

**THE ELEVATED STATION  
OF CHAUNTECLEER:  
THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING AND AUGUSTINIAN SIGN  
THEORY IN *THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE***

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The Great Chain of Being was an idea widely accepted throughout the medieval, Christian world. This concept created a hierarchy that placed God at the top, with humans and animals below that. Within this view of the cosmos, humans retained dominion over animals. This idea of hierarchy has been used by St. Augustine to explain the natural order of this world, as it was believed that this order had been put forth by God at the time of creation. From this idea about the natural world, Augustine created a sign theory in his work *De Doctrina Christiana*. Augustinian Sign Theory has been widely recognized and utilized for centuries.

Augustinian Sign Theory is the simple idea that a sign is a thing that invokes the impression of another thing, specifically that God reveals greater truths in this way. Before the Fall of Man, man knew God inwardly. After the Fall, external means were necessary to know God, which He revealed through signs, particularly written word.<sup>1</sup> For theological purposes, sign theory sees Scripture as “intentionally given by

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson, Darrel B. “The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*.” *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 15, no. 1-2 (1969): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1484/j.rea.5.104162>.

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God, presented to us by men, and set forth in language.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, if the sign-giver is God, then the sign must signify what He has determined. In his work, Augustine explicitly defines “*signa naturalia*,” or natural sign, which shows how the natural world brings to mind greater truths, such as the ordered hierarchy of beings.<sup>3</sup> The sign itself is not nearly as important as what it signifies. The animals, as an integral part of the natural world governed by the structure of the Great Chain of Being put forth by God, can be used as signs of morality.

Furthermore, utilization of Augustinian Sign Theory can be made practical for other types of texts, particularly moral tales rooted in Christian values. One of the more popular ways that signs can be utilized is in stories, as this medium is particularly suited for imparting moral lessons without being overly explicit. An example of moral messaging in stories through signs can be understood through the work of Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. These tales are presented individually through an overarching story about pilgrims participating in a storytelling contest as they make their long journey to visit the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at the Canterbury Cathedral. These tales are entrenched in moralistic themes from the time period, particularly Christian ones. As author, Chaucer has entered a god-like role of sign-giver that bestows upon him the ability to designate signs, through his characters, to express his Christian values, which Chaucer achieves in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. These Christian values lend themselves to, and exist in harmony with, the Great Chain of Being, along with Augustinian Sign Theory, which bridges the gap between

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson, Darrel B. “The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana.” *Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 15, no. 1-2 (1969): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1484/j.rea.5.104162>.

<sup>3</sup> Gramigna, Remo. “Augustine on Lying: A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Types of Falsehood.” *Sign Systems Studies* 41, no. 4 (2013): 478, <https://doi.org/10.12697/sss.2013.41.4.05>.

the fantastical nature of the stories and the insight into morality that is to be applied to the readers' everyday life.

*The Nun's Priest's Tale*, one of the stories from *The Canterbury Tales*, is interesting in how it disrupts the Great Chain of Being and breaks natural order within the narrative. This narrative poem recounts the tale of Chauntecleer, a rooster. This rooster is presented very differently from the humans, or even the other nonhumans, in the story. Chauntecleer is arguably of greater importance and of higher standing in the hierarchy due to his superior understanding in astrological matters; therefore, his inherent purpose exceeds that of any humans or nonhumans. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* also lends itself to an analysis through Augustinian Sign Theory because the story's moral is conveyed with the use of animals as signs. Chauntecleer is the sign for adhering to the Great Chain of Being, and a sign for what evils await if one does not comply.

While many critics debate what the tale's moral might be, it is fair to say that there are a number of correct answers.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this essay, this story serves as a reminder of the importance of natural law, of finding one's place within the Great Chain of Being and finding fulfillment. It is only when one seeks to elevate themselves away from one's station that one becomes vulnerable to corruption and chaos.<sup>5</sup> God created an exceptional animal in Chauntecleer as a sign of His divine intellect, but Chauntecleer is still bound by his station as a rooster, in an ultimate moral statement of the hierarchical natural world that God created.

