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Chaucer Meets Burke: Examining Medieval Elementary Education and Societal Conventions Through a Rhetorical Lens

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Chaucer Meets Burke: Examining Medieval Education and Societal Conventions Through a
Rhetorical Lens

William Shakespeare is often lauded for his command of the English language that makes his works not only integral to classroom curricula, but universal in how they are read and interpreted around the world. In our awe of Shakespeare, we perhaps unintentionally allow him to dwarf another great master of the English language, a man who is credited with starting the tradition of modern English literature of which Shakespeare is a part. The works of Geoffrey Chaucer reflect his innovation in developing the art of literature itself. In literary debates regarding Chaucer's works, it is the innovation of works such as *The Canterbury Tales* that makes them so compelling to read from so many differing critical perspectives. William Minto creatively described Chaucer as "a fine day if not the last fine day, in the autumn of mediaeval European poetry" (qtd. in Bloom 240). It is with the hope of enjoying and preserving the memory of that last autumnal day, that critics and readers of Chaucer continue to enthusiastically read his *Tales* and proffer new understandings of their meaning.

Why do the works of Geoffrey Chaucer continue to intrigue his modern readers as much as they did his medieval readers nearly six hundred years ago? Chaucer's works remain relevant because they continuously elicit differing interpretations that reflect prevailing critical theories. Although a close reading of Chaucer's works was previously viewed as a somewhat frivolous

pursuit by critics, complex theories such as Marxism, deconstruction, and queer theory have moved to the forefront of Chaucerian criticism. These theories buttress the progression of Chaucerian studies and demonstrate how "contemporary literary theory should not imply a simplistic rejection of traditional medieval scholarship but rather encourage an ongoing reevaluation of the critical assumptions currently structuring the discipline" (Finke 5). In other words, the critical theories now prevalent in contemporary Chaucerian studies should be embraced for their ability to bridge the distance of time that prevents us from attaining a more perfect understanding of the meaning in Chaucer's writing. However, despite the immense variety in approaches within Chaucerian criticism throughout the twentieth century, comparatively little has been written that applies Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory of identification to Chaucer's works.

To better understand Burke's rhetorical theory, it is prudent to further explore the specific meanings of the terms *identification* and *consubstantiality*. Such an understanding will explicate how individual members of Chaucer's audience--who differ in their social status and level of education--become consubstantial with one another through the telling of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. One focus of Kenneth Burke's text, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, is to address "the possibilities of classification in its *partisan* aspects; it considers the ways in which individuals...become identified with groups or less at odds with one another" (Burke 22). In connection to *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, the members of the *Tale's* medieval audience would be those who, because of their difference in social status and education, would be at odds with one another. In William H. Rueckert's book, *Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, 1924-1966*, John Kirk explains "that the term *identification* used by Burke is essentially new with properties that are not found in the traditional use of the term" (Kirk 345). He makes the distinction between Burke's definition of

identification and its traditional denotation by emphasizing how the element of hierarchical structure and the inherent conflict within identification is key to understanding what makes Burke's rhetorical theory unique.

In his formula, Burke provides the necessary framework for understanding how his theory is effective in the examination of the division inherent in identification. As he explains, "[i]dentification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division" which thus makes "[i]dentification...compensatory to division" (Burke 22). Conflict and division in Burke's theory is thus integral to its effectiveness as a lens through which to conduct a literary analysis of a text such as *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Burke himself provides an excellent example that clarifies the importance of conflict and division to his rhetorical theory. He asks his audience to consider how "men are brought to that most tragically ironic of all divisions, or conflicts, wherein millions of cooperative acts go into the preparation of one single destructive act" which Burke claims is war (Burke 22). He then elaborates with an explanation of how "[m]odern war characteristically requires a myriad of constructive acts for each destructive one; before each culminating blast there must be a vast network of interlocking operations, directed communally" (Burke 22). While there is no war in *The Canterbury Tales*, the same logic that justifies the place for conflict in Burke's rhetorical theory also justifies the application of the theory to a literary analysis of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. In order for the "culminating blast" of challenging the social conventions of medieval England to occur and be successful, "a myriad of constructive acts" must first occur (Burke 22). In the context of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, these constructive acts are the various elements of medieval elementary education with which its audience members identify. Specifically, one foundation of the pilgrims' identification is their shared memory and application of their medieval educational experience. All the literate pilgrims would have

engaged in these exercises such as reading Aesop and Cato, participating in disputations, and translating Latin phrases; they could remember these educational exercises; and they might even apply them to their understanding of the Nun's Priest's story as the story developed around them. In other words, the pilgrims would have used these exercises to analyze and judge other characters' words such as Chauntecleer's. It's this shared experience of medieval education that forms the basis for the pilgrims' identification with each other and thus the identification of Chaucer's medieval audience with the pilgrims. Furthermore, this identification occurs even as the characters experience division among themselves--divisions that inherently result from their difference in social status and level of education.

This description and understanding of identification and its dependency on conflict resolution also helps define *consubstantiality* and its integral role in Burke's theory. In doing so, the role language plays in Burke's theories of identification and consubstantiality is revealed. Kenneth Burke defined rhetoric in the twentieth century as "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Brummett 23). That is to say that rhetoric constitutes an audience from which it requires active participation, interpretation, and appreciation. Thus, the language such as that in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* illustrates elements of medieval elementary education that allows the pilgrims and Chaucer's medieval audience to become consubstantial with one another and analyze the alliances and differentiations within their group.

Consubstantiality is defined by David Cratis Williams in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times* as "[a] sharing of the same essence or substance, by which humans attain states of identification sufficient to act together cooperatively" (Williams 140). Within this definition of consubstantiality are the elements of

autonomy previously discussed that the rhetorical subjects in Burke's theory possess. Ultimately, "[t]o be consubstantial with another is to be of the same essence, the same substance, but it is not to be identical" (Williams 140). To be identical would be to imply that autonomy is lost as a result of consubstantiality. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke presents a formula that emphasizes the importance of autonomy where "A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (Burke 20). To elucidate, both subjects maintain their individuality while also being susceptible to the persuasive techniques of rhetoric that, when enacted upon them, are capable of unifying the subjects' interests despite their differences. Burke therefore emphasizes the individuality of his rhetorical subjects as well as their potential to be *consubstantial* with one another. The fundamental principles of Burke's rhetorical theory mark a shift in the attitudes that perpetuate the erroneous tradition of passing unfair judgment on the study of rhetoric. Such an appreciation for rhetoric's benefits are reflected in how it makes a new reading of a familiar text like *The Nun's Priest's Tale* possible. Consequently, the *Tale* can be recognized for how it evokes the memory of medieval education and unifies its medieval audience in their identification with that memory.

