The Nun's Priest's Tale

A widow who was rather old and poor In a small cottage dwelt in days of yore, Beside a grove that stood within a dale. This widow whom I tell of in my tale Had from the day that she was last a wife 2825 In patience led a very simple life, So little were her gain and property. With what God gave her, though, she thriftily Cared for her daughters and herself. Three cows She had, no more, along with three big sows, 2830 And but one sheep named Molly--that was all. And sooty were the bedroom and the hall In which she'd eaten many a scanty meal. With pungent sauce she never had to deal. No dainty morsel passed her throat, it's not 2835 A fancy diet found in such a cot, So overeating never caused her qualm. A temperate diet was her only balm, With exercise and a contented heart; The gout did not stop dancing on her part, 2840 And apoplexy never hurt her head. She had no wine to drink, nor white nor red, Her board was mostly served with white and black (Milk and brown bread, of which she found no lack), Broiled bacon, and sometimes an egg or two. 2845 Her work was much like dairywomen do. She had a yard that was enclosed about By paling and a dried up ditch without, In which she had a cock named Chanticleer, In all the realm of crowing without peer. 2850 His voice was merrier than the play Of the church's organ each holy day. And surer was his crowing than a clock (Even that of the abbey), for this cock By instinct knew each move of the equator 2855 As it progressed, that none too soon nor later But on the dot, fifteen degrees ascended, He crowed the hour no clock so well attended. His comb was finest coral red and tall, And battlemented like a castle wall. 2860 His bill was black and like the jet it glowed,

His legs and toes like azure when he strode. His nails were whiter than the lilies bloom, Like burnished gold the color of his plume. This gentle cock commanded at his leisure 2865 A flock of seven hens to do his pleasure, His paramours and sisters, each of whom Like him had wondrous coloring in her plume. But she with fairest coloring on her throat Was that one called fair damsel Pertelote; 2870 Discreet and gentle, showing courtesy, She was so gracious, such nice company, Right from the day she was seven nights old, That she had Chanticleer's heart in her hold Completely, as if under lock and key. 2875 He loved her, that was his felicity. And such a joy it was to hear them sing, At morning when the sun would brightly spring, In sweet accord, "My Love's Gone Far Away." 2880 (For in those days, so I have heard men say, The beasts and birds alike could speak and sing.) It so befell, as day began to spring, That Chanticleer was on his perch, with all His seven wives there with him in the hall, Beside him being fairest Pertelote, 2885 When he began to groan down in his throat As men in troubled dreams have done before. And when fair Pertelote thus heard him roar, She was aghast and said to him, "Dear heart, What's ailing you that makes this groaning start? 2890 For shame, so sound a sleeper to complain!" "My lady," Chanticleer sought to explain, "I pray, don't take me wrong in my distress. By God, I dreamt I was in such a mess That even now my heart is full of fright. 2895 May God," he said, "help me divine it right Lest into foul captivity I go. I dreamt that I was roaming to and fro Here in our yard when I espied a beast Much like a hound, who would have at the least 2900 Laid hold of me and left me cold and dead. His color was betwixt yellow and red; His tail as well as both his ears had hair With tips of black, unlike his coat elsewhere. His snout was small, a glow was in each eye. 2905

