As the previous chapters have explored, few of Chaucer’s human characters succeed in the erotic sphere without vexed sacrifices of self and desire, and so it is intriguing to consider the implications behind the rooster Chauntecleer’s depiction in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, for he is painted as a creature capable of integrating sexual desire organically and pleasurably into his life. From the start it should be acknowledged that most medieval writers did not turn to roosters and hens for models of human sexual behavior. More typical is the viewpoint expressed by John Gower in the Confessio amantis, in which those with animalistic appetites corrupt the Church’s efforts to extirpate incest:

For of the lawe canonized
The Pope hath bede to the men,
That non schal wedden of his ken
Ne the seconde ne the thridde.
Bot thogh that holy cherche it bidde,
So to restreigne Mariage,
Ther ben yit upon loves Rage
Full manye of suche nou aday
That taken wher thei take may.
For love, which is unbesein
Of alle reson, as men sein,  
Thurgh sotie and thurgh nycete,  
Of his voluptuosite  
He spareth no condicion  
Of ken ne yit religion,  
Bot as a cock among the Hennes,  
Or as a Stalon in the Fennes,  
Which goth amonges al the Stod,  
Riht so can he nomore good,  
Bot takth what thing comth next to honde.  

Because love “is unbesein / Of alle reson,” it bears the potential to strip humans of their humanity, depriving them of rationality and degrading them into lusty cocks and stallions. As male animals, both cocks and stallions suggest further the loss of masculine restraint in favor of sexual excess, thus tacitly adumbrating the potential for incest to emerge in humans who do not control their amorous desires.

Against such verse both anti-erotic and anti-avian, Chaucer’s Chauntecleer models the proper masculinity both of a knight acting in deference to his courtly beloved and of the lusty lover reveling in unrestrained fabliau sexuality. From Chaucer’s romances to his fabliaux, from his exempla to his hagiographies, from his dream visions to his moral treatises, the majority of his narratives do not depict a merry blend of conjugality and eroticism, yet in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, Chauntecleer both sexually desires his wife and loves her as well. As is well established, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale parodies numerous genres, including romance, epic, dream vision, and beast fable, yet the tale’s overarching parodic treatment of these genres does not preclude the possibility of obtaining erotic insight from their subversive deployments. The Nun’s Priest urges his fellow pilgrims to uncover a moral from his story, citing Paul’s belief that pre-Christian texts enlighten Christian truths: “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” (7.3441–43). Interpretations of the tale’s “fruyt” abound, and often focus on Chauntecleer’s sin of pride and the lesson he learns from his travails with the fox, although Stephen Manning cautions

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2. For a thorough study of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale and its play with genres, see John Finlayson, “Reading Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale: Mixed Genres and Multi-layered Worlds of Illusion,” English Studies 86.6 (2005): 493–510.
that, in the tale’s moralizing, “Chaucer is poking fun at those who felt that a poem had to have some moral in order to justify its existence.” 3 Much of the pleasure of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale arises in its converging discourses of various genres, and Chaucer’s parodic play with the erotics of romance encourages readings of this polyvalent tale that take seriously the humor of its avian amorousness.

The tale’s opening description of Chauntecleer, with its mock blazon of his beauty and its praise of his royal bearing, establishes him as its courtly protagonist (7.2859–64), and the ensuing description of Pertelote—“Curteys she was, discreet, and debonnaire, / And compaignable, and bar hyrself so faire” (7.2871–72)—likewise portrays her as the rooster’s fair and imperious beloved. Within the courtly conventions of romance, Pertelote wins Chauntecleer’s heart and amatory devotion: “That trewely she hath the herte in hoold / Of Chauntecleer, loken in every lith; / He loved hire so that wel was hym therwith” (7.2874–76). It is a simple description of a true love: with his beloved Pertelote by his side, Chauntecleer enjoys an erotic life of contentment and satisfaction. Furthermore, in accordance with the gendered parameters of romance, Pertelote must both narcissistically mirror Chauntecleer’s attractiveness and challenge his worth as a courtly lover in her role as the imperious courtly lady. When Chauntecleer confesses his fears arising from his nightmare of bestial violence, Pertelote upbraids him, demanding that he affirm his role as a hero:

“Allas,” quod she, “for, by that God above, 
Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love! 
I kan nat love a coward, by my faith!