Critics of rhetoric might question the use of this approach to the analysis of literature presuming that rhetoric is only effective or necessary as a persuasive tool in speech and composition. However, this understanding of rhetoric that motivates such assessments of its purpose reflects only one definition, which is usually not applied to literature. In his text, *History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction*, James Herrick provides another way to view the purpose of rhetoric. He defines it as "the study of how we organize and employ language

effectively, and thus it becomes the study of how we organize our way of thinking in a wide range of subjects" (Herrick 3). In his definition, Herrick emphasizes rhetoric's power as a linguistic tool that can be used to influence the thoughts of its audience. Ultimately, rhetoric should be recognized and appreciated "not [as] a secondary addition to text: rather, it is through rhetoric that one thinks about language, truth, form, embodiment, time, history, intention, authority, the social construction of meaning, and the very human problem of being in the world" (Lerer 139).

The ill-repute with which the definition of rhetoric is viewed has contributed to its seeming illegitimacy as a field of study as well as its lack of value in literary analysis. This illegitimacy is defended by three main accusations: rhetoric is manipulative, rhetoric is ornamentation, and rhetoric is a clumsy tool (Verhoeven). Although a seemingly valid accusation, the first ignores the agency of its audience members (Verhoeven). Unlike Burke, it neglects to acknowledge that identification happens with the consent of its audience members, who choose to identify based partially on the human affinity for symbols as a way of making connections with each other (Verhoeven). Similar to the first accusation, the second accusation neglects an important aspect of rhetoric. In its contention that rhetoric is mere ornamentation, this accusation creates a false divide between content and style, not recognizing that content and style actually go hand-in-hand (Verhoeven). Regarding the clumsiness of rhetoric, it is a rhetorical theory like Burke's that exposes the hidden elegance of rhetoric and thus its applicability to the subtleties of literature (Verhoeven).

Further legitimacy for rhetoric's role in literary analysis is presented in Herrick's text, where he explains how the adverse view of rhetoric is not one that originated in the twentieth century (Herrick 1). Plato addresses rhetoric in his *Gorgias* where he writes that "the type of

rhetoric being taught in Athens was simply a means by which 'naturally clever' people 'flatter' their unsuspecting listeners into agreeing with them and doing their bidding" (Herrick 1). It is a statement made by Nietzsche, however, that redeems rhetoric's validity as a serious academic field of study. Nietzsche claims "nothing in the realm of language is purely 'natural' and unmarked by 'rhetorical arts,' that rhetoric is 'the essence of language,'" (Herrick 2). If only for the integral role that Nietzsche claims rhetoric plays in language, rhetoric's applicability to literary analysis is worth further consideration.

To appreciate the application of Burke's unique rhetorical theory to *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, one must understand the hierarchy and the inherent divisions of the society into which the *Tale* was first introduced. In its most basic conception, English society in the fourteenth century was one to which scholars have applied the modern description of a three estates model where the first estate is comprised of "those who pray", the second estate is comprised of "those who fight", and the third estate is comprised of "those who work" (Mortimer 39). To further complicate this structure of medieval English society is the hierarchy of the subgroups within each estate such as how, in the third estate, "a physician outranks a tradesman, who in turn outranks an agricultural laborer" (Hallissy 20). The societal model of "The Three Estates" is one that illustrates how the different parts of society worked in tandem to ensure the society functioned as a whole. This tri-partite model also provides a useful visual representation of fourteenth-century English society. However, this model is flawed in its characterization of medieval society during Chaucer's time. Appreciating the flaws in this societal model serves to elucidate and better understand the publication of literature and the reception of texts such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

In the late fourteenth-century, England witnessed a shift in social structure as well as in the everyday use of the English language by members of society. Chaucer grew up and wrote at a time when "the leadership of the first estate was being challenged and questioned...the line of demarcation between the second and third estates was being blurred by change" (Childress 43). That is to say, that the flaws of the tri-partite model were exacerbated in the second part of the fourteenth-century so that it no longer made allowances for those who didn't fit neatly within the boundaries of each estate. Chaucer, himself, was one such member of society who was difficult to categorize within the tri-partite model. Not only was he a respected writer, but he was "involved in many different fields: accomplished courtier, experienced soldier, wily ambassador, spy, poet, story teller, and gentleman of the world" (Lambdin and Lambdin xiv). Naturally, Chaucer's résumé does not make him a man who can easily be categorized as either one who prays, one who fights, or one who works. To further illustrate the flaws of the three estates model is Chaucer's education. According to the tri-partite model of society, "those who pray" in the first estate would have been those in society who received the traditional medieval elementary school education. However, Chaucer was not a clergyman and received a comparable education even as a member of society who didn't fit within the bounds of the first estate. Recognizing the flaws of the three estates model of society exposes the way in which Chaucer uses *The Nun's Priest's Tale* as part of the *Canterbury Tales* to exploit the societal shift of which he was a part.

Provided with the supporting evidence of rhetorical theory and the structure of medieval English society, it would seem that applying Kenneth Burke's theory of identification and consubstantiality would confirm how the *Nun's Priest's Tale* strengthens the divisions separating the members of a higher social status, Chaucer's literate audience, from those of a lower social status. According to Burke's theory, the various elements of education presented in *The Nun's*

Priest's Tale are those with which the pilgrims of a higher social status would readily identify. Included among these pilgrims would be the Knight, "the Prioress and the nun; the Monk; the Friar; the Summoner; the Pardoner and the Parson" (Huddleston 64). Because of their professions in life, they would have been exposed to the various elements of medieval elementary education presented in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. As they listened to the *Tale*, Burke would say that these pilgrims become consubstantial with one another because they are able to identify with the elements of medieval elementary education evoked by the *Tale* and therefore share in the same essence characterized by those memories. Burke's concept of identification also "functions not only as a process by which separate entities are brought together, but also as a structure--a hierarchical structure in which the entire process of rhetorical conflict is organized" (Kirk 345). It may therefore be said that *The Nun's Priest's Tale* creates a hierarchical structure that places the pilgrims of these professions at a superior level. They would identify with each other despite the three estates model. Especially given that the divisions among the three estates were crumbling. However, the specific level of high social status is determined by each pilgrim's profession which creates division among even this group of pilgrims. Despite this division, all of these pilgrims would still have shared, and been able to identify with, the specific elements of medieval elementary education as it is portrayed in the *Tale*. The presence of division is significant because it is a reflection of the successful application of Burke's theory to *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. It speaks to the way Burke helps explain why people--including the pilgrims and Chaucer's medieval audience--strive to continue to identify with each other, despite that so much argues for their difference from one another.

