Most readers agree that *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is one of Chaucer’s finest poetic achievements. Critics have judged it to be a “virtuoso performance,”¹ “the most consciously aesthetic of Chaucer’s productions,”² “a summa of Chaucerian artistry,”³ illustrating “*in parvo* the achievement of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole.”⁴ Donald Howard finds it one of the “few places in *The Canterbury Tales* . . . where we hear a neutral voice which might as well be Chaucer’s own.”⁵ And Morton Bloomfield would appear to speak for two generations of readers when he agrees with his own undergraduate professor who once imperiously asserted that “an inability to enjoy [*The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*] should disqualify anyone from the study of literature.”⁶ Urbane, playful, humanistic, learned, and quintessentially Chaucerian, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* has rarely suffered from underappreciation.

In addition to inspiring a host of appreciative essays, the *Tale* has prompted numerous scholarly studies concerning the *Tale*’s literary, intellectual, historical, and cultural *mise en scene*. These include studies of its sources and its analogues; its reflections of medieval dream psychology, medical theories, theological debates; its astronomical allusions, musical allusions, scientific allusions, scriptural allusions, and political allusions. These informative pieces have caused little controversy, by and large, because each has contributed to a knowledge that is helpful in preparation.
for our interpretation of the tale. It is only when scholars actually begin to articulate the Tale’s meaning that the fireworks start. Although critics of literature are scarcely known for their collegial harmony of opinion (“What,” asks the jejune critic Persse McGarrigle in the academic novel Small World, “do you do if everybody agrees with you?”), the diversity of readings of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is nevertheless astonishing. It is also deeply ironic, since beast fables—brief narratives with attached morals—are not considered to be a very difficult genre to decode. And even though The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is obviously a uniquely complex instance of the genre, it too closes with a moralitas that graciously empowers readers to discover for themselves the essence of the Tale’s meaning:

But ye that holden this tale a folye,
As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,
Taketh the moralite, goode men.
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.
Now, goode God, if that it be thy wille,
As seith my lord, so make us alle goode men,
And brynge us to his heighe blisse! Amen.
(VII.3438–46)

Over the past century one might expect that careful readings of these concluding nine lines would have generated consensus somewhere along the spectrum of Chaucerian scholarship. However, after reviewing all pertinent critiques of this moralitas, Derek Pearsall in his invaluable The Nun’s Priest’s Tale in The Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer reports: “The narrator here bids us find a simple moral, but no two critics agree on what it is, except that it is not what the Nun’s Priest says it is.” One of the several difficulties in successfully determining the Tale’s “moral” obviously lies in the overabundance of “fruit” scattered about its narrative field, for in a poem of only 646 lines, there are numerous embedded apothegms all striving to extrapolate the import of ongoing events. Indeed, every major character—rooster, hen, fox, and narrator—seems to be a frustrated glossator, whose instinctive response to a half-line
of narrative is to lift aloft hand, wing, or paw, exclaim “Lo!” and utter a timely axiom or two.

Because the tale’s plethora of self-interpreting philosophemes seems to function as an oblique critique of literary criticism generally, a number of readers have felt warned off from any kind of serious interpretative endeavors. Under the puckish rubric “Desiderata,” The Chaucer Review once requested a magic “Alley-oop machine” that could take five scholars, plus tape-recorder, back in time to ask those questions only Chaucer could answer, such as “What is the ‘fruyt’ of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale?” 

Talbot Donaldson, in an oft-cited one-liner, has pronounced conclusively that the fruit of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is its chaff. In his survey of all the tale’s criticism up until 1982, Pearsall appears to agree with Donaldson’s anti-interpretative interpretation. After dividing “Interpretative Studies” of the tale into “Moral Interpretation” (surveyed in seven pages), “Exegetical Interpretation” (five pages), “Skepticism Concerning Moral and Exegetical Interpretation” (two pages), and “Political Interpretation” (one page), Pearsall arranges the bulk of the tale’s criticism (surveyed in sixteen pages) under the rubric “Noninterpretative Evaluation.” These studies, which focus generally upon the Tale’s satiric and mock-heroic rhetorical voices, constitute in Pearsall’s opinion “the traditional and central critical approach to The Nun’s Priest’s Tale.” For Pearsall, it is quite acceptable for critics to evaluate the tale (that is, appreciate its range of literary styles), but it is folly to attempt to interpret the tale (that is, explicate its meaning). In fact, Pearsall rather pointedly concludes that it is really quite useless to search for the ultimate import of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale because “the fact that the tale has no point is the point of the tale.” To put it another way, since Chaucer’s poem seems to have so brilliantly anticipated, parodied, and deconstructed the extrapolative importunities of our critical profession, sheer admiration might be our wisest option: dwarfling scholar had best retire and leave the field free and clear to Chaucer’s gigantic genius.