Still of that look I fear that I could die, And this has caused my groaning, there's no doubt." "Oh fie," she said, "faint-hearted you've turned out! Alas," said she, "for by the Lord above, Now you have lost my heart and all my love. 2910 I cannot love a coward, there's no way! For certainly, whatever women say, We all desire, if heaven let it be, Wise, hardy men of generosity, Husbands discreet--not niggards, fools aghast, 2915 Afraid of every weapon that comes past, Nor haughty boasters. By that God above, How dare you say, for shame, to your true love That anything can make you so afeard! Have you no manly heart to match your beard? 2920 Alas! can you be so afraid of dreams? Illusion's all it is, not what it seems. Such dreams from overeating come to pass, Or else from humors (if not simply gas) When they get too abundant as they might. 2925 For sure this dream that you have had tonight Resulted from there being great excess In your red bile--the very thing, God bless, That makes folks when they're dreaming have such dread Of arrows or of fire that's flaming red, 2930 Of red beasts that pursue to bite and maul, Of strife and of fierce dogs both great and small; Like melancholy's humor comes about To make so many sleeping men cry out For fear of big black bears, and bulls to boot, 2935 Or else black devils that are in pursuit. Of other humors I could tell also That torture many a sleeping man with woe, But I will pass as lightly as I can. "Look at Cato, who was so wise a man: 2940 Did he not say to 'pay no mind to dreams'? Now, sire," she said, "when we fly from the beams, For love of God please take a laxative. On peril of my soul, as I may live, This counsel is the best, I will not lie: 2945 Of choler and of melancholy hie To purge yourself. And there's no need to tarry Though in this town there's no apothecary, For I myself will teach you of the herbs

That aid your health when choler so disturbs; 2950 And in our yard these very herbs I'll find, And these will by their property and kind Purge you beneath as well as purge above. For this do not forget, for God's own love: You have a very choleric temperament. 2955 Beware unless the sun in its ascent Should find you with hot humors so intense; For if it does, then I would bet a fourpence You'll have a tertian fever or an ague, And either one could be a bane to you. 2960 A day or two you'll have some worm digestives, Then after that you'll take your laxatives--Some laurel, fumitory, centaury, Or hellebore, that grows here as you see; Or else the caper and the dogwood berry, 2965 Or ivy growing in our yard so merry. Go pick them where they grow and take them in. Be merry, husband, by your father's kin, And do not dread a dream. I say no more." "Madam," said he, "I thank you for your lore. 2970 But nonetheless, concerning Master Cato (So much renowned for all his wisdom, though He said that dreams are not a thing to dread), By God, in many old books it is read That many a man of more authority 2975 Than ever Cato was--or woe is me--Says the exact reverse of Cato's sentence, And has discovered by experience That dreams have often been significations Of joy as well as tribulations 2980 That folks endure as this life may present. Of this there is no need for argument, Experience is proof enough indeed. "One of the greatest authors men may read Says once upon a time two fellows went 2985 Upon a pilgrimage with good intent, And came upon a town wherein they found Such people congregated all around That there was lack of lodging. Up and down They couldn't find one cottage in the town 2990 In which they both might be accommodated.

And so it was, as circumstance dictated, That for the night they parted company And each of them sought his own hostelry And took his lodging as it might befall. 2995 So one of them was lodged inside a stall In a barnyard with oxen of the plow; The other one lodged well enough somehow, Whether it was by fate or by the fortune 3000 That governs each of us in equal portion. "It so befell that long before the day, This man dreamt in his bed there as he lay That he could hear his friend begin to call, Saying, 'Alas! for in an ox's stall Tonight I will be murdered where I lie. 3005 Dear brother, come and help me or I die. Come here,' said he, 'as quickly as you can!' Out of his sleep with fright uprose the man; But once awake, he was not overwrought And lay back down without a further thought--3010 He felt such dreams were only fantasy. Twice in his sleep this vision came to be, And then he thought his friend had come again For yet a third time, saying, 'I am slain! Behold my bloody wounds so wide and deep! 3015 Rise early in the morning from your sleep And at the west gate of the town,' said he, 'A cart that's full of dung there you shall see, In which my hidden body is contained. Now boldly see that this cart be detained. 3020 They murdered me, in truth, to get my gold.' Then each detail of how he died he told With such a piteous face, so pale of hue. And you can trust he found the dream was true; For in the morning, at the break of day, 3025 To his friend's lodging place he took his way; And when he came upon the ox's stall For his companion he began to call. "Here's what at once he heard the hosteler Reply: 'Your friend is gone. The fellow, sir, 3030 Went out of town as soon as it was day.' The man became suspicious right away, Recalling what he dreamt. He didn't wait A minute more, but to the western gate Out of the town he went, and saw at hand 3035 A dung cart headed out to dung some land (At least it so appeared), and its array