It is possible to take the application of Burke's theory a step further, however, by considering the way *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is told to its audience, the Canterbury Pilgrims as a

whole group. When all the pilgrims are considered together, the variety in their professions is evident as is the equal variety in their levels of education. This contributes to and reinforces the structural hierarchy that separates those who differ in social status. Before 1476, "the transmission of literature involved a single text, an oral reader (who might or might not also be the author), and a listening audience" (Hallissy 1). According to Hallissy, "[d]irect addresses to the listeners and conversational tags remind the modern reader that *The Canterbury Tales* are imagined orally, as stories told by an individual to a group" (Hallissy 1). In the context of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, it is easy to imagine the Nun's Priest orally telling the other pilgrims about the shenanigans of Chauntecleer, the proud barnyard rooster. Initially, it would seem that only a select few of the pilgrims are able to identify specifically with the medieval elementary education in the *Tale*. However, the plot could be enjoyed by all of the pilgrims who listened to the Nun's Priest's oral telling of the *Tale*. It is important to broaden the scope of the *Tale's* audience beyond the Canterbury pilgrims to the members of medieval English society. Doing so exposes how the pilgrims of a lower social status represent those who benefited from the tradition of oral narration and how literature became more accessible to non-literate members of society. In this way, the oral tradition further exploited the increased social mobility of the late fourteenth century and challenged the medieval social hierarchy.

It is also important to acknowledge how the other pilgrims are able to enjoy and appreciate *The Nun's Priest's Tale* despite their inability to relate to its elements of medieval elementary education. In making this acknowledgement, it is possible to see how *The Nun's Priest's Tale* not only makes the pilgrims with a higher social status consubstantial with one another, but it makes all the Canterbury pilgrims consubstantial to one another. The hierarchy within the group of pilgrims still remains as does their autonomy. However, all the Canterbury

pilgrims are made consubstantial with each another because they identify with the text of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* itself rather than its specific elements of medieval elementary education.

Using Burke as a lens, the whole group of pilgrims demonstrates how his theory can be applied to a new reading of the familiar text in two ways: one way relates specifically to those pilgrims with a higher social status while the other relates to all the pilgrims regardless of their social status and level of education. Without Burke's rhetorical theory, *The Nun's Priest's Tale* could not be recognized as a rhetorical tool that influenced this consubstantial relationship among the pilgrims.

Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales* are recognized by critics, such as Jill Mann, as part of the genre of medieval estates satire. *The Canterbury Tales* thus becomes "a satiric representation of all classes of society' -- the form of an estates satire" and thus a text that demonstrates the way Chaucer exploited the social mobility occurring in the late fourteenth-century and challenged the traditionally hierarchical composition of society (Mann 1). By seeing *The Canterbury Tales* as a satire of society in the fourteenth century, the connection can be made between the text and the way in which the pilgrims represent "a conspectus of medieval English society" (Mann 4). This connection is made more significant in how the pilgrims represent this cross-section of medieval society yet cannot be easily categorized according to the criterion of the three estates. Ruben Quintero supports this claim with his explanation of how, in the *General Prologue*, Chaucer "left out the clerical and secular elites...and he did not respect the usual division between the clergy and laity or the hierarchy within each order" (Quintero 66). The character of the Nun's Priest is particularly representative of Chaucer's dismissal of hierarchy; it is the Priest, not the Prioress, who is "subordinate in social status, and hence it is he who is identified as her traveling companion" (Lambdin and Lambdin 63).

The way in which Chaucer challenges the hierarchical structure of the fourteenth-century is not confined to the pages of *The Canterbury Tales*. Rather, the way in which his work contributed to the social mobility of his time can be seen in his medieval contemporary audience. According to Boitani and Mann, it is a challenging "task of determining the boundaries of Chaucer's contemporary audience" because "the circumstances of oral narration in Chaucer's day could have permitted people to hear his work without having the occasion (or perhaps even the ability) to read it" (Boitani and Mann 5). The broadened inclusivity that oral readings of texts such as *The Canterbury Tales* afforded naturally contributed to the popularity of the social readings that characterized this century. Despite the progress in social mobility, however, traces of other variables continued to impose a certain level of exclusivity on medieval literature.

Boitani and Mann claim that less than five percent of the medieval population were literate which meant that the majority of the population didn't learn the Latin and Norman French languages (Boitani and Mann 6). Typically, it was members of a higher social status who were privileged in being "the first to learn and to find opportunity to read for themselves, in seclusion as well as in company" (Ford 91-92). As educated members of society, the claim may be made that the current social status of these people would comprise those in Chaucer's literate audience who could specifically identify with the memory of medieval elementary school education that *The Nun's Priest's Tale* evokes. Unfortunately, this means that those of a lower societal status would not be able to readily identify with the memory of elementary school education in medieval England. Correlating with the increasing social mobility, this separation among those in society was mitigated when William Caxton brought the printing press to England in the later part of the fifteenth century. Although Caxton made literature more accessible to a wider

audience, it was still only those of a higher social status who were initially able to take advantage of the benefits the printing press offered.

To discuss and analyze elements of medieval elementary school education, we must return to the education Chaucer received to examine the way it parallels the education portrayed in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* and challenges the social conventions of medieval England. J. Stephen Russell humorously describes this endeavor as one that "is plainly a foolhardy task, with all the comic potential of analyzing the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines" (Russell 6). With the lack of records pertaining to Chaucer's education there is a serious deficit in the specific information related to where and for how long Chaucer went to school. According to Russell, "the best guess seems to be that he [Chaucer] attended St. Paul Almoner's for elementary education and that he was in the vicinity of the Inns of Court long enough to get himself fined for brawling" (Russell 6). However, there are available pieces of information that, when compiled, provide some sense of the education Chaucer may have received. For example, from his writings we know that Chaucer knew Latin and French, that he was familiar with astronomy and dream lore, and he had a working knowledge of logical and grammatical terminology (Russell 6). Although Chaucer's did not receive his education in the traditional sense, aspects of his education such as dream lore would have been present in the medieval education of the Canterbury pilgrims as well as that of Chaucer's broader medieval audience. A certain degree of familiarity with Chaucer's education proves useful in that it provides an introduction to other specific elements of the elementary school education represented in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*.

As might be expected, medieval education drastically differs from the modern education with which we in the twenty-first century are familiar. First and foremost, elementary education in fourteenth-century England was primarily characterized as an education in grammar where

grammar "included vernacular and Latin reading, 'vocabulary,' and even some grammatical theory (of necessity, since classes were conducted in French and English)" (Russell 9). Students would generally begin their education at age six or seven as they still do in modern education. However, in the "song schools" where students began their education, they would not only learn their alphabet, but the "Latin recognition and pronunciation through drills in prayers, psalms, and hymns" often being asked to memorize and recite "the texts without any opportunity to interpret or reflect on the texts" (Russell 9-10). As it is made clear by the texts through which students would apply their knowledge of the alphabet and Latin recognition, religion was an integral aspect of the classroom curriculum.