Indeed, there is much in the Tale that mocks all our scholarly endeavors. The hubris of erudition, as Peter Elbow observes, is embodied in Chauntecleer himself, whose most distinctive characteristic as avian humanist is “to stretch away from earth”—in his crowing, his astronomizing, his glozings, and his cocky style of loving. Because modern and post-modern critics, especially those of a theoretical bent like me, are forever
prepared to stretch into the stratosphere, if we were ever to gloss this tale in an unusually clever way we would surely be setting up our own critical jouissance as a special target of its ironies. “Unlike fable,” Charles Muscatherine famously asserted years ago, the “Nun’s Priest’s Tale does not so much make true and solemn assertions about life as it tests truths and tries out solemnities. If you are not careful, it will try out your solemnity too; it is here, doubtless, trying out mine.”17 An especially poignant moment underscoring the experience of critical self-deflation regularly effected by this tale occurred at an MLA session when a paper entitled “Chauntecleer and Partlet Identified” attracted a flock of curious scholars. What the paper eventually proved was that the tale’s hero and heroine were actually Golden Spangled Hamburg chickens.18 No one, except the most erudite experts in the history of chicken breeding, could have disagreed.19 But to find oneself suddenly brought so low on the great chain of academic being, mucking about in the taxonomies of poultry identification, must have been a sobering experience. And a salutary experience it may have been as well, because a fundamental reason that The Nun’s Priest’s Tale remains remarkably unresponsive to our golden-spangled critical ambitions, I believe, is that one of its major commitments is to demonstrate, not only its own resistance, but the adamantine resistance of all literature to traditional critical practices.

But precisely because the literary world of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is so imaginatively creative and quintessentially Chaucerian, certain stalwart critics in past generations have insisted that if we cannot decrypt Chaucer’s intent in this, his signature piece of poetry, we can scarcely feel confident about our interpretations of any of his other major works. Contending that The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is a biblicosm of The Canterbury Tales and arguing that The Canterbury Tales, in turn, with its Genesis-like opening and Last Judgment–like closure, constitutes a literary variant of the history of Christian salvation, at least one school of thought has argued that Chaucer’s beast fable is best interpreted in the same ways the Bible, its most sacred textual referent, was traditionally understood. This means that Chauntecleer, strutting around his terrestrial paradise, is rather like Adam before the fall; Pertelote, gracious Everywoman and harridan Arch -wife, is equivalent to Eve; the clever and insouciant fox is, well, quite similar to the Devil, or perhaps the snake.20 The tale unquestionably invites...
this kind of associative thinking, even from readers far removed from
the prevenient grace of neo-Robertsonian exegesis. Undoubtedly, if one
squints in the right spirit, one can readily descry—in a roosting-peg, a
dry ditch, a convenient tree, and various struttings, frettings, and awkward
flights—the major types of salvation history. And if one is somewhat un-
certain about the prefabricated certitude of these typological equations,
one can choose to dilute biblical allegory with ethical tropology occa-
sionally modified by contemporary history: Chauntecleer might become
a priest (or any holy man), the fox might become a heretic (or a Francis-
can), and Chauntecleer’s peasant mistress, the widow, might become the
church (or at least an exemplary Christian).  