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<sup>4</sup> Myers, D.E. "Focus and 'Moralite' in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 7, no. 3 (1973): 210–11.

<sup>5</sup> Schuman, Samuel. "The Widow's Garden: 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' and the Great Chain of Being." *Studies in the Humanities: Journal of the Senshū University Research Society* 6, no. 2 (1978): 13.

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As a character, Chauntecleer is uniquely vulnerable to temptation and corruption because of the line he walks in between human and god, complicated even more so by the fact that as a rooster, he is neither. Chauntecleer's temptation to leave the safety of his station inspires a moral lesson on the importance of knowing one's place within the Great Chain of Being, with a greater allegorical meaning for the natural world that can be revealed through Chauntecleer's use as a sign, in accordance with Augustinian Sign Theory. Chauntecleer signifies the temptation that can befall individuals who are not secure in their position in life, and the dangers that come from not adhering to their God-given purpose and hierarchical station.

Because the Nun's Priest's Tale reads like a fable or instructional story, the reader is ready for a moral or value to be imparted through the use of animals as signs. By setting up the reader's expectations, it will be easier to impart the lesson. The larger lesson being conveyed is the importance of staying humble and not succumbing to flattery, which is particularly applicable to Chauntecleer, as he is characterized as a superior being in all ways, but most importantly, he is aware of it. The moral also speaks to the danger of thinking too highly of oneself and striving for more than their station in life.<sup>6</sup> It is described that "[i]n al the land, of crowing nas his peer."<sup>7</sup> Because of this great skill that Chauntecleer possesses, he knows that he is an integral part of the lives of those around him. As such, the story's structure suggests that Chauntecleer is of more importance than his human owner, or any other being mentioned in the story.

*The Nun's Priest's Tale* starts with an introduction to Chauntecleer's owner, the widow, and then an explanation of the setting and relationship between the human and nonhuman

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<sup>6</sup> Myers, D.E. "Focus and 'Moralite' in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 7, no. 3 (1973): 212.

<sup>7</sup> Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," line 2850.

characters: “For thilke tyme, as I have understonde, beestes and briddes koude speke and synge.”<sup>8</sup> The story eventually transitions into a narrative focused entirely on Chauntecleer and those that surround him, and the subsequent trouble Chauntecleer gets into when he lets the Fox tempt him away from the safety his hierarchical standing provides within the widow’s yard.

Animals in this story take on human qualities, displaying more fully realized personalities than any of the human characters mentioned in the opening lines. While the main human character, Chauntecleer’s owner, is characterized in the beginning, the characterization seems to only be there to describe just how low in station she really is, by mentioning that “[f]ul sooty was hire bour and eek hir halle.”<sup>9</sup> His owner, only referred to as a “povre wydwe,”<sup>10</sup> is a peasant, poor and destitute. Her greatest possession is Chauntecleer himself. Her house is dirty and in disrepair, whereas Chauntecleer lives in relative comfort in her front yard.<sup>11</sup> While she is without a husband, Chauntecleer has seven hens for wives. In this way, Chauntecleer has a better life and higher station than his owner. Chaucer creates an earthly hierarchy within the widow’s own garden, with Chauntecleer as the ruler, which also behaves as a signifier for the natural world. From that hierarchy, the narrative “[f]ocuses on a number of enlightening and entertaining illustrations of the dangers of deviating from one’s place within the universal order, and the delights to be found in cleaving to that place.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, lines 2880-2881.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, line 2832.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, line 2821.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, lines 2847-2849.

<sup>12</sup> Schuman, Samuel. “The Widow’s Garden: ‘The Nun’s Priest’s Tale’ and the Great Chain of Being.” *Studies in the Humanities: Journal of the Senshū University Research Society* 6, no. 2 (1978): 13.

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Regardless of Chauntecleer's excellence, the fact remains that Chauntecleer is a rooster, and the widow is a human. As such, the widow's humanity comes with certain inherent qualities, a claim that would be supported within the Great Chain of Being and by St. Augustine. The theory based on Augustinian thought put forth by Anne Payne in her essay helps illuminate the dynamic between the widow and Chauntecleer. Even if the widow is poor, she is still a more elevated individual just in the nature of her being human.<sup>13</sup> Chauntecleer does not know what a fox is, or the danger it can pose to a rooster. The widow does though, only due to the inherent intelligence that comes with human lived experience.