A better understanding of the specific elements of the medieval grammar school curriculum may be achieved by first turning to Peter W. Travis's book, *Disseminal Chaucer*, in which he writes a chapter titled "*The Nun's Priest's Tale as Grammar School Primer, Menippean Parody, and Ars Poetica*". According to Travis, medieval elementary school education in England was characterized not only by "reading assignments, but memorizations, translations, paraphrasings, glosses, disputations, imitations, and themes amplifying and defending truths uncovered in the master text" (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 53). At the heart of this medieval grammar school education was Aesop and his fables that were used as the source for the various assignments students completed as part of their standard classroom curriculum. More specifically, in a section of Paul Strohm's text, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Travis explains that "[t]he most basic literary text for all schoolboys...was a collection of Aesop's fables, which...[they]...studied...with extraordinary diligence, by translating and examining fine grammatical points,...memorizing, paraphrasing, moralizing, and rewriting" (Strohm 83). In addition to Aesop, students learned the art of literary analysis and criticism by studying the

fables in conjunction with classic texts such as Cato's distichs, *ethica Catonia*, (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer* 56).

Cato's writing was useful in the medieval curriculum because his works served as another form of effectively assessing students' mastery of skills such as memorization, translations, and imitations. His distichs complemented students' reading of Aesop and often "preceded the fables in the standard course of study" (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer* 56). According to Travis, Cato aided students in their development of their skills of literary analysis and criticism when they "translated and memorized verbatim, the distich's more complex linguistic passages" (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer* 56). Although more prominently practiced at the university level, disputations were another aspect of medieval grammar school education. Encouraged to continue their education outside of the classroom, teachers would pose questions for debate to their students while simultaneously asking students to propose their own "formal disputation with each other, both in and out of the classroom" (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer* 57).

In his text, Travis also takes care to mention the integral role Latin held in the curriculum of medieval grammar school education. Latin was typically accepted as the language of the educated and literate classes of English society. Travis emphasizes this class distinction by stating that "Latin was the preeminent language of knowledge and learning: it served as the *lingua franca* of the universities as well as the language in which all intellectual texts were written" (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer*, 57-58). The intensive study of Latin throughout students' elementary school education complements their equally rigorous study of Aesop's and Cato's texts. In his text, Russell underscores the prominent role of Latin in the medieval curriculum by identifying it as one of the most significant influences in education in medieval England. Russell explains that Latin was assigned "almost mystical privilege" which is to say that, even as early as

their elementary school education, students were learning the language that would later distinguish them as literate members of society and perpetuate the unequal hierarchy of fourteenth-century English society (Russell 10). Russell cautions his readers, however, by encouraging them to recognize that there was no alternative grammar that could be taught in the grammar school classroom; "there was literally no grammar instruction in the vernacular because there were essentially no prescriptive grammars of English or French from which to teach" (Russell 10).

We may now direct our attention to *The Nun's Priest's Tale* itself to examine the ways in which it reflects the various elements of curriculum in the medieval grammar school. Percy Van Dyke Shelly claims that "no one can tell how old" the *Tale* is and says this timelessness has made the beast fable into one that continues to delight and be a familiar text in the repertoire of English literature (Shelly 107). Despite its familiarity as a beast fable, Shelly lauds the *Tale* as "a new creation, or re-creation, and one that bears the imprint of Chaucer throughout" such as with his "subtle characterization of the Cock and the Hen, with their humorous likeness to man" (Shelly 107-108). In a superficial reading, the *Tale* may appear to be one that follows the mischievous antics of Chauntecleer, a proud rooster who debates the meaning of a troubling dream that eventually fulfills its own prophecy when he is nearly eaten by the fox who carries him off to the woods in his teeth. It is a disservice to merely be entertained by the *Tale* on this superficial level, however. The *Tale* ends with an offer to its readers. It tells us to "Taketh the moralite, goode 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" (Chaucer 3440-3443). In other words, the *Tale* explicitly encourages its readers to forget the superficial story itself, the chaff, and instead focus

our attention on the "'fruit' scattered about the [poem's] narrative field" from which its deeper moral meaning may be examined (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer 2*).

Heeding this advice, we may use our knowledge of Chaucer's education to begin connecting the *Tale* to the elements of medieval grammar education by studying the way in which his own education is reflected in the plot. In doing so, we begin separating the wheat from the chaff in the same way that the pilgrims were encouraged to do, channeling exercises around literary criticism and disputation with which they'd be familiar. We know of Chaucer's training in astronomy, which was an aspect of medieval grammar education that figures prominently in the *Tale*. In the beginning, Chauntecleer's routine of crowing is described thus: "By nature he crew ech ascencioun/Of the equynoxial in thilke toun/For whan degrees fiftene weren ascended,/Thanne crew he that it myghte nat been/amended" (Chaucer 2855-2858). To make Chaucer's language more understandable, this description of Chauntecleer's routine relates it to astronomy in the way he "crows when each hourly point of the celestial equator rises past the horizon" (Boenig 342, note 8). By using astronomy as the marker for the routine of Chauntecleer's crowing, Chaucer's accomplishment becomes significant. Chauntecleer's knowledge and use of astronomy further distinguishes the rooster as an educated member of society and, therefore, as representative of pedagogy in the *Tale* with which its medieval audience could identify.

It is the vibrant and proud character of the beloved feathered protagonist that acts as one of the best connections between the elements of medieval grammar school education and *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Chauntecleer's character demonstrates how the "the beast fable, debate, Catonian assertion, [and] Latin translation" in the *Tale* "would have been poignantly evocative, triggering a collage of bittersweet personal memories from...[it's audience's]...early years of

grammar school linguistic and literary training" (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer* 53). Additionally, the *Tale* evokes the habit of mind as encapsulated in the disputations and literary criticism exercises, which ask audience members to separate the wheat from the chaff in search of a deeper lesson about character and morality. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* begins with an introduction to the barnyard of the "poure wydewe somdeel stape/in age", the poor old widow (Chaucer 2819-2820). Within this setting sits Chauntecleer with his seven lovers, the most special of whom is, of course, Lady Pertelote. The vibrancy of Chauntecleer's character is not just in his personality and intellect, but is physically represented by the coloring of his comb which is "redder than the fyn [fine] coral/And batailled [crenallated] as it were a castel wal" (Chaucer 2859-2860). His beak is compared to the blackness of a jet stone and his legs are the brilliant color of azure (Chaucer 2861-2862). On his feet "nayles whitter than the lyllye [lily] flour" and his color was "ly burned gold" (Chaucer 2863-2864). His mannerisms are that of an educated aristocrat that he uses to maintain the deceptive illusion of being more than a barnyard chicken.