Have ye no mannes herte, and han a berd?” (7.2909–11, 2920)

Due to her affronts to his masculinity and her veiled threats that he will lose erotic access to her, Chauntecleer must perform a sufficiently credible version of courtly and heroic masculinity to win back his beloved. As with many romance narratives, Chauntecleer must act valiantly to ensure his erotic desires are consummated, yet the tale then faces an inherent obstacle, for how can a rooster—a chicken—successfully perform the valor

and violence requisite to defeat his (as yet chimerical) enemy? Indeed, it is impossible for such an ending to be effected: at the narrative’s end, Chauntecleer succeeds in outwitting the fox that would devour him and thus achieves an important victory, but he does not defeat his adversary under the conditions of a martial combat, which serves as the preferred venue of masculine aggression in the romance tradition.

To win back his lady’s affections, Chauntecleer must rely on his amatory intelligence as a courtly lover, and his lengthy disquisition on the prophetic nature of dreams establishes his rhetorical capabilities and argumentative skills as superior to Pertelote’s. However, defeating her in debate appears to be an ineffectual amatory tactic, especially since she demands that he embody a courtly masculinity based on martial courage. And so, after their discussion of the meaning of dreams, Chauntecleer resolves any lingering disagreement with Pertelote by reminding her of their shared conjugal pleasures:

“For al siker as In principio,
Mulier est hominis confusio—
Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,
‘Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.’
For whan I feele a-nyght your softe syde—
Al be it that I may nat on yow ryde,
For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas—
I am so ful of joye and of solas,
That I diffye bothe sweven and dreem.” (7.3163–71)

The prevailing interpretation of these lines is that Chauntecleer mistranslates the Latin phrases that he cites and thereby reveals the shaky foundations of his professed intellectualism. Nevertheless, if readers are willing to suspend their disbelief sufficiently to enjoy this story of chickens engaging in a philosophical discourse over dreams, they should also entertain the possibility that Chauntecleer deliberately misinterprets the Latin phrases and their misogynistic context so as to comfort his wife and thus to regain erotic access to her. As Peter Travis observes, “the most productive way of beginning to respond to this translation exercise is to read it as a heuristic parody of the very activity of translation itself, a parody whose reading regimen requires considerable patience as well as creativity to fully explore.” Chauntecleer’s citation of *In principio* alludes to the first words

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4. Peter Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 95.
of the Vulgate translation of Genesis, and thus puts the following adage, *Mulier est hominis confusio*, within a Christian context. Certainly, within the misogynist worldview that blames Eve for humanity’s expulsion from Eden, women are indeed a destructive force in the lives of men. What is more important to Chauntecleer, however, than the Christian truth that his Bible reveals is his experiential belief in the earthly and erotic joys evident and abundant in wedlock. Thus, although Christian truth may denigrate women by linking its foundational narrative to misogyny, Chauntecleer realizes the limitations of this perspective, and, like the Wife of Bath, misreads the Bible so as to generate erotic pleasure on earth. Certainly, it seems safe to assume that the imperious Pertelote would not be amorously swayed by an accurate—and misogynist—translation of these Latin phrases, yet Chauntecleer’s rewriting of the gendered traditions of Christian thought ensures sexual pleasure in his future by employing the biblical account of the Garden of Eden as a palimpsest upon which to revise earthly eroticism as newly freed from gendered discontents. In his reading of this passage, Joseph Dane posits that “What Chaucer has constructed here is a situation in which any foreign phrase, or for that matter, any English phrase would mean ‘woman is man’s joy and bliss’”; Chauntecleer’s Latin words are eclipsed by his translation of them, as he rewrites the Vulgate to facilitate sexual conquest.

As much as Chaucer foretells Chauntecleer’s and Pertelote’s sexual pleasures in this passage, the rooster cannot consummate his affections for Pertelote because, at the moment he speaks these words, the close quarters of their perch prohibit intercourse. Chauntecleer nonetheless proclaims himself “ful of joye and of solas” as he revels in the pleasure of simply resting by her side. Of course, the fact that Chauntecleer enjoys his wife’s company when they do not engage in intercourse does not preclude their indulging in sexual pastimes on subsequent occasions, and Chaucer describes the bestial lust that sparks Chauntecleer’s immoderate pleasures:

> And with that word he fleydoun fro the beem,  
> For it was day, and eke his hennes alle,  
> And with a chuk he gan hem for to calle,  
> For he hadde founde a corn, lay in the yerd.  
> Real he was, he was namoore aferd.  
> He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme,