Was just as you have heard the dead man say. Then he began to cry out heartily For justice to avenge this felony: 3040 'My friend last night was murdered, here to lie Flat on his back inside this cart! I cry Out to you ministries, all you,' said he, 'Who in this town are in authority, For help! Alas, my friend is lying slain!' 3045 What more about the tale need I explain? The people cast the cart then to the ground, And in the midst of all the dung they found The dead man who so lately had been slain.

"O blessed God, so just and true, again As always murder is revealed by thee! Murder will out, as day by day we see; It's loathsome and abominable to God, Who, just and reasonable, spares not the rod, Will not allow that murder hidden be. 3055 Though it abide a year, or two or three, Murder will out, that's all I have to say. The officials of the town without delay Commanded that the carter then be racked; The hosteler was tortured, too, in fact, 3060 And soon they both confessed to their misdeed, And hanging by the neck was then decreed.

"Here men may see that dreams are things to dread. And truthfully in that same book I read, In the very next chapter after this 3065 (I speak the truth, or banish me from bliss), Of two who would have sailed the ocean for A certain cause upon some foreign shore, Had not the wind developed so contrary That in a city they were forced to tarry--3070 A merry city on the harborside. But then one day, when it was eventide, The wind began to change to suit them best; Jolly and glad the two went to their rest, 3075 That early they might sail when day began. But then great marvel fell upon one man; It happened as he slept, for as he lay He dreamt a wondrous thing toward the day. He thought a man was standing at his side, One who commanded that he should abide. 3080 'Tomorrow if you sail as you intend,

3050

You shall be drowned. My tale is at an end.' He woke and told his friend the dream and prayed That he'd agree his voyage be delayed. One day, at least, he begged him to abide. 3085 His friend, though, from his bed nearby his side Began to laugh, and scorn upon him cast. 'No dream,' said he, 'makes my heart so aghast That I'll delay to do as best it seems. I do not give a straw for all your dreams. 3090 For dreams are just illusions, only japes. Men always dream of owls or else of apes, Of things amazing to absurd degree, Things that have not, and will not, come to be. But as I see that here you will abide, 3095 Thereby forsaking willfully the tide, God knows I'm sorry and I say "Good day."" And so he took his leave and went his way. But half his course the fellow hadn't sailed When--I don't know by what mischance it failed--3100 Quite suddenly the vessel's bottom rent And ship and man beneath the waters went, In sight of other ships that were beside, That sailed with him upon that very tide. And so, my dear and fairest Pertelote, 3105 Of old examples such as this take note. No man should act so carelessly about His dreams. I say to you without a doubt That many a dream is one to sorely dread. "Look, in the life of Saint Kenelm I've read 3110 (His father was Kenulphus, noble king Of Mercia) how he dreamt a dreadful thing A little before his death. Upon that day He dreamt about his murder. Right away His nurse explained it in detail, and she 3115 Then bade him guard himself from treachery. But as he was but seven years of age, He put too little stock in dreams to gauge One of them right, so holy was his heart. By God, I'd give my shirt if, for your part, 3120 You would have read this legend as have I! "Dame Pertelote, I'm telling you no lie. Macrobius says a dream came long ago In Africa to worthy Scipio That was affirmed, and says that dreams can mean 3125 A warning of things men have later seen. And furthermore, I pray you take a look In the Old Testament. Look in the Book Of Daniel--were his dreams all vanity? Or read of Joseph and there you will see 3130 That dreams are sometimes (I don't say they're all) A warning of things that later befall. Look at the king of Egypt, mighty Pharoah, His baker and his butler--did they know Nothing of dreams' effects? Whoever traces 3135 Through history the events of sundry places May read of visions many a wondrous thing. Did Croesus, when he was the Lydian king, Not dream that he was sitting on a tree, Which signified that hanged he was to be? 3140 Look at Andromache, young Hector's wife: The day that Hector was to lose his life, She had a dream that day before the dawn Of how his life was to be lost if on That morning he should go into the fray. 3145 She warned him but to no avail; that day He still went forth to fight the foe again, And promptly by Achilles he was slain. But that's a story much too long to tell; It's almost day, on such I cannot dwell. 3150 For my conclusion I will simply say That from this vision I shall have someway Adversity. And I say furthermore That in these laxatives I put no store--They're venomous, I'm well aware of it. 3155 Fie on them, for I like them not a bit! "Now let us speak of mirth, no more of this. Dame Pertelote, if ever I have bliss, One thing God's given me with special grace; For when I see the beauty of your face, 3160 The scarlet red you have about your eyes, It makes my dread all wither and it dies, As certainly as In principio, Mulier est hominis confusio--Madam, the meaning of this Latin is 3165 'A woman is man's joy and all his bliss.' For when I feel at nighttime your soft side (Although, alas, upon you I can't ride, Because our perch is built so narrowly),