Against the backdrop of his barnyard setting, Chauntecleer debates with his love, Pertelote, the meaning of a troubling dream. It is in his comparison of this dream "to a number of auctorial *narrationes*, which he recounts in a wide variety of literary shapes" that we see represented by Chauntecleer the elements of debate found in the curriculum of medieval grammar education (Travis, *Disseminial Chaucer* 52). Chauntecleer tells Pertelote "That dremes been significaciouns/As wel of joye as of tribulaciouns" (Chaucer 2979-2980). The proudly educated Chauntecleer addresses the trouble of interpreting the meanings of dreams with references to a book in which he read about ancient accounts of similar dreams such as that of "the man [who] was logged wel ynough" and dreamed of his companion's murder (Chaucer 2998). This dream does come true when this man finds his companion's murdered body in a dung

cart at the west gate of the town just as his dream prophesied. However, the truth of this dream is complicated by the additional evidence Chauntecleer provides of instances that he believes prove the difficulty of interpreting dreams, a difficulty not necessarily attributable to indigestion. As Travis points out, however, the accounts Chauntecleer provides span from "the fulsomely dramatized, plotted, and sententiated story all the way to the wispiest of anecdotes" (Travis, *Disseminated Chaucer* 52). Despite the wide spectrum on which Chauntecleer's stories may be placed, his efforts to debate the truth of his dream speaks to the way in which the element of debate in medieval grammar school education is represented in the story. In his writing included in Strohm's text, Travis explains that one of "the most important traditions [of debate is]...the *sophismata* (or 'horizontal' debate), where no determination is expected and where students would argue on either side of almost any issue" (Strohm 84). With his final statement of "I am so ful of joye and of solas/That I diffye bothe swevene and drem", Chauntecleer leaves the debate open-ended in his desire to "feather" Pertelote twenty times (Chaucer 3170-3171). Thus, the end of Chauntecleer's debate about his troubled dream is characteristic of the *sophismata* debate of medieval elementary education. By ending the debate without coming to any definitive conclusion about the interpretation of dreams, the debate reflects the open-ended nature of the *sophismata*. The open-endedness of the debate may also be seen as a parallel to the open-endedness of the ongoing debate about status in society that characterized the latter part of the fourteenth century.

In response to Chauntecleer's position in this debate, Pertelote dismisses his notions about dreams by prescribing him an exorbitant amount of laxatives that would not only cure Chauntecleer's indigestion, but jeopardize his life. She chooses to support her side of the debate by analyzing the literal presentation of the dream rather than the intangible and unsupported

implications of the dream that Chauntecleer defends. Chauntecleer's argument for the truth of dreams specifically reflects the element of debate found in medieval elementary education; however, it is perhaps worth considering how the individuals on each side of the debate affect the way medieval grammar school education is represented in the *Tale*. To clarify, Pertelote is a female on one side of the debate whose support for her argument is markedly lacking in references to the volume of literature with which the learned Chauntecleer supports his argument. Pertelote references and praises Cato; however, her apparent lack of formal education may be seen as a reflection of the educational limitations for women in fourteenth-century England, a reality that is reinforced by the recurrent reference to the medieval education of schoolboys. According to Boris Ford, although feminine education existed to some degree, more so for "the noble or gentle widow", it was in a much more restricted form incomparable to that of the opposite sex at the time (Ford 99). Although Pertelote's education, like that of other females, is limited by medieval societal conventions, Chauntecleer's is not, which is why his inability to use his education supports the challenge of medieval societal conventions. Despite the education he represents, Chauntecleer does not heed his own teaching about the truth of dreams despite evidence to the contrary that his book learning provides. He compromises his knowledge by his inability to apply it in his debate with Pertelote and avoid being carried off by the fox.

Closely related to the characteristic practice of debate in medieval elementary education, is the study of Cato included in the curriculum. In *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, "half of...[its]...narration is taken up with a protracted scholarly debate centering around one of Cato's distichs" (Strohm 82). Despite her seemingly inferior education, it is Pertelote who first references Cato when she says, "Lo Catoun, which that was so wys a man,/Seyde he nat thus: 'No do no fors of dremes'?" (Chaucer 2940-2941). In translation, Cato believed that it is best for

us to pay no attention to dreams. Pertelote's very literal assessment of Chauntecleer's troubling dream is therefore corroborated by the words of the Roman Dionysius, Cato. However, Chauntecleer continues the debate of Cato's distich by responding to Pertelote with his belief that "men may in olde bookes rede/Of many a man moore of auctorite/Than evere Caton was, so moot I thee" supposedly refuting Pertelote's argument (Chaucer 2974-2976). Consequently, Chauntecleer launches into his account of "unevenly told literary exempla, closing out with an ironic citation and mistranslation of a Latin tag" (Stroh 82).

In addition to its portrayal of debate in medieval elementary education, this section of the *Tale* also contrasts book learning and life experience. As is suggested by the quote in the paragraph above, the book learning side of the debate, Chauntecleer "finds solace in books, feathering the pages of one as he debates with his wife about the meaning of dreams" (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 52). It is clear that he not only prides himself on his medieval education, but is quite dependent on it when confronted with an area of knowledge--the truth in the meaning of dreams--with which he is unfamiliar. Pertelote, however, represents a different side of the debate with her life experience of traditional medicine, a different kind of education. Her life experience and knowledge of medication differs from the education of book learning, but was nevertheless a serious course of study in the medieval period. Pertelote draws on her life experience when she analyzes Chauntecleer's dream from a more pragmatic standpoint. It is therefore logical that she would deem the dream invalid and prescribe Chauntecleer an overabundance of medicines to treat indigestion.

As a prominent and respected figure both within and without the standard medieval grammar curriculum, it is natural that Cato would make an appearance in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Having a character like Chauntecleer who intentionally represents book learning is an

appropriate way to introduce Cato to the plot of the *Tale* in a way that further establishes his place in the medieval curriculum. In Strohm's text, Travis writes that Cato was "[t]ranslated and memorized verbatim by all medieval schoolboys, [because] the distichs' finer grammatical points served as occasion for pedagogical elaboration and even for debate among the students" (Strohm 83). There are those who may view Cato's role in the *Tale* as trivialized by the way he is disrespected when he is relegated among the seemingly negligible literary exempla Chaucer recounts. However, Travis proffers the idea that "enclosing a Catonian apothegm inside an extended *disputatio* inside a cornucopian curricular environment" was simply Chaucer's way of "reenergiz[ing] memories of the many-faced foundations" of the medieval grammar school education (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 56). Thus, Travis's claim may be seen as a further defense of the way in which *The Nun's Priest's Tale* evokes the memory of medieval elementary school education for its medieval audience. It is this memory that creates identification among the pilgrims despite the divisions created by their differences in social status and profession.