And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme.
He looketh as it were a grym leoun,
And on his toos he rometh up and doun;
Hym deigned nat to sette his foot to grounde.
He chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounde,
And to hym rennen thane his wyves alle. (7.3172–83)

The lines describing Chauntecleer as a “grym leoun” who “rometh” so energetically that his claws do not touch the ground are somewhat ambiguous, as they come between the passages detailing his energetic pursuit of intercourse with Pertelote and those detailing his search for grain. If one construes them as referring to his lovemaking, one visualizes Chauntecleer as a zealous copulator, frenetically pursuing pleasure after pleasure, yet one whose immediate task after passion is to find food for Pertelote and his other wives. By so closely linking Chauntecleer’s erotic passions with his work to ensure a functioning civilization for them, in which the primary physical need of satiating their hunger is fulfilled, Chaucer underscores that the rooster succeeds in building a sustainable culture, one remarkably free from the discontents that Freud locates in the disjunctions between personal desires and social regulations. For Freud, the conflict between civilization and the individual arises in the disjunction between communal demands for maintaining the civic order and personal desires to pursue individual pleasures, as discussed in his Civilization and Its Discontents, and Chauntecleer models the possibility of integrating communal and personal desires into a coherent and unified life of pleasure in support of the commonweal. As the leader of the farmyard’s civic order, he structures the foundations of his society as mediated through his sexual desires, as he also regulates patriarchal discourse in service of women’s desire not to be construed as the foundational error of Western culture.

Against the backdrop of erotic tension throughout the Canterbury Tales, Chauntecleer’s amatory exuberance and ready sexual pleasures stand in sharp contrast, yet it cannot be overlooked that Chauntecleer builds this social order not merely on a joyful eroticism in marriage but on incest and polyamory. He enjoys sexual congress with numerous hens in addition to Pertelote, as the opening description of his regal beauty details: “This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce / Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce, / Which were his sustres and his paramours” (7.2865–67). In this regard, Chauntecleer flagrantly violates the incest taboo, which Freud believed to be the cornerstone of civilization: “The tendency on the part of civilization to restrict sexual life is no less clear
than its other tendency to expand the cultural unit. Its first, totemic, phase already brings with it the prohibition against an incestuous choice of object, and this is perhaps the most drastic mutilation which man's erotic life has in all time experienced.” By curtailing the range of viable eroticisms, civilizations circumvent desires that potentially fracture their organic unity. Freud also notes, “The first form of a social organization came about with a renunciation of instinct, a recognition of mutual obligations, the introduction of definite institutions, pronounced inviolable (holy)—that is to say, the beginnings of morality and justice. Each individual renounced his ideal of acquiring his father’s position for himself and of possessing his mother and sisters.”

Chauntecleer’s farmyard, based on the fantasy of a civilization liberated from the incest taboo, creates a realm free of masculine discontents in the possibility of multiple sexual partners without constraints on consanguinity or number.

Certainly, this vision of masculine sexuality untethered from the incest taboo is troubling: it subordinates women into a misogynist structure that Chauntecleer’s excessive eroticism perpetuates, yet one from which his biblical exegesis ostensibly liberates them. Chauntecleer both cleanses his realm of Christian misogynist discourse that blames women for humanity’s fall from grace and reinstitutes a pre-Christian culture that recognizes no taboos on male desire, for as the undisputed leader of the farmyard, he faces no threats to his masculine governance that might undermine his claim to his seven wives. If women are to find erotic satisfaction in Chauntecleer’s world, they must do so as wives equal to one another yet jointly subservient to an erotic system predicated upon masculine authority and pleasure. Truly, then, Chauntecleer’s world is one for the animals—unregulated in terms of the incest prohibitions necessary for a human civilization, yet one surprisingly enlightened in its rewriting of Christian misogyny through the shared joys of eroticism. And so, as the tension between seriousness and play circulates throughout the Canterbury Tales, the image of Chauntecleer’s sexual pursuits illuminates a pleasureful vision of erotic exuberance yet one that can only be realized within an animal world freed from critical human taboos. As John Finlayson argues, “If Chauntecleer is more fully Man than in most fables, he


is also more exactly bird as well—and this ambivalence, which suggests many parallels and judgments on Man without reducing the story to mere didacticism, makes this beast-fable much more than an exemplum." For his human readers, Chauntecleer can only model erotic wholeness if one is willing to sacrifice one’s sense of the human as a constituent factor of human culture.

