It is the nature of the beast fable, of which the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is an example, to make fun of human attitudes by assigning them to the lower animals. Perhaps no other form of satire has proved so charming throughout literary history. From Aesop's fables through the medieval French mock-epic Reynard the Fox (upon a version of which the "Nun's Priest's Tale" relies for its slight plot), down to La Fontaine and Br'er Rabbit, the beast who acts like a man has enjoyed general popularity. In the "Nun's Priest's Tale" one of the most charming of poets has given the genre a superbly comic expression. Yet much of the tale's humor lies neither in its plot nor in the equivalence of man and beast, but in the extraordinary dilation of the telling. For while Chaucer was endowing his feathered hero and heroine with many of the qualities of a courtly lover and his lady, he was also embellishing his tale with an ample selection of the rhetorical commonplaces of Western civilization. To analyze the effect these have on the story it is necessary to investigate briefly what rhetoric is.

It is almost as if the Creator were watching with loving sympathy and humorous appreciation the solemn endeavors of His creatures to understand the situation in which He has placed them.

The art of expressive speech and writing or, more narrowly, of persuasive speech is a fair enough definition of rhetoric. But considered as a set of formulas for expressing a recurrent idea or situation, rhetoric may amount to little more than cliché. It is also possible to think of rhetoric, as one frequently does today, as a kind of cosmetic art—of adorning bare facts. Yet something is lacking here. The rhetorical mode of expression may be said to consist in using language in such a way as to bring about certain preferred interpretations. Compare, for example, an apparently bare statement, "The sun sets," with the rhetorical statement, "The Sun drove his chariot beyond the waters of the western seas." To the ancient mind the last statement would suggest a particular kind of order and meaning in the universe—in other words, a cosmos. This piece of rhetoric was the ancient man's way of reassuring himself that chaos would not come again with the setting of the sun. Today we probably prefer the simplicity of the first statement. Yet "The sun sets" has its residue of rhetoric: we know that the sun does not set but only seems to. We accept this inaccurate and quite rhetorical statement because we are reluctant, even when we know better, to displace ourselves from our inherited position at the center of creation. Rhetoric still stands between us and the fear of something which, even if it is not chaos, is disconcerting.

It follows that rhetoric in this sense is something more than language of adornment. It is, in fact, a powerful weapon of survival in a vast and alien universe. In our own time, as in the Middle Ages and in the Age of Homer,
rhetoric has served to satisfy man's need for security and to provide a sense of the importance of his own existence and of the whole human enterprise. It is true that rhetoric, as it operates for persuasion and self-persuasion, may become merely an instrument of deception, a matter of clichés and of superficial and contradictory thinking. One finds examples in advertising and political slogans and in the mutually inconsistent wisdom of proverbs. The excesses of rhetoric invite satire; regarded satirically, rhetoric may be taken as a kind of inadequate defense that man erects against an inscrutable reality. It is in this way that Chaucer is viewing it in the "Nun's Priest's Tale." Most noticeably, of course, he employs the standard rhetoric of heroic poetry in order to give the utmost mock-significance to each of Chantecleer's actions. Even the best of epic heroes suffers from the handicap of being only one of an untold number of people who have lived on earth, and the fact that Achilles and Hector still have significance (if a fading one) is due to the gigantic rhetorical effort of Homer, who persuades his reader that these were the very best in their kind who ever lived. By a similar technique Chantecleer is made the best rooster that ever lived, so that his death amid the teeth of Dan Russel--if it had occurred--could have provided a tragic episode every bit as significant to mankind as the death of Hector. Or so the Nun's Priest would have us believe, what with his epic manner and his full-dress similes, his references to the fall of Troy, the burning of Rome, the destruction of Carthage, to Sinon, Ganelon, and Judas Iscariot, to the awful problems of free will and foreordination. And, if this were not sufficient to persuade us of the importance of Chantecleer to the scheme of things, the divine powers take the trouble to send the rooster a monitory dream concerning his impending fate. The logic of the comedy is unexceptionable: these are the devices that made Hector and Achilles, and hence all men in their persons, significant; will not the devices do the same for Chantecleer?

While he deals largely in the rhetorical commonplaces appropriate to epic heroes, the Nun's Priest does not ignore commonplaces less exalted. The discussion of the significance of dreams reflects one of man's most enduring attempts to enhance his importance, and the basic disagreement between the cock and the hen regarding dreams is an embarrassing instance of the rhetorical tradition's having produced two entirely antipathetic answers to the same problem: Similarly, the age-old question of woman is answered--in one breath, as it were--by two equally valid if mutually exclusive commonplaces: woman is man's ruination and woman is all man's bliss. Especially prominent is the rhetoric of "authority," by which poets assure themselves that what they are doing is unexceptionable: when the rooster's singing is compared with the singing of mermaids, the expert on mermaids' singing is named--Physiologus, whose authority presumably makes the simile respectable. It is inevitable that the Friday on which Chantecleer's near-tragedy occurs should be castigated in the terms set by that most formidable and dullest of medieval rhetoricians, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who carried almost to its ultimate point formalization of expression and stultification of thought.

The "Nun's Priest's Tale" is full of what seem to be backward references to the preceding tales, so that it is sometimes taken as a parody-summary of all that has gone before. The reason for this is probably less that Chaucer had the other tales in mind as he wrote (indeed, he could have written the "Nun's Priest's Tale" without having any thought of the others) than that in it he employs comically all the rhetorical devices that were a part of his own poetical inheritance. But with the "Monk's Tale," which immediately precedes, the Nun's Priest's does seem to have a more organic connection. The Monk had pitilessly labored the emasculated notion of tragedy current in the Middle Ages, with all its emphasis on the dominance of Fortune, viewed apart from human responsibility. In taking by turns the attitude toward Chantecleer of the Monk ("Oh destiny that mayst not be eschewed") and the more ethical attitude that the cock was fondly overcome by female charm (he "took his counsel of his wife, with sorrow"), Chaucer is comically exploiting a paradox the two ends of which are played against the poor narrator, caught in the middle and not knowing whether to blame fate or rooster and compromising by doing both by turns. Yet this elusive interaction between man's nature and his destiny is one of the concomitants of a far more profound kind of tragedy than anything the Monk's definition could produce: Macbeth also had his fatal influences and his deliberate wrongdoings. As a work of the intellect, even though it is wholly comic, the "Nun's Priest's Tale" is far more serious and mature than the Monk's. Its author might well have produced a Shakespearean tragedy--provided he could have stopped laughing.
The man who is able to maintain a satiric view toward rhetoric—the sum of the ideas by which people are helped to preserve their self-respect—is not apt to be popular with his victims. Inevitably, they will search him out to discover the pretensions under which he subsists. Aware that in the personality of the satirist will always exist grounds for rebutting the satire, Chaucer carefully gives us nothing to work on in the character of the Nun's Priest: there is no portrait of him in the "General Prologue," and the introduction to his tale reveals only the most inoffensive of men. But in one important respect he is very like his creator: he can survey the world as if he were no part of it, as if he were situated comfortably on the moon looking at a human race whom he knew and loved wholeheartedly but whose ills he was immune from. This is the same godlike detachment that characterizes the incident of the telling of Sir Thopas and also, in another way, Troilus. It is almost as if the Creator were watching with loving sympathy and humorous appreciation the solemn endeavors of His creatures to understand the situation in which He has placed them.

Source Citation  (MLA 7th Edition)

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1420037494