The medieval conception of the dynamic between humans and nonhumans implies some basic principles for analyzing medieval animal fables. "According to the rules of hierarchy in fable," Anne Payne explains, "animals move up into the role of men, and men move up into the role of gods."<sup>14</sup> In the context of this story, the widow would be raised to a god-like status, while Chauntecleer and the other hens are humans. In stories such as these, to be human is to be God. The foreknowledge of the widow will always be more than Chauntecleer's, simply because she is human, and he is not. Chauntecleer, as an animal, is constantly in contention with his lack of foreknowledge, which is inherently linked to the fact that he is not human. Even with his cosmic abilities, arguably, it does not do enough to push him into god-like status. Chauntecleer, at times, appears to be "a fool because he is a chicken but acts like a man."<sup>15</sup> It is Chauntecleer's attempt to move into a god-

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<sup>13</sup> Payne, F. Anne. "Foreknowledge and Free Will: Three Theories in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 10, no. 3 (1976): 206.

<sup>14</sup> Payne, F. Anne. "Foreknowledge and Free Will: Three Theories in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 10, no. 3 (1976): 205.

<sup>15</sup> Schuman, Samuel. "The Widow's Garden: 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' and the Great Chain of Being." *Studies in the Humanities*:

like role that casts him into a perilous situation. This entire narrative shows Chauntecleer constantly fighting against the constraints that come with being a rooster confined to the hierarchical structure of the natural world. Furthermore, this inequality in existence does not stop Chaucer from attempting to elevate Chauntecleer and assert his higher status through the utilization of his unique ability in time-keeping. This fact further cements the limitations that the Great Chain of Being puts on Chauntecleer, which is morally conveyed through Chauntecleer as a character and as a sign.

Chauntecleer the rooster, whose name in modern English means “clear singing,” has his narrative significance as the main character and moral signifier conveyed by Chaucer through detailed description of the bird’s physical appearance. Much care is taken to describe him. Most of the other animals are mentioned in passing and without much of a description at all, such as the “thre large sows,” “three keen,” and “a sheep that highte Malle.”<sup>16</sup> Chauntecleer, on the other hand, is given six lines that explicitly describe his coloring:

His coomb was redder than the fyn coral,  
And batailled as it were a castel wal;  
His byle was blak, and as the jeet it shoon;  
Lyk asure were his legges and his toon;  
His nayles whitter than the lylve flour,  
And lyk the burned gold was his colour.<sup>17</sup>

The level of detail that is provided to any of the other beings in the story pales in comparison to the breadth and depth of detail that the story provides Chauntecleer, because he is the most important character. Even of the seven hens that were all

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*Journal of the Senshū University Research Society* 6, no. 2 (1978): 14.

<sup>16</sup> Chaucer, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” line 2830-31.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, lines 2859-64.

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his wives, only “faire damoysele Pertelote” is described because of her standing as Chauntecleer’s near equal.<sup>18</sup> Her description, as well as the other hens, is entirely based on his own, as Pertelote, in particular, is extolled only in her relationship to Chauntecleer. All the hens are described as “wonder lyk to hym, as of colours.”<sup>19</sup> Pertelote is beautiful and talented only in the qualities that she shares with him, that is her looks and her singing, which Chauntecleer holds in high regard. However, she does not possess all his abilities, that is, his time-keeping abilities and his knowledge, so she is still beneath him.