In many ways, then, the Nun’s Priest’s Tale asks readers to consider the meaning of the human–animal boundary and the ways in which animals model erotic possibilities for them. Susan Crane posits that “Chaucer’s interest in animals encompasses his interest in how they are enmeshed in human culture,” and this observation can be expanded to include the ways in which Chaucer ponders the meaning of the animal enmeshed in the human. After the Nun’s Priest concludes his tale, Harry Bailly extols his fellow pilgrims, and the Nun’s Priest in particular, to enjoy the possibility of following Chauntecleer’s example of an erotically organic life:

“This was a murie tale of Chauntecleer.
But by my trouthe, if thou were seculer,
Thou woldest ben a trede-foul aright.
For if thou have corage as thou hast might,
Thee were need of hennes, as I wene,
Ya, moo than seven tymes seventeen.
See, which braunes hath this gentil preest,
So gret a nekke, and swich a large breest!
He loketh as a sperhauk with his yen.” (7.3449–57)

Surely, as with much of the humor of the Canterbury Tales, Harry’s words are spoken with tongue firmly in cheek, yet in the perpetual tension between game and play, Harry speaks truth, perhaps unintentional truths, through his humorous words. His vision of the Nun’s Priest as a trede-foul, a chicken-fucker, intriguingly posits the possibility of a human–animal hybrid capable of resolving the inherent tensions of erotic desire.


Harry further links the Nun’s Priest with the avian amorousness featured in his tale by describing him as a sparrow hawk, and also by multiplying to 119 the number of female partners the Nun’s Priest would need to sate his erotic desires. Harry’s grotesquely comic vision of the Nun’s Priest as excessively indulging in intercourse—whether with his own or another species—strips the Christian Church of its erotic authority, as the host resignifies a defender of the faith into a monstrous emblem of its sexual subversion.

Moreover, Harry’s desire to see the Nun’s Priest as a human–animal hybrid builds on his earlier call to the Monk, the “manly man” of the General Prologue (1.167), to see himself on the borders between the animal and the human. Harry believes that the Monk should be capable of successfully pursuing sexual pleasure unchained to the human condition:

“I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun
That first thee broghte unto religioun!
Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright.
Haddestow as greet a leeve as thou hast myght
To parfoune al thy lust in engendrure,
Thou haddest bigeten ful many a creature.” (7.1943–48)

Within Harry’s erotic worldview, religion circumvents the Monk’s and Nun’s Priest’s ability to metamorphose into avian sexuality, and thus to satisfy their erotic desires with abandon and without limit. As Chauntecleer reformulates the In principio of the Christian tradition to win back Pertelote’s sexual favors, Harry Bailly also identifies prohibitions against unlimited sexual desires within Christian traditions and advocates to these representatives of the faith the necessity of energetically breaching its doctrines by aligning themselves with animals.

For the Monk and the Nun’s Priest to do so, however, is, of course, impossible, for despite the sexual freedom embodied in the chimerical vision of a trede-foul, it remains merely a fantasy. Fantasies, however fleeting, are not without their psychological and cultural function, and in their critique of the Freudian master narrative of sexual maturation, in which one moves through the perversities of childhood into adulthood and adult sexuality, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari posit the possibility of becoming pleasurably mired in perversion, of resisting the psychosexual wholeness that Freud offers as the telos of psychological development. Their view of becoming-animal, a state of fluctuating union with the animal world that allows an individual to escape the limitations of humanity,
enlightens the potential meanings of what a *trede-foul* might become within Chaucer’s imagination:

> What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes. Becoming can and should be qualified as becoming-animal even in the absence of a term that would be the animal become. The becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not; and the becoming-other of the animal is real, even if that something other it becomes is not. This is the point to clarify: that a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; but also that it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block, with the first.\(^{10}\)