Such joy and comfort swell inside of me 3170 That I defy nightmare as well as dream." And with that word he flew down from the beam, For it was day. His hens flew to the ground, And with a "chuck" he called them, for he found That in the yard a bit of kernel lay. 3175 Royal he was, his fear had gone away. Dame Pertelote was feathered by this cock And trodden twenty times ere nine o'clock. Then, with a grim look like a lion's frown, Upon his toes he wandered up and down, 3180 Not deigning to set foot upon the ground. He chucked each time another corn he found, And all his wives came running to his call. Thus royal as a prince within his hall I leave this Chanticleer there in his yard. 3185 To his adventure next I'll give regard. Now when the month in which the world began (The month of March, when God created man) Was over and indeed had been exceeded (The days were thirty-two that were completed), 3190 It happened that this cock in all his pride, His seven wives all walking by his side, Cast eyes up to the brightly shining sun That in the sign of Taurus then had run Some twenty-one degrees and even more. 3195 He knew by nature and no other lore That it was nine, and blissfully he crew. "The sun," he said, "has climbed the heavens through More than forty and one degrees, no less. 3200 Now Madam Pertelote, my happiness On earth, hear how these blissful birds all sing, And see the newborn flowers, how they spring; My heart is full of solace, revelry!" But sad fate then befell him suddenly; The latter end of joy is always woe. 3205 God knows how worldly joy will quickly go; A rhetorician who can well indite Might safely in his chronicle so write, For it's a royal notability. Let every wise man listen now to me---3210 This story is as true, I undertake, As the book of Lancelot of the Lake That women hold so much in great esteem.

And so I'll turn again now to my theme. A black-marked fox, iniquitous and sly, 3215 Who'd lived for three years in the grove nearby (By heaven's high design right from the first), That very night had through the hedges burst Into the yard where Chanticleer the Fair And all his wives were accustomed to repair. 3220 There in a bed of cabbages he lay Completely still till well into the day, Waiting his time on Chanticleer to fall, As gladly do homicides one and all Who wait to ambush and to murder men. 3225 O false murderer, lurking in your den! O new Iscariot, new Ganelon! O false dissembler, like the Greek Sinon Who brought the Trojans sorrow so severe! A curse upon that day, O Chanticleer, 3230 When to that yard you flew down from the beams! Full warning you were given by your dreams, That very day would bring adversity. But that which God foreknows is what must be, Or so, at least, some learned men contest. 3235 As any worthy scholar will attest, In schools there is a lot of altercation About the matter, mighty disputation (A hundred thousand men are in the rift). In this the grain from chaff I cannot sift 3240 As can the holy doctor Augustine, Boethius, or Bishop Bradwardine, Whether God's knowing what our futures bring Constrains me so that I must do a thing (By which I mean simple necessity), 3245 Or whether there's free choice granted me To do the thing or not (though there is naught That God does not foreknow before it's wrought), Or if his knowing constrains not one degree Beyond conditional necessity. 3250 But I will have no part of such debate; My tale is of a cock, as I'll relate, Who took his wife's advice, to his dismay, And walked within the yard that very day Despite what he had dreamt, as I have told. 3255 How often women's counsels prove so cold; A woman's counsel brought us first to woe,