Chauntecleer’s most essential character trait as a sign, and most compelling evidence of his higher level on the Great Chain of Being, is his cosmic and astrological understanding of how the sun rises and sets. His crowing is more exact than any “clokke” or “orlogge.”<sup>20</sup> It is said that “[b]y nature he knew ech ascencioun of the equynoxial,” which means that Chauntecleer knows the time, once each hour, when each of the twenty-four imaginary points on the celestial equator rises on the horizon.<sup>21</sup> Because of Chauntecleer’s great skill, his purpose has surpassed any rooster that has ever been. Roosters are known for crowing when the sun rises and as timekeepers in general, but Chauntecleer crows in such an exact way for each hour of the day, and with such understanding of how the world works, that he has risen past his station as a mere rooster, or even a mere animal. It is his fundamental purpose, and Chaucer describes it as part of “his nature.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes this particular meaning of nature,<sup>22</sup> for this time period, as “the inherent dominant power or

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, line 2870.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, line 2868.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, line 2854.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, lines 2855-58.

<sup>22</sup> "nature, n.5a." *OED Online*. December 2020.



impulse on a person by which character or action is determined, directed, or controlled.” This definition captures the nuance of Chauntecleer’s abilities and their correlation to his higher standing within the Great Chain of Being. It is in this way that Chauntecleer attempts to cement himself higher up on the hierarchy, even surpassing humans. His understanding of timekeeping rivals that of a god. This skill is his essential quality that is inherent to his being. This quality puts him above most beings but is in constant conflict with the nature of his existence as a rooster.

After the opening lines of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* strongly declare Chauntecleer’s high place in the Great Chain of Being, Chaucer crafts a narrative that shows the danger of breaking away from one’s station, through the introduction of the Fox as a villain. When analyzing the relationship between Chauntecleer and the Fox, it is important to understand how lies function in this story. Lies are integral in the strategy the Fox uses to try to eat Chauntecleer. He preys on Chauntecleer’s inflated ego and uses flattery to lure him into a dangerous situation, entreating, “But trewely, the cause of my comynge [w]as oonly for to herkne how that ye synge.”<sup>23</sup> This flattery is rooted in lies, but in an unconventional way. Critic Remo Gramigna offers a theoretical framework to better understand how lies are used within stories. By understanding the intention and goal of the liar, the nuances of the statements used to lie can give better insight into the motivations of the liar, in this case, the Fox. This analysis is based on the works of St. Augustine, who contributed to the study of human deception through two short treatises. Within Chaucer’s work, Augustine would most likely categorize the Fox’s lies as the “intention to mislead” rather than to “assert a falsehood.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Chaucer, “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” line 3289-90.

<sup>24</sup> Gramigna, Remo. “Augustine on Lying: A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Types of Falsehood.” *Sign Systems Studies* 41, no. 4 (2013): 467.

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Not even the Fox would try to state that Chauntecleer's crowing is not magnificent; rather, he acknowledges this truth by saying that his voice is like that of "any aungel hath that is in hevене."<sup>25</sup> He weaponizes this truth to prey on the rooster's ego and maneuvers him into a situation that benefits the Fox's ultimate goal. The Fox represents what happens when signs are utilized for personal purposes, rather than to express God's will. Signs not properly framed through Augustinian Sign Theory, that is, signs that corrupt natural order and God's plan, can be misleading. The endless proliferation of meanings from signs, when unchecked by properly formed morals, can lead individuals astray from the true order of existence.

Through the lens of Augustinian Sign Theory, the Fox symbolizes evil and chaos, which speaks to his position in the story as a foil to Chauntecleer's attempt to rise above his station and the subsequent harmful results of such an action. Chauntecleer, having fallen into the trap of the Fox's lies about his intentions puts himself in danger of being eaten by the Fox. Having learned his lesson, Chauntecleer actually uses the Fox's deceptive technique to free himself from the jaws of the predator. As D. E. Myers observes, "The Nun's Priest chose to tell a moral little fable in which a flattering liar is deceived by the same kind of trick that he himself used."<sup>26</sup> It is only after this close call with the Fox that Chauntecleer comes to accept his place within the widow's yard, his rightful place as a rooster. Regardless of his lofty ambitions, Chauntecleer's special abilities are uniquely suited to the station that has been provided to him, and it is only there that he can achieve contentment in the natural world. In moral tales, characters act as a sign to a moral truth. The moral messaging of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* imparts that all beings have a natural station in the hierarchy that brings fulfillment. Even Chauntecleer, who

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<sup>25</sup> Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," line 3292.