One cannot become a rooster, of course, but one can become rooster-like, freed from the limitations of desire that circumvent its formulation and fruition in the human realm, and, intriguingly, Chaucer may have encoded the possibility of his own becoming-animal in his *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. His protagonist Chauntecleer is based on numerous avian forebears, including Marie de France’s unnamed cock in *Del Cock e del Gupil* and Pierre de St. Cloud’s Chantecler in Branch II of the *Roman de Renart*.\(^{11}\) Chaucer’s slight Anglicization of Chantecler to Chauntecleer need only reflect his pronunciation of the name, but the orthographic overlap between his and his rooster’s names, which becomes complete as a *u* is added to Chantecler, links the two together, potentially painting the author as the foremost *trede-foul* of the pilgrimage.\(^{12}\) To see Chaucer as a *trede-foul* in brotherhood with the Nun’s Priest and Monk allows both a liberating vision of a human queerly unyoked from the human condition, and thus capable of pursuing eroticism freed from discontents, yet Chaucer sullies the utopic cast of this image as well, coupling it with a world bereft of the incest taboo that constrains certain desires but does so for the purpose of elevating the human above the animal. If Chauntecleer and

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Chaucer as *trede-foul* emblematize queer freedoms in eroticism, untethered from the normative parameters of mate selection, they simultaneously acknowledge that all eroticisms are potentially corrupted with darker currents than pleasure acknowledges. Lesley Kordecki reminds readers that “Chaucer beguiles us by trying on the radical voices of animals, adjusting his sources, and playing with possibility in both genre and in apprehension of disparate perspectives,” and this radical voicing and vision dismantles barriers between animality and humanity, incest and marriage, nature and civilization.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming-animal thus requires as a necessary corollary the concept of becoming-queer, in the open possibilities that merge in the quest for a sexual humanity in and beyond the Middle Ages. As apparent through this monograph, when eroticisms and their anti-erotic counterparts queerly circulate in Chaucer’s corpus, his characters must endure the vagaries of gender and sexual identity inherent in pursuing their amatory passions, with their respective narratives foregrounding the negotiations of self and society necessary to consummate sexual desire. To experience a state of becoming-queer, to allow desires to surface only to confront the impossibility of their satisfaction, allows one to confront the erotic torsions inherent in human existence, as the previous chapters of this study have explored. In the *Franklin’s Tale*, love necessitates that Arveragus and Dorigen push each other to the masochistic brink of utmost suffering, and the men who pledge brotherhood oaths to each other in the *House of Fame*, *Knight’s Tale*, *Friar’s Tale*, *Pardoner’s Tale*, and *Shipman’s Tale* find themselves debased by emulating rituals intended to elevate them, as latent eroticism colors their ostensibly chaste relationships with a tinge of homosexuality. Pursuing romantic love with women, Arcite in the *Knight’s Tale* and Troilus in *Troilus and Criseyde* find themselves instead confronting the necrotic underbellies of their erotic desires; by compelling women to serve as the ideal beloved in their narcissistic fantasies, they confront the anti-erotic force of Emily’s and Criseyde’s rejection of romance and its potential repercussions to the social order. For Chaucer’s child characters in the *Reeve’s Tale*, *Summoner’s Tale*, *Clerk’s Tale*, and *Physician’s Tale*, adult desires ensnare them in erotic plots that rob them of constitutive factors of their beings—their virginity, their parents, and often their lives—yet their apparent lack of erotic agency merely camouflages the power of passivity to subvert

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parental authority. Chaucer’s God institutes regulations to govern human eroticism, only to be swept away by love’s throes in the Legend of Good Women and the Second Nun’s Tale, and his surprising surrender to human passions queerly subverts the very possibility of religious dogma. From these disparate moments of Chaucer’s corpus, the queerness of eroticism surfaces in the tension between desire and social dictates, particularly from traditions endorsing anti-eroticism that must confront the necessity of their own transgressions. All desires spark becomings, and all those who desire find themselves confronted by its ever protean force in their visions of themselves and of their beloveds, and thus in their understanding of the unsteady and queer relations that are engendered through eroticism.

The annals of literature records the primacy of desires fulfilled and unfulfilled: the foundational narrative of Adam and Eve encapsulates the tribulations of eroticism, a story told, retold, reimagined, and reinvented throughout the centuries but with core consistencies: a snake in the garden destroying the bliss of an eternal love, and the snake, of course, symbolizing the very instrument necessary in many, but certainly not all, enactments of sexual desire. For Chaucer’s queer eroticisms, so too is there often a snake—or perhaps a fox—in the garden of human sexuality, but there is also a rooster in a farmyard, guiding the ways to eroticisms united in a civilization free from discontents, while ironically modeling the necessity of erotic discontents if one is to become fully queer, and thus fully human.