There is of course no question that Chaucer employed various forms
of biblical citation and scriptural allusion throughout his poetic career,
braiding into his texts familiar images and phrases that alert the reader
to the sacred referents that are being parodied, transcontextualized, and
redeployed. Whereas in most forms of literary parody the target text is
itself the object of critical scrutiny, in biblical parody the dynamics are
typically reversed, the Bible serving as the textual authority against which
characters and events reflected in the parodic text are themselves to be
judged. But the narrator of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale appears to be intent
upon an even more complex form of parody, biblifying his animal crea-
tures so that he may just as expertly unbiblify them. Chauntecleer at tale’s
end remains an oversexed and underrepentant pagan. Pertelote, despite
the narrator’s archly misogynistic asides, remains the testy wife, attractive
lemman, and loving sister she has always been. The fox slithers six ways to
Sunday under every exegetical hedge, his only consistent meaning being
what he most consistently is: a fox. What appears to be the primary paro-
dic target in this fable is neither the Bible itself nor the animal characters
inside their barnyard paradise, but rather our own hermeneutical de-
sires to unite the two. Thus it would appear that one major subject of in-
terrogation in this literary hortus inconclusus is ultimately the reader as
overextended exegete, whose proclivities toward knee-jerk biblicism and
hyper-allegoresis are in need of the finest cathartics parody can provide.

But this does not mean that critical attempts to descry in The Nun’s
Priest’s Tale patterns of epic proportion and cosmic significance are en-
tirely out of order. In an ambitious study entitled “Food, Laxatives, and
Catharsis in Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale,* Patrick Gallacher focuses upon the prevalence of food in the tale, both its consumption and expulsion, most notably the widow’s diet, the chickens foraging for grain, the narrator’s inability to “butte it to the bren” (VII.3240), the closing exhortation to take the fruit and leave the chaff, and Pertelote’s prescription of “lawriol, centaure, and fumetere, / . . . ellebor, / . . . katapuce . . . [and] gaitrys beryis” (VII.2963–65) as purges for her husband’s imbalanced humors. Citing a large body of medieval theological tracts but concentrating especially on Plato’s *Timaeus,* Gallacher argues for an implicit contrast in the tale between the body of the divinely constructed universe, which is in such perfect balance that “it is fed, ecologically enough and immanently, by its own waste,” and the human body, which “is in a state of constant flux and mutability—of ingestion, respiration, and purgation, of being filled and emptied.” Relying upon numerous medieval examples of the well-balanced consumption of food as a holistic sign—an analogue to taking advice sensibly, to digesting the meaning of texts properly, and to communing the Eucharistic mysteries—Gallacher argues that Chaucer’s fable points toward a model of the perfect human life as well as toward a “model of total continuous intelligibility in the universe.” Accordingly, the ideal mode of interpretative understanding entertained in the *Tale* is nothing less than utopian: it “must explicitly reconcile the literal and the metaphorical, the physical and the spiritual, the empirical and the transcendent, the universal and the particular; it is, in fact, the sum total of all answers to all questions.”

In *Chaucer and Menippean Satire,* F. Anne Payne agrees that physical eating is an important behavior in the fable. But in a chapter entitled “The Eaters and the Eaten in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale,*” her assessment of the heuristic significance of consumption is diametrically opposed to Gallacher’s. Rather than a trope directing us toward an understanding of the well-balanced moral and spiritual life in a divinely ordered universe, she sees eating as a powerful reminder of the meaningless violence of human life and the inevitable horrors of death:

The fate of all but God is to be eaten eventually. Power, which ultimately only God has, is the ability to eat, by destroying or consuming or manipulating offending bodies which are obstructive
or uncooperative and which, in some way, provide food for the eater’s desires.27

Payne’s dystopian vision of the alimentary disorders of the natural world, a violent site of devourers consuming devourees, embraces an anxious conviction that the narrator of the tale is himself intent on taking us in—devouring our good will with his “lies,” “inconsistencies,” and “covert, sly, and gleeful attacks on serious thinkers,”28 laughing at “men’s rooster-like concerns,” and belittling “their futile attempts at explanation.”29 Speaking in “the voice of the devil,” the Nun’s Priest is a verbal trickster whose only “fruit is the morality of the arch-destroyer,” a “knowledge that destroys all sense of beauty, all joy, all impulse toward freedom.”30 So when the Priest opens his mouth to speak, Payne concludes, “like Chauntecleer, we ought to fly into the most convenient tree, not stay in the fox’s mouth the while, for we have been in the process of being beguiled by a master with intents every bit as wicked as the fox’s.”31