The role of Latin both in medieval grammar education and *The Nun's Priest's Tale* has been alluded to only indirectly thus far; however, its importance makes it deserving of more thorough discussion. Travis provides the most comprehensive account of the rigorous Latin exercises, exercises that are most evocative of medieval grammar education. Students diligently studied "Latin grammar, translated Latin texts, and learned to write Latin verse, Latin prose, and Latin letters" (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 58). Travis delves deeper into the Latin curriculum by explicating the way students applied their knowledge of Latin in exercises called *vulgaria*. This term initially described the English sentences students were assigned and expected to translate. *Latinitates* was the term describing those Latin sentences into which students would translate the *vulgaria* (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 58). *Vulgaria* evolved into the term that described the

translation exercise itself. According to Travis, "schoolmasters often tried to think up Latin and English sentences that referred to everyday life, contemporary events, and schoolboy humor" (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 58). While these exercises may have been effective in teaching Latin, schoolmasters seemed to overlook how assigning these exercises further defined the unequal, hierarchical model of medieval society that made Latin its "mystical privilege" (Russell 10).

Despite the myriad interpretations of the *Tale* that have resulted from scholars' eagerness to reap the rewards of the "fruyt" it bears, the famous mistranslation of the Latin phrase "*In principio, Mulier est hominis confusio*" often constitutes a common thread that connects them (Chaucer 3163-3164). Specifically, it is the mistranslation of the second part of the phrase, "*Mulier est hominis confusio*", that provokes the most discussion and analysis (Chaucer 3164). It is at the end of his literary defense of the truth of dreams, when Chauntecleer commits this faux pas. Chauntecleer is still sitting on the wooden beam with Pertelote and quotes this Latin phrase in response to her persistence in prescribing him a potent, and even dangerous, regimen of laxatives. He tells her "'forthermoor,/That I ne telle of laxatyves no stoor!/For they been venymes! I woot it weel!/I hem diffye! I love hem never a deel!/Now lat us speke of myrthe and stynte al/this'" (Chaucer 3153-3157). Not only does Chauntecleer assert his position against the formidable laxatives, but he uses it as an opportunity to transition from debating with Pertelote to showing his adoration for her.

It is perhaps his carnal desire and affection for Pertelote that influenced in some small part Chauntecleer's mistranslation of the Latin phrase. By mistranslating the phrase, Chauntecleer further emphasizes the division between book learning and experience. The correct translation of the phrase reads "'In the beginning, woman is man's downfall (or ruin)'" (Beidler

195). However, Chauntecleer imposes a far more romantic meaning to the phrase when he translates it as meaning "'Womman is mannes joye and al his blis'" (Beidler 195). With such a romantic translation, how could Pertelote not feel flattered by the words of the handsome rooster who so obviously adored her? However, upon closer examination, the implications of Chauntecleer's mistranslation are not as benign as they may initially appear.

It is important to recognize the specific wording employed in Travis's description of this particular event in the *Tale*. In his contribution to Strohm's text, Travis remarks that Chauntecleer "carefully" mistranslates this Latin phrase (Strohm 82). He believes that Chauntecleer's mistranslation is indicative of the importance of remembering that *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is first and foremost a beast fable "and that our potent hero is an educated chicken who enjoys more than one natural talent we are left to marvel at, perhaps even to envy" (Strohm 82). As we know, Chauntecleer promptly succumbs to his carnal desires only a few short lines after his famous mistranslation. Had the outcome of Chauntecleer's error simply been his love-making with the "woman" he loves, the matter could be put to rest.

However, it is important to realize the full extent of the implications of Chauntecleer's actions. Namely, that his mistranslation "is a speech-act that tellingly instantiates translation's traditional masculinist bias--for as Chaucer's readers and auditors were fully aware, medieval women were marginalized by all things Latin because they were not admitted into the schools" (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 58). In other words, Chauntecleer's mistranslation not only earned him the fulfillment of his carnal desires, but it perpetuated the exclusionary aspects of medieval education and reinforced division within society. Those of Chaucer's audience will identify with this aspect of medieval grammar education in the way it reminds them of their Latin exercises and perhaps the times when they, themselves, mistranslated a *latinitates*. More importantly,

however, is how this particular memory of Latin exercises will become important in the way it enables the educated members of Chaucer's medieval audience to see the sophisticated way that *The Nun's Priest's Tale* causes the social hierarchy to crumble.

Chauntecleer's mistranslation of the Latin tag undermines his authority as a representative of book learning. Addressed in her text, *Knowledge, belief, and lack of agency: The dreams of Geoffrey, Troilus, Criseyde, and Chauntecleer*, Sue Hum addresses the rooster's authority bestowed upon him by his book learning. She cites Alfred David who "indirectly defines medieval 'human learning' as the extensive knowledge of books and the ability to use 'auctoritee' to add weight and significance to a story" (Hum 513). David's definition of human learning correlates with a comment made by Hum earlier in the text in which she describes "[t]he discursive world of the barnyard as a hierarchical, authority-driven world, supporting the primacy of a monarch. External knowledge not only privileges the status quo but is also responsible for maintaining a social hierarchy" (Hum 512). Taking this discursive world into consideration, a connection can be made between the way Chauntecleer's book learning not only represents one side of his debate with Pertelote, but the very hierarchy of the barnyard society in which he lives. Naturally, this social hierarchy cannot be disturbed. Had Chauntecleer not mistranslated the Latin phrase, he would have emasculated himself by admitting to Pertelote the power she had as a female to be the ruin of man. As a male member of society, much of Chauntecleer's pride and hierarchical superiority rests on the medieval education he experienced and that Pertelote was denied. To call the validity of Chauntecleer's education into question would be to simultaneously call into question his masculinity and the battle of the sexes would be lost. Chauntecleer would be forced to admit that there is no truth in dreams and that Pertelote was right in her assessment of his assertion. Consequently, Chauntecleer would have effectively

undermined the social hierarchy and authority given to the literate audience of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Of course, more can be said about the way social hierarchy rests on the aspect of gender in addition to social status. To address gender's role in relation to the social hierarchy any further, however, would be to digress too much from the primary argument of this paper.