<sup>26</sup> Myers, D.E. "Focus and 'Moralite' in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 7, no. 3 (1973): 220.

through his paradoxical existence seems to blur the line between human and nonhuman, finds a place that is fit for a rooster by the end of this tale.

Through the lens of the Great Chain of Being and Augustinian Sign Theory, it is possible to understand how Chaucer crafts a character that seems to break natural law, while also acting as a cautionary tale about the dangers of doing so. Critics agree that, in many fables such as this one, humans are raised to the levels of gods, and the animals are raised to the levels of humans.<sup>27</sup> Chauntecleer, in particular, is raised to an even higher level within the Great Chain of Being than that of the typical animal of fable, due to his astrological understanding. The dynamic between the Fox and Chauntecleer ultimately behaves as the primary driver for the moral of the story. When the Fox arrives in the story, he acts as the initiator of direct conflict with Chauntecleer's elevated station, highlighting how Chauntecleer's arrogance and susceptibility to flattery will get him in trouble. The Fox symbolizes the corruption of natural order. He is a sign for devilish influence that Chauntecleer eventually overcomes by resisting the flattery and finding contentment in his station. As such, one can find ultimate pleasure and purpose by acknowledging one's station and staying there.

Chauntecleer in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* is an unusual character because of how he breaks the mold for what is expected of animals, and what is believed to be the capacity of their intelligence and understanding, especially during medieval times. Chaucer presents a main character that is not only a nonhuman, but is such an exceptional being that Chauntecleer seems to surpass any other being within the story, most importantly, his human owner. In the context of the Great Chain of Being, Chauntecleer seems to be approaching a higher level than that of both humans and nonhumans, resting somewhere

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<sup>27</sup> Payne, F. Anne. "Foreknowledge and Free Will: Three Theories in the Nun's Priest's Tale." *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 10, no. 3 (1976): 205.

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between humans and God. Chaucer infers this by his authorial choices regarding Chauntecleer: through visual imagery, relationships to other characters, and his own character traits that set him apart from any other being in the story. Chauntecleer's status is further complicated by the nature of his being, and subsequent susceptibility to corruption, with the story's moral expressed in a narrative that can be analyzed through the lens of Augustinian Sign Theory.

Why is it that Chauntecleer makes for such an integral sign for Chaucer to discuss the Great Chain of Being? Augustinian Sign Theory ultimately asserts that the natural world is a sign of God's divine intellect, as creator of the natural world, which he imbued with inherent hierarchical properties. These properties have then been understood through the concept known as the Great Chain of Being. Chauntecleer is particularly situated, through his character descriptions, character arc, and hierarchical place in the widow's yard to represent Chaucer's most striking conversation about the state of hierarchy in the natural world. Through this dialogue, Chaucer highlights God's divine intellect and providence, in accordance with medieval Christian beliefs.

While this belief was not exceptional for medieval times, Chaucer's use of the character of Chauntecleer for this purpose is exceptional, and it highlights Chaucer's brilliant craft and knowledge of sign theory, as a critical theory to instill the moral underpinnings of his tale. Chauntecleer's use as a sign initially seems as though it would conflict with the Great Chain of Being because of the perceived elevated nature of Chauntecleer's existence, but the events of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* counter this initial inclination. Chauntecleer's story arc demonstrates that even if one possesses extraordinary characteristics, one must come to understand and accept the station appointed by God. To be a sign in Augustinian Sign Theory is to align with the God-given order of the natural world.

Chauntecleer is presented as a being with a unique ability, that of his astrological understanding, which places him at a higher station than would be expected of a mere

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rooster, or a mere human. While his station does not place him higher than humans, in agreement with the Great Chain of Being, the surety and fulfillment that Chauntecleer finds in his station at the end of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* functions as a sign of God's divine love for, and divine providence of, His ordered creation. Chaucer frames the Great Chain of Being through the tale of Chauntecleer, in a way that allows Augustinian Sign Theory to reveal what it means to truly find one's place as a hierarchical being in the natural world.

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