From Paradise poor Adam had to go, From where he'd been so merry and at ease. But as I don't know whom it might displease 3260 If I should give to women's counsel blame, Please let it pass, I'm only making game. Read authors where such stuff is their concern, And what they say of women you may learn. These words have been a cock's, they are not mine; 3265 No harm in any woman I divine. Sunbathing in the sand, fair Pertelote Lay blithely by her sisters, while the throat Of Chanticleer made song as merrily As that of any mermaid in the sea. 3270 (The Physiologus, with truth to tell, Says mermaids sing both merrily and well.) It so befell that as he cast his eye On the cabbage bed, to catch a butterfly, He caught sight of the fox there lying low. 3275 He didn't have the least desire to crow--He cried at once "Cock, cock!" with guite a start, As any man fear-stricken in his heart. By instinct every beast desires to flee When he has seen his natural enemy, 3280 Though never laying eyes on him before. This Chanticleer would not have tarried more Once he espied the fox, had not the latter Said, "Gentle sir, alas! what is the matter? I am your friend--are you afraid of me? 3285 I'd be worse than a fiend, most certainly, To do you harm. And please don't think that I Come here upon your privacy to spy; The reason that I've come is not a thing Except that I might listen to you sing. 3290 For truly you've a voice as merry, sire, As any angel's up in heaven's choir. Because of this, in music you've more feeling Than had Boethius, or all who sing. 3295 My lord, your father (his soul blessed be) And mother (she of such gentility) Have both been in my house, to my great pleasure. To have you, sir, I'd love in equal measure. For when men speak of singing, I must say--As may my eyes see well the light of day--3300 Till you, I never heard a mortal sing

As did your father when the day would spring. And all he sang was surely from the heart; That more strength to his voice he might impart, He used to strain himself until his eyes 3305 He'd have to blink, so loud were all his cries; And he would have to stand up straight on tiptoe And stretch his neck as far as it would go. And he was one of such discretion, sire, No man was to be found in any shire 3310 Who could in song and wisdom him surpass. I've read the story Sir Burnel the Ass, Wherein it's said that there was once a cock Who from a priest's son suffered quite a knock Upon his leg (a foolish lad's caprice), 3315 For which he made him lose his benefice. But there is no comparing to be based Upon your father's wisdom, his good taste, And a wounded cock's avenging subtlety. 3320 Now, sir, please sing, for holy charity; Let's see how well your father you repeat." Then Chanticleer his wings began to beat, As one who'd been betrayed but couldn't see, So ravished was he by such flattery. Alas! my lords, there are within your courts 3325 False flatterers and other lying sorts Who please you, by my faith, more than the man Who speaks to you the truth as best he can. In Ecclesiastes read of flattery; Beware, my lords, of all their treachery. 3330 This Chanticleer stood high upon his toes; Stretching his neck, he let his two eyes close And loudly he began to crow. Apace The fox Sir Russell sprang out from his place And by the throat grabbed Chanticleer. He bore 3335 Him on his back toward the woodland, for The fox as yet by no one was pursued. O Destiny, you cannot be eschewed! Alas, that Chanticleer flew from the beams! Alas, his wife did not believe in dreams! 3340 And on a Friday fell all this distress. O Venus, goddess of all pleasantness, Since servant you have had in Chanticleer, Who used his powers in your service here More for delight than world to multiply, 3345

Why would you suffer him this day to die?