Payne’s fearful vision of the bestial world of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is radically different from Gallacher’s trust in the existence of a salvific telos to that world’s literary design. Gallacher’s and Payne’s studies are similar in significant ways, however, especially in their shared sense that the tale is a monad of Chaucer’s poetic, intellectual, and theological imagination, and in their deep conviction that the fabulous world it creates is a simulacrum of the real world Chaucer would wish we all might adequately understand. Indeed, their belief that a single beast fable could be such a capacious literary microcosm is similar to the attitude in Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* of the consul who respectfully kept a volume of *Peter Rabbit* in his vast and eclectic library: “‘Everything is to be found in *Peter Rabbit,*’ the consul liked to say.”32 Furthermore, and quite importantly, both Gallacher and Payne see *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* as a metafable concerned with the problematics of literary interpretation and its effects upon the reader, Gallacher trusting in Chaucer’s investment in some kind of readerly progress towards an elevated unity of Being, Payne fearing that the reader may end up abused, ground down, and consumed. And what these two studies most symptomatically demonstrate is the contentious pattern of almost all extended interpretations of the tale. In ways that are both fascinating and frustrating, for several generations *The Nun’s*
Priest’s Tale has inspired intracritical disputes between hermeneutical extremes—secular versus spiritual, theoretical versus pragmatic, serious versus ironic, didactic versus antididactic, trusting versus wary, interpretative versus anti-interpretative, and so on. These kinds of debates are of course scarcely new to Chaucer criticism, but in a way that is quite distinctive The Nun’s Priest’s Tale has generated a peculiarly riven and walleyed critical canon. And inside this critical canon there is an unusual amount of nervous tension generated by a felt need to create some kind of synaptic arc across a large conceptual space positioned within dyadic sets of interdependent but mutually exclusive discourses.

This book attempts to conceptualize that synaptic arc by first asking a very basic question: What in fact is the genre of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale? In addition to beast fable, it has been defined as a sermon, an exemplum, a comedy, a tragedy, a tragicomedy, a satire, a mock epic, a romance, a fabliau, even a fictional poème à clef. It includes bits of many other kinds of literature as well: fortunate fall motifs are intercalated with fascicles of the Fürstenspiegel (“mirror of princes”), the consolatio, and the disputatio, which in turn are set off against discursive snippets relating to theology, psychology, astronomy, gastronomy, philosophy, and the proper measurements of time. In fact, The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is such a polygeneric kaleidoscope of literary kinds that from a distance it resembles what W. K. Wimsatt once saw when he took in the panoptic world of Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism in one acerbic glance: “Superimposed fourth-of-July pinwheels, with a reversing sequence of rocket engines.”33

In order to give some critical order and generic stability to our reading of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, I will employ a principal concept throughout this book: a fully theorized understanding of parody. Over the past generation, the inner workings of parody have belatedly been accorded the nuanced attention they deserve. A verbal construct whose primary object of imitation is typically another verbal construct, literary parody is both an intertextual and a self-referential genre. Normally based on at least one other work of literature, parody is a prime example of a meta-fictional artifact whose ultimate concern is the nature and value of art—its construction, contamination, transcontextualization, and interpretation. One must be especially foolhardy or self-assured to write parody: as a literary form of literary criticism, parody is the art of art glossing art,
and thus it must stand up to being judged according to the aesthetic norms it itself employs in judging its target text. The target text functions first as an empowering model in that its literary achievements must be intimately understood in order that they may be imitated, critiqued, and then superseded as the parodic text aspires to an even more demanding aesthetic ideal. Accordingly, the literary parodist must needs be an accomplished poet as well as an achieved critic whose parodic *ars poetica* is itself a work of art.