There are two different ways to interpret the motivation behind Chauntecleer's mistranslation of the Latin tag each of which affects the hierarchy and thus the division of the society represented by the barnyard. By first examining the Nun's Priest's character, himself, a more fruitful discussion of each interpretation can be achieved. In his work, *Chaucer's Disgruntled Cleric: The Nun's Priest's Tale*, Arthur T. Broes cites R. K. Root, a critic of the Nun's Priest. Unsatisfied with the sparse description of this particular pilgrim, Root "rejected the Nun's Priest completely: 'Neither in the General Prologue nor in the links which fit the tale into its framework has Chaucer taken any pains to characterize the 'gentil Preest' who tells this tale. So we may dismiss him without ceremony'" (Broes 156). Given the depth with which his tale and its characters have been analyzed, it would seem that the same level of analysis should be given to the man who told the story. The priest's profession as a religious man would also include him among the members of a higher social status which makes it especially important to juxtapose an analysis of the priest with his tale. As Broes states, "[t]he rejection of the Nun's Priest's importance is ultimately dissatisfying and leaves the work a disjointed and garrulous effort, filled with digressions and allusions never quite satisfactorily tied together by the poet" (Broes 156). Therefore, further analysis of this elusive character is necessary.

The description of the Nun's Priest pales in comparison to the wonderfully rich description of the adored Wife of Bath. However, the Epilogue of his tale provides information about the priest that pieces together the fragmentary image of him that we may get from the *Tale*

itself. In the Epilogue, the Host provides a physical description of the priest when he says, "'Se which braunes hath this gentil preest/So gret a nekke and swich a large breest./ He loketh as a sparhauke with hise eyen/Him nedeth nat his colour for to dyghen/With brasile ne with greyn of Portyngale'" (Chaucer 3454-3458). The image of the priest portrayed by the Host is thus of a man who is quite muscular, who has a large neck and breast and who has eyes like a hawk. Because of his ruddy complexion, the Host says the priest has no need for several types of red dye such as "[b]rasile" which comes from Malaya and "Greyn of Portingale" which comes from Portugal (Boenig 353, note 2).

Although description of his character is lacking compared to descriptions of the other pilgrims, it is possible to make inferences about the Nun's Priest. As a result, we may be able to sketch a better image of the man telling the story of Chauntecleer and Pertelote. For example, Elizabeth Huddleston also proffers the idea that, in his description of the man, "[t]he Host could simply be poking fun at this priest, on his poor horse, in the company of the Prioress in her fine cloak; and in the convent, confined with all the holy sisters yet unable to perform as Chauntecleer does with all his 'sustres'" (Huddleston 64). Additionally, Huddleston believes that "[t]he Nun's Priest's character is known to the reader mostly from what he says and how he says it...There is no reason to think ill of him, and clearly he is educated" (Huddleston 64). Were we to take the Host's physical description of the priest at face-value, Huddleston's claims would be appropriate. It would seem that the Nun's Priest is little more than a body guard. However, just as his tale is far more complex than it at first appears, so too is the Nun's Priest's character. Instead of simply viewing the Nun's Priest as a body guard for the Prioress who rides beside her on a poor horse, we can use what is known about him to make a comparison between the pilgrim and Chauntecleer. Consequently, we can see how this comparison reveals a more

complex character in the Nun's Priest. Through a better understanding of the complexities of the Nun's Priest, we can see how his personal motivation influences his story and the way he crafts Chauntecleer's character. For, it is the character of this vain rooster that encourages the pilgrims to identify with one another despite their inherent division until the moment of the mistranslation when the Nun's Priest delivers a blow to the established boundaries of medieval society.

Chauntecleer is a character whose pomposity and superiority is brilliantly conveyed by Chaucer in his description of Chauntecleer's vividly colorful appearance. The way his mannerisms emphasize his education and the book learning he represents is an element of the rooster's character that has been well established. However, when juxtaposed to the Nun's Priest, similarities between the rooster and the pilgrim can be traced. Perhaps most prominently is the way in which the priest uses his tale to counteract the reversed-hierarchical relationship he has with the Prioress as her servant rather than her superior (Broes 159). Just as Chauntecleer turns to his book learning to assert his intelligence over Pertelote, the priest is "concerned with demonstrating to his fellow pilgrims that, although he occupies a subordinate position to this woman [the Prioress], he is really more than her intellectual equal" (Broes 161). It is this motivation that Broes presents as evidence for "the many supposed digressions" that are interpreted by critics as "so many embellishments that have little or no direct connection with the tale itself" (Broes 161). The close connection between the Nun's Priest and Chauntecleer refute this criticism and instead give value to the digressions by identifying them as "learned allusions that the Nun's Priest makes...either to embarrass the Prioress further or to establish his intellectual superiority over her" (Broes 161). In addition to discussing Chauntecleer's motivation for mistranslating the Latin phrase, it is worth noting the Nun's Priest's motivation for

mistranslating the phrase for his motivation is integral to the analysis of the two ways in which the mistranslation may be interpreted.

Chauntecleer's mistranslation may first be perceived as a purposeful mistranslation with religious echoes that affects the structure of society in the *Tale*. "*In principio*" translates to mean "In the beginning" which Bernard Felix Hupp explains is a reference to the biblical story of Adam and Eve in *Genesis* of the Old Testament (Hupp 178). Chauntecleer is therefore likened to Adam and Pertelote is likened to Eve. This comparison reveals a clear connection between Adam's downfall and Chauntecleer's; although Adam knew he shouldn't follow Eve's counsel in Paradise, "he was so attached to her that he disregarded the evidence of his reason" (Hupp 181). Similarly, it is not necessarily a lack of book learning that is the reason for Chauntecleer's mistranslation of the Latin phrase. Chaucer took care to emphasize the wealth of knowledge Chauntecleer has gained from all the books he has read. Chauntecleer knew the correct Latin translation, but mistranslated it into a meaning that instead reflected his own attachment to Pertelote rather than heeding the contrary evidence provided by his book learning. Chauntecleer's actions seem to thus confirm Hupp's belief that the religious connotations of the Latin phrase serve as a "reminder of God's creation of Adam, who was created that he might inherit the kingdom of heaven, but fell from grace through willful disobedience" (Hupp 178). Like Adam, Chauntecleer fell from grace through his willful mistranslation of the Latin phrase and literally fell from the beam to feather Pertelote.

