

## Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale," VII.3218

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### Abstract

The statement that the fox in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* breaks through a hedge to penetrate Chauntecleer's barnyard would seem to conflict with the earlier description of the barnyard as surrounded by a fence and a dry ditch. The apparent anomaly may be resolved, however, if we recognize that breaking through hedges could be a conventional activity for a fox, not necessarily linked to the topography of a particular expedition. Such a possibility is suggested by the name *Percehaie* 'hedge breaker' of Renart's son in *Le Roman de Renart*, one of the sources for Chaucer's tale.

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According to the generally acknowledged authority of Robert Pratt (522-44, 646-68), Geoffrey Chaucer used *Le Roman de Renart* among the sources for his version of the cock and fox fable. One piece of evidence sometimes cited in opposition to this view, however, and most recently articulated by N. F. Blake (53-65), is the absence from *The Nun's Priest's Tale* of most of the names in the Old French beast epic, particularly that of the vulpine hero, identified by Chaucer only as "daun Russell" (line 3334)<sup>1</sup>. I want to suggest that a curious topographical anomaly in Chaucer's text points to the possibility that he was familiar with at least one name unique to *Le Roman de Renart*, and that it was in his mind when he composed *The Nun's Priest's Tale*.

The traditional story of a fox's beguilement and capture of a cock, and the cock's reciprocal beguilement of, and escape from the fox, can be traced back to Latin fable sources as early as the eleventh century. The closest parallel to Chaucer's account is the Old French fable, "Del cok e del gupil," written by Marie de France in the late twelfth century (Warnke 198-200). During the same period, Pierre de St. Cloud incorporated the basic plot of the fable into the Constant de Noes episode of Branch II of *Le Roman de Renart* (Martin 1:91-104). He added to the story a number of new features which appear also in Chaucer's version, most important among them being the motif of the cock's premonitory dream. The general outline of the story as told by Chaucer is as follows:

An old widow, whose frugal life-style is described in detail, keeps a cock and seven hens in a barnyard where they enjoy a life of prelapsarian luxury. One night the cock, Chauntecleer, dreams that he has been seized by a dog-like creature with red coat and black tipped ears and tail. His favorite wife, Pertelote, scorns the dream as inconsequential. Chauntecleer responds with a pedantic demonstration that dreams foretell the future, but then dismisses the whole debate as his mind turns to contemplating his wife's attractiveness. When the fox eventually breaks into the barnyard, he has no difficulty persuading the cock that in order to emulate his father's celebrated vocal achievements he should crow with his eyes closed and his neck extended. Having made himself thus vulnerable, the cock is seized by the fox and carried off towards the woods, in a scene of general confusion in the barnyard, and to the accompaniment of mock-heroic lamentations by the hens.

Trading in turn on the fox's susceptibility to flattery, however, the cock prevails upon him to yell defiance at his pursuers. As soon as he feels the fox's jaws slacken, the cock escapes into a tree, from which the fox cannot entice him to descend. The narrative concludes with a cluster of moral injunctions— not to close one's eyes or open one's mouth at inappropriate moments, and constantly to guard against the allurements of flattery—of the kind which constitute a conventional device for closure in fable literature.

The passage of particular interest for my purposes describes the fox's incursion into the cock's sheltered world:

A col-fox, ful of sly iniquitee,	3215
That in the grove hadde woned yeres three,	
By heigh ymaginacioun forncast,	
The same nyght thurghout the hegges brast	
Into the yerd ther Chauntecleer the faire	
Was wont, and eek his wyves, to repaire.	3220

(A black-marked fox, full of sly iniquity, that had lived in the grove for three years, that same night in accordance with his cunningly preconceived plans, broke through the hedge into the yard where the fair Chauntecleer, together with his wives, was accustomed to repair.)

As Derek Pearsall points out (216), the reference to *hegges* "is inconsistent" with an earlier description (lines 2847-48): "A yeerd she hadde, enclosed al aboute/ With stikkes, and a drye dych withoute." Pearsall rightly rejects Kenneth Sisam's suggestion that *hegges* might here carry "the general sense 'fences'" (48). He prefers to assume that

the discrepancy is attributable to the fact that "the scenery is not consistently visualized by Chaucer" (139-40).

An alternative possibility is that Chaucer regarded "hedge breaking" as something which, by nature, foxes do, a characterizing activity. Such is the implication of the name *Percehaie* given to the eldest of Renart's three sons. Although this character makes no appearance in Branch II of *Le Roman de Renart*, which contains the story of the abduction of Chauntecleer, his name is mentioned in Branches I, Ia, III, and IV, and he plays a major role in Branch XI. The meaning of the name is conveyed by the Modern French equivalents of its constituent parts, *percer* 'to break through,' and *haie* 'hedge.'<sup>2</sup> If Chaucer knew the name, he would surely have been alert to its etymology, since other evidence suggests his keen interest in these matters. *The Second Nun's Prologue* concludes with a traditional *interpretacio* of hypothesized Latin root elements in the name *Cecilia*, and we have an instance, first noticed by Skeat (5:238-39), of Chaucer perhaps exercising his own ingenuity with French by interpreting as "wikked nest" the name of [Sir Oliver] Mauny in *The Monk's Tale* (line 2386). An article by Roy Peter Clark (49-50) suggests that Chaucer may have incorporated in the Prologue to *The Reeve's Tale* a punning reference to his own name.

The statement "thurghout the hegges brast" is perhaps best accounted for as a narrational paraphrase of the name *Percehaie* from *Le Roman de Renart*.

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## Notes

1. All quotations of Chaucer's text are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

2. Mario Roques, in the index to his edition of the *B* text, explains the name as an "imitation comique" or "parodié" of *Perceval*, the hero of Arthurian romance whose name, from its first appearance in the work of Chrétien de Troyes, is associated with the quest of the Holy Grail. Some doubt as to the plausibility of this suggestion is raised by the fact that *Percehaie* as a proper name dates back to as early as 1086 and *Domesday Book* (which lists a Berkshire *Ralph Percehaie*), and reappears through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See Reaney 245 (s. v. *Pearcy*).

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