of the English court, of government business, of the new nobility, and of the scholars, cooks, and craftspeople that the Norman barons brought with them to serve their more "refined" needs. The use of English became confined to the conquered, mostly peasant population. Hints of this class division still survive in modern English. For instance, Anglo-Saxons tending cattle in the field called the animal a *c¯u,* or cow, while the Norman aristocrats who dined on the product of their labors used the

Old French word *buef,* or beef. Ever adaptable, English soon incorporated thousands of words and many grammatical conventions from Norman French. These changes led to the development of Middle English, a form much closer than Old English to the language we speak today.

English Makes a Comeback: During the long war with France, it came to seem unpatriotic among the upper class to use the language of the nation's number-one enemy, especially since Anglo-Norman French was ridiculed by the "real" French speakers across the English Channel. By the end of the Hundred Years' War, English had once again become the first language of most of the English nobility.

Literary Terms

Allusion: an indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader's familiarity with what is thus mentioned. The technique of allusion is an economical means of calling upon the history or the literary tradition that author and reader are assumed to share, although some poets (notably Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot) allude to areas of quite specialized knowledge.

Examples of Allusion to Classical Mythology

- Achilles' heel (alluding to the one weakness of Achilles)
- arrow of love (allusion to Cupid)
- carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders (allusion to Atlas)
- pushing a boulder uphill every day (allusion to Sisyphus)
- looking like Venus (alluding to the goddess of beauty)
- Herculean effort (alluding to the strength of Hercules)
- opening Pandora's box (alluding to Pandora's myth of letting trouble into the world)
- can't stop staring at himself (allusion to Narcissus)

Examples of Biblical Allusion

The Bible is another frequently referenced source for writers utilizing allusion as a literary device. Here are some famous examples of Biblical allusion:

- garden (Eden, creation)
- snake (serpent, Satan)
- flood (Noah's Ark)
- apple/fruit (tree of knowledge, temptation)
- cross (Christ, crucifixion)
- great patience (Job)
- fraternal competition (Cain and Abel)

Examples of Historical Allusion

Sell down the river

During the early –to- mid 19th century in America, slaves were transported down the Mississippi River for sale to the plantation where the work was harder than other counties. To sell the person down the river is to betray him for his own benefit.

Casanova

He was a Famous Venetian adventurer and writer who romanced over 100 women during the early1700s. Calling someone a Casanova can be a compliment and an insult also. It means a charismatic man with a reputation for having too many romantic relationships.