In light of the connections that can be made between Chauntecleer and the Nun's Priest, Broes posits that the Priest utilized this event in the tale to further criticize the Prioress and assert his intelligence. To clarify, Broes claims that he uses Chauntecleer's mistranslation as a means of "indirectly criticizing the Prioress for her linguistic shortcomings" regarding Scripture (Broes

162). The Nun's Priest echoes Chauntecleer's sentiments regarding the social hierarchy that must be maintained where man and his book learning remain superior to the opposite sex. Broes underscores this point when he claims that "the Priest appears to be saying...that woman, in her proper place in the 'chain of being,' is a joy and a helpmate to man, but that to alter this position...is to invite trouble and disaster" (Broes 162). The "satiric purpose of this erudite clergyman" is one that is generally accepted by critics of *The Nun's Priest's Tale*.

Combined with the religious aspects of the mistranslated phrase, this view of the Nun's Priest shows how the mistranslation affects the hierarchy of the barnyard society. It is not sufficient to say that the Latin phrase has religious connotations simply because it likens Chauntecleer to Adam. The significance of the phrase must be further explored to directly connect the phrase to the Catholic church itself. Until the latter part of the Middle Ages, "Latin influenced the speech and writing of educated people" which meant "[t]o be educated was...to learn to read Latin" (Hallissy 11). However, according to Hallissy, Latin was also considered the "universal tongue of the Catholic church" which makes Chauntecleer's mistranslation of the specifically Latin phrase that much more significant (Hallissy 11). If seen as a deliberate mistranslation, Chauntecleer is successful in asserting his superior intelligence over Pertelote. Furthermore, Chauntecleer's deliberate deception would appear to emphasize the superiority of the book learning of literate members in Chaucer's audience.

Although the first interpretation of Chauntecleer's mistranslation is valid and accepted by critics, the flaws of the three estates model of society make it perhaps more appropriate to interpret Chauntecleer's mistranslation as an unintentional action. This second interpretation also has implications for hierarchical structure of medieval English society. Hum supports this alternative interpretation of Chauntecleer's mistranslation with her citation of David's statement

that "Chaucer parodies the pride and arrogance that accompanies human learning" (Hum 513). That is to say that Chaucer crafted a character such as the Nun's Priest who, in his story about a learned cock, consciously wanted to give his audience the impression that Chauntecleer unknowingly mistranslated the phrase. The value of interpreting the mistranslation as an accident is worth examining further because of its support of Chaucer's challenge of medieval social conventions.

The phrase, "*Mulier est hominis confusio*" is one that is "[p]art of a comic definition of woman so widely known that it was almost proverbial" in the Middle Ages (Benson 459, note 3164). The appearance and similar presentation of the same phrase in Chaucer's *The Tale of Melibee* underscores the prevalence of this definition. The popularity of this comical perception of woman speaks to the sophistication of the tale and its teller. The Nun's Priest, as a member of the clergy, would have received the education afforded to those of a higher status in society. Therefore, he certainly would have known the accurate translation of the phrase. However, Chaucer specifically has the Nun's Priest, an educated clergyman, tell a story in which the educated protagonist accidentally mistranslates a comically proverbial Latin phrase. By doing so, Chaucer takes advantage of the structure of the beast fable and transforms it into a sophisticated text that is effective in "reactivating his readers' early and quite challenging engagement in the formidable difficulties of literary criticism" (Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer* 56). By evoking this memory, Chaucer uses it to parody medieval elementary education and support the deconstruction of social conventions in medieval English society.

Burke enhances our appreciation of the sophistication of the beast fable by showing how the educated audience members of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* were lulled into a false sense of security in their higher social status. Until the moment when Chauntecleer mistranslates the Latin

phrase, the *Tale* encourages its literate audience to identify with the various elements of medieval education such as the readings of Aesop and Cato, disputations, and Latin translation exercises. In the process of identifying with these various educational exercises the educated members of the *Tale's* audience became consubstantial with one another despite their differences. However, it is precisely because the educated members of the *Tale's* audience identified with the various exercises of medieval elementary education that they were able to appreciate the sophisticated way the Priest caused the medieval social hierarchy to crumble. Being able to identify with the Latin translation exercises of their elementary education, means that the educated audience members would have known the accurate translation of the phrase. Therefore, they would have been able to easily notice the subtle discrepancy in Chauntecleer's mistranslation and appreciate the significance of the misinterpretation as one that was unintentional. The way the Priest uses Chauntecleer and his story to "communally direct" his audience toward this one destructive act of dismantling medieval social hierarchy might have been lost on his literate audience members had they not first identified with the several constructive acts in the story: the exercises of medieval elementary education (Burke 22).

Within the great tradition of English literature, Chaucer will always remain an integral and prominent figure. However, it would be folly to think that Chaucer's title "as the father of English literature and the first great English canonical poet" is solely responsible for providing his works with their seeming immortality (Boenig 20). Works such as *The Canterbury Tales* and the indefatigable literary discourse they elicit has made Chaucer immortal in the tradition of English literature. Derek Pearsall speaks to this discourse when he suggests that the "relationship between author, narrator and reader, being in a state of constant flux, is the subject of a quest in almost every tale, and the nature of Chaucer's experimentation is such that some tales will return

progressively more complex answers on successive readings, each reading being suggestive of new ideas" (Pearsall xi). That is to say that one cannot read Chaucer with the expectation of being enlightened or having questions answered. Like the *sophismata*, Chaucer's works remain open-ended, inviting new and continuing debates of meaning and interpretation. The reader of Chaucer must come to terms with the way "Chaucer...will allow his handling of stories to create problems, to ask questions, and to suggest ambiguities that are not easily resolved" (Pearsall xi). However, it is precisely the dissatisfaction of Chaucer's scholars and critics that incites them to continue seeking answers to the questions his stories pose and therefore continue the literary discourse he began.

The popularity and endurance of Chaucer and his works is incontestable. The longevity of rhetoric and its valued application to literary analysis is perhaps less established. Rhetoric's importance in literary analysis is emphasized when Seth Lerer describes the *Tale* as "a commentary...on the...apparatus of thought that generated the Chaucerian corpus. To understand the pervasiveness of rhetoric as a cognitive structure of medieval culture is to understand how Chaucer conceptualized the power of language, the grounds of knowledge, and the possibilities of representation" (Lerer 139-140). With the understanding that we live in the barnyard that is human society, rhetorical theories such as Burke's become helpful in revealing Chaucer's linguistic power so that we might recognize and interrogate our role within the barnyard. With its overabundance of "fruyt", *The Nun's Priest's Tale* exemplifies the challenges its myriad interpretations pose to scholars. However, as scholars of Chaucer, we should not be deterred and "retire...[to]... leave the field free and clear to Chaucer's gigantic genius" as Travis suggests we should (Travis 3). Rather, rhetorical analysis of beloved and familiar texts such as *The Nun's*

Priest's Tale should be celebrated for the way it broadens the field to accommodate both Chaucer's genius and the endless interpretations of his works that are yet to come.

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