Notes

DANIEL IN THE
“NUN’S PRIEST’S TALE”

Chauntecleer’s citation of Daniel to buttress his argument that dreams are prophetic — “looketh wel/In the olde Testament of Daniel./If he heeld dremes any vanite”\(^1\) — has evoked two responses from scholars. While some have remained silent,\(^2\) others have glossed the passage as an allusion to Daniel vii, a narrative of Daniel’s dream of four mythological beasts prophesying four great kings who were to arise on earth.\(^3\) This dream has no resemblance, however, to the other dreams cited by Chauntecleer nor to Chauntecleer’s own harrowing experience. A more pertinent dream can be found in Daniel iv.

There King Nebuchadnezzar relates a dream similar to Chauntecleer’s and to the dreams Chauntecleer cites in his oration defending the truth of dreams. “I, Nebuchadnezzar,” begins the story, “was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. I had a dream which made me afraid; as I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me.” The dream was of a mighty tree “visible to the end of the whole earth” which a “watcher” from heaven ordered to be hewn down and stripped of its branches and leaves but its roots left in the earth. He (the pronoun changes in verse 15) is to be wet with dew, his lot with the beasts, and his mind changed from a man’s to a beast’s “to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men.” After the enchanters, magicians, and astrologers have failed to interpret the dream, Daniel explains it as follows. The mighty tree is Nebuchadnezzar “whose greatness has grown and reaches to heaven.” The cutting down of the tree signifies a decree of the Most High “that you shall be driven from among men . . . and seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.” In one year Daniel’s prophecy comes to pass. As Nebuchadnezzar walks on his palace roof basking in self-glory a voice from heaven proclaims his fall. “Immediately the word was fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men, and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws.” After the appointed time the fallen king recovers his reason, acknowledges the omnipotence of the Most High, and is restored to his kingdom. “Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase.”\(^4\)

This story resembles the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale” in both structure and thought. An alarming dream of impending calamity proves true, as do Chauntecleer’s own dream and the dreams he cites in his argument with Pertelote. In Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and its aftermath there is a fall from greatness and then a reversal of misfortune when Nebuchadnezzar regains his reason and his kingdom. Likewise, Chauntecleer falls prey to the fox, is caught in the jaws of ruin, then fortuitously escapes. Pride causes Nebuchadnezzar’s fall, as pride contributes to Chauntecleer’s, when satisfaction with his learning about dreams makes him forget the truth he has just demonstrated and when vanity about
his voice renders him the dupe of the fox's flattery. Both heroes, finally, gain wisdom from their catastrophe.

Not only do the similarities between these stories suggest that if the allusion to Daniel is to be annotated Daniel iv is preferable to Daniel vii. After the Knight has interrupted the "Monk's Tale," the Nun's Priest parodies in this mock-heroic beast fable the tragedies recounted so tediously by the Monk. One of the Monk's tragedies is the fall of "Nabugodonosor," which is largely a paraphrase of Daniel iv. It seems almost certain, therefore, that in alluding to Daniel Chaucer had primarily in mind the dream of Nebuchadnezzar's fall as told in Daniel iv.

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4. Quotations are from Daniel iv, Revised Standard Version.

EASTER LITURGY AND THE LOVE DUET IN MV V, 1

The love duet between Lorenzo and Jessica that opens the last act of Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice has been praised for its lyrical and allusive beauty, and E.M.W. Tillyard was undoubtedly right in taking H. Granville-Barker to task for slighting the passage as a bit of time-wasting to allow Portia and Nerissa to remove their male disguises. Tillyard was also correct in noting that "this night-piece is the very thing into which the rest of the play issues."1 Tillyard failed to see, however, that the "earthly paradise" at Belmont was patterned more on celestial and divine love than on recovered natural innocence and harmony. In other words, the play "issues" into the duet even more integrally and religiously than Tillyard himself noticed.

Undoubtedly the play's happy resolution of discord into concord is based primarily on the saving of Antonio from Shylock's clutches, but on a deeper level its happy ending sees Christian marriage (especially that of Lorenzo and Jessica) as a type of the universal harmony introduced into history by the first Easter morn.

The love duet between Lorenzo and Jessica hymns the reconciliation