Although various critics have expressed their appreciation for *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*’s intertextual playfulness—calling its style “ironic,” “satiric,” or “parodic”—rarely has it been argued that the entire tale is a sustained parody, in part because there is obviously no one textual referent, in part because there is no apparent ideational target other than such grand notions as “the follies of human nature” or “the sin of pride.” Accordingly, at this early point in my analysis of *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* I find it worth introducing two instances of literary nomenclature that will provide assistance in forthcoming chapters: encyclopedic parody, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, and Menippean anatomy, as defined by Northrop Frye. Both Bakhtin and Frye group under these closely related rubrics a variety of literary works that take pleasure in resisting traditional generic classifications. Cornucopian and labyrinthine, these works tend to favor colliding literary styles, disorderly narrative forms, multiple authorial perspectives, and conflicting points of view. Often placed in unusual settings, their world of intellectual reference entertains the entirety of Western thought, and while their principal comic butt is consistently the archetypal *philosophus gloriosus*, they raise, even though they refuse to answer, a series of important questions about the limits of human knowledge and the ultimate purpose of man. Like Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* (as small as they are large) is a fair example of Menippean anatomy—a concatenated mixture of textual appropriations, scholarly allusions, and protean voices all channeled through an authorial persona so chameleon-esque that he burlesques the reliable and the unreliable narrator at the very same moment.

To illustrate just a few of the Tale’s Menippean features, I turn to Maurice Hussey’s *The Nun’s Priest’s Prologue and Tale*, an edition that for years
served as a preparatory text for the British A-level exams. Hussey provides a memorable outline of the tale's narrative and nonnarrative parts:

[1–54 Prologue]
55–115 Introduction of human and bird characters
116–141 The Tale (I): The Dream
142–175 Pertelote’s interpretation (based upon Cato)
176–203 Her medical advice
204–217 Chauntecleer’s rejection of her interpretation
218–283 The first example: the murder of the pilgrim
284–296 Brief moralization upon murder and punishment
297–343 The second example: deaths by drowning
344–355 The third example: the death of St Kenelm
356–360 The reference to Scipio’s dream
361–371 The reference to Joseph’s dreams
372–384 Citation of classical examples:
   (i) Croesus (372–374)
   (ii) Andromache (375–384)
385–390 Chauntecleer’s conclusion
391–420 The Tale (II)
421–433 Astronomical interlude
434–440 Chauntecleer’s fears
441–448 Digression upon rhetoric
449–459 Introduction of the Fox
460–463 Digression upon treachery
464–485 Digression upon Predestination
486–558 The Tale (III) with moralization (486–500)
559–564 Sermon upon Flattery
565–571 The Tale (IV): The attack upon Chauntecleer
572–575 Digression upon Destiny
576–580 Digression upon Venus
581–588 Digression upon Richard I
589–608 Classical lamentations:
   (i) Troy (589–595)
   (ii) Carthage (596–602)
   (iii) Rome (603–608)
This is an editorial tour-de-force. Contending that the tale itself is a mere 175 lines long while the rest of whatever the poem is takes up the remaining 521 lines, Hussey’s seemingly straight-faced plot outline is meant to illustrate the amount of rhetorical ornamentation that has been superimposed upon the basic *materia*, or field, of the story. Chopped up into six unequal parts, “The Tale” is repeatedly arrested in its narrative forward progress as digressions, interludes, moralizings and amplifications take over center stage, the most egregious being a 250-line one-sided debate between Pertelote and Chauntecleer on the meaning of dreams. Nevertheless, despite its many divagations, Hussey hopes the reader might eventually discover some principle that would accord narrative or ideational unity to the *Tale*’s disparate elements:

This list may make the Tale look absurdly fragmented. This is not the case. It is left to the individual reader to decide whether there is not a relevance among so many irrelevances, a consistency within so many seeming inconsistencies. In so far as they refer to human problems and predicaments they may be allowed to enhance the Tale rather than to distract from it.37

In response to Hussey’s formalist reservations, it is useful to recall how the craft of poetry in the Middle Ages was understood to be similar to constructing an edifice out of standard elements, each of which could be appreciated in isolation before being fitted into a larger design. As Robert Jordan remarks in *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation*, “[t]he typical Chaucerian narrative is literally ‘built’ of inert, self-contained parts, collocated in accordance with the additive, reduplicative principles which characterize the Gothic edifice.”38 Further, as John Dagenais notes in his study of medieval reading practices, the “particular texture of [medieval] reading,” with “its starts and stops and bumps and skips,” may have been