O Geoffrey, sovereign master, when was shot And slain your worthy Richard, did you not Complain so sorely of his death? O would I had your gift and lore, so that I could 3350 Chide Friday as you did! (For it was on A Friday Richard died, as is well known.) Then I would show you how I could complain For Chanticleer, for all his fear and pain.

Surely not such a cry or lamentation 3355 Did ladies make at Troy's devastation--When Pyrrhus seized King Priam by the beard And with his straight, unsparing sword then speared And slew him (so relates the Aeneid's bard)--As made all of the hens there in the yard 3360 When they had seen the plight of Chanticleer. Shrieked Pertelote so loudly all could hear, More loudly than did King Hasdrubal's wife When her husband at Carthage lost his life And Romans made the town a conflagration. 3365 (So filled with torment and with indignation, The queen jumped willfully into the fire And burnt to death, as death was her desire.) O woeful hens, your crying is the same As when by Nero Rome was set aflame 3370 And tears were shed by senators' wives Because their husbands all then lost their lives. (They had no guilt but Nero had them slain.) Now to my tale I will return again.

This simple widow and her daughters heard 3375 The woeful crying of the hens. They stirred Themselves at once, leapt up and ran outside; The fox toward the grove they then espied, Bearing away the cock upon his back. They cried out "Help!" and "Mercy!" and "Alack! 3380 Hey, hey, the fox!" And after him they ran, And joining in with staves came many a man, And our dog Collie, Talbot too, and Garland, And Malkin with a distaff in her hand. Ran cow and calf and even all the hogs, 3385 So frightened by the barking of the dogs And shouting of each woman, every man. They thought their hearts would burst, so hard they ran. They yelled like fiends in hell, such was the cry;

3390 The ducks all quacked as if about to die; The geese in fear flew up above the trees; Out of the hive there came a swarm of bees. God knows, the noise was hideous and loud! I'm certain that Jack Straw and all his crowd Did not produce a shouting half as shrill 3395 (When they had found a Fleming they could kill) As all the noise directed at the fox. They brought out trumpets made of brass and box, Of horns and bone, on which they blew and tooted; They also shrieked, they whooped as well as hooted, 3400 Until it seemed that heaven itself would fall. Good men, I pray, please listen one and all, For see how Fortune upsets suddenly The hope and pride now of her enemy! This cock, who on the fox's back still lay, 3405 Despite his fear said to the fox, "I say, What I would do, my lord, if I were you, So help me God, is tell those who pursue, 'Turn back, you fools, you haughty churls all, And may a pestilence upon you fall! 3410 For now that I have reached the woodland's side, In spite of you this cock shall here abide--I'll eat him up right now in front of you!" The fox replied, "In faith, that's what I'll do." But as he spoke those words, without a pause 3415 The cock broke nimbly from the fox's jaws And immediately flew high up in a tree. And when the fox had seen his captive flee, "Alas," he said, "O Chanticleer, alas! Against you I am guilty of trespass. 3420 I made you fear what it was all about, To grab you in the yard and bring you out. But, sir, I did it with no ill intent. Come down, and I will tell you what I meant--The truth, so help me God! You have my oath." 3425 "Nay," said the cock, "a curse upon us both. And first I curse myself, by blood and bone, If more than once I let you lead me on. You shall no more, with words so flattering, Inveigle me to close my eyes and sing. 3430 For him who wills to blink when he should see, God never let there be prosperity!"

"No," said the fox, "but God bring to defeat

One whose demeanor is so indiscreet That when he ought to hold his peace he chatters." 3435 Lo, such it is to trust in one who flatters, Be negligent, and act so carelessly. But you who judge this tale frivolity (As it's about a fox, or cock and hen), 3440 Take seriously the moral, gentlemen. For all that has been written, says Saint Paul, Is written so that we might learn it all. So take the fruit and let the chaff be still. Now, gracious God, if it should be thy will, As says my lord, make all of us good men 3445 And bring us to high heaven's bliss! Amen.