GENERIC MIX IN CHAUCER’S  
THE CANTERBURY TALES

Abstract. This paper will explore usage of different genres in individual Chaucer’s tales and explain the advantage of their mixture. The tale in which the intergeneric communication is most evident is The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, but it is also present in others. The one mentioned will be the main subject of the paper in which the beast fable, romance, dream vision and moral debate are successfully blended together to display the biggest flaws of the time through the context of animal characters.

Key words: genre, bestiary, generic stereotype, convention, parody, dream, moral.

As a collection of all the main medieval literary genres, The Canterbury Tales gives an insight into the forms of romances, sermons, didactic treatises, saint’s lives, fall of great men, Breton Lays, dream visions, fabliaux, beast fables, and others. Chaucer didn’t limit himself to using just one genre per story. He successfully mixed genres interweaving them in one finely crafted and meaningful form. Rejecting the generic distinction by using the elements of two, three and
even four genres in one tale, Chaucer managed to create more significant conclusion and deeper meaning of the general idea. He was also in a habit of inverting the limited generic stereotypes in order to make his stories more effective, significant and complex and to adjust them to the character of his pilgrims. Multi-generic form that he uses makes the understanding of the work more difficult, less determinate in meaning and, therefore, closer to the modern literary mind. When reading Chaucer’s tales, it is difficult to limit each tale to strictly one paradigm of story telling, it is almost impossible. Chaucer selected the genres of his tales making sure that they matched the status or occupation of the teller, but he usually inverted the genre’s stereotype pushing the boundaries in order to make points not possible within the usual generic parameters. The inversions were sometime used for the honest criticism and satire, but more often in order to submit some phenomenon to a parody and allusion. In order to explore different roles that many medieval genres played in *The Canterbury Tales*, it is necessary to define some of them, at least those important ones for analyzing the chosen tales.

The tale in which the intergeneric communication is most evident is *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, but it is also present in others. Tale about the rooster and a fox is of French origin and nominally belongs to a beast fable genre. But through this beast fable, romance, dream vision and moral debate with exemplum are successfully blended together to display the biggest human flaws of the time through the context of animal characters. Pictured flaws are everlasting, recognized even today and that is why this story has its amiability for the modern reader. The above mentioned genres are not conventionally used in this tale. Though the tale seems as the simple beast fable of rooster, hen and fox, Chaucer expressed far deeper ideas and used far more complex form of story telling than could be seen in conventional beast fables.

Conventionally, the beast fable is considered to be a short story with an explicit moral, stated at the end as a maxim. Characters of these stories are personified animals with human characteristics that are always easily understood. Language of the conventional fables is simple, not elevated like in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. Allegory was often used in order to express the diversity of human character and worldly wisdom. Chaucer’s usage of this familiar XIV century genre differs from the accepted norms of the time as he gives a variety of expansions which complicate the interpretation of the tale. The most important difference from the traditional usage of the beast fable is that in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* there is almost no human interaction with the animals. Focus on the widow and her estate at the beginning of the tale is quickly transferred to the rooster Chauntecleer and his beloved hen Pertelote. This swift change is used mostly to contrast the widow’s poor and humble life style with Chauntecleer’s pompous, lavish and rich one.
After a realistic presentation of the setting the narrative continues with the highly allusive description of the protagonist and his wives. Medieval writer of the fable often used this form to practice sophisticated rhetoric, so did Chaucer. He gives us the super chickens, Chauntecleer and Peretelote who are familiar with philosophy and rhetoric and a simple fable becomes a live conflict between two psychologically depicted and extraordinary characters. But, traditional beast fables pictured things as they are, not as they ought to or could be.

The true humans in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* are animals, super intellectual ones and they represent almost all human qualities – love, consideration, affection, wisdom, knowledge, power of speech, beauty etc. Animals do behave as humans in this story, but all their foibles are also human ones. Beast fables usually develop the story through action and their animals are portrayed simply as animals - talking animals, but in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* chickens are described as human characters who think throughout the situation and have a vast general knowledge.

The focus of this story is not on the action of the common characters but on the discussion about who is right. All these departures from conventional fables make *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* almost the parody of that genre. Large part of the tale, actually, represents an educated discussion on dreams because a widely used genre in medieval literature was a Dream vision. This form was basically used to avoid the medieval literary restrictions, because the narrator could express more liberal ideas through the dream, without fear of being judged or even punished for them. Traditionally, the dreamer would learn from a dream a meaningful truth or receive the definitive impulse that was very important for his present state of mind and it was usually done by God. In the dream he would have a guide figure towards the truth or some knowledge. In Chauntecleer’s dream there is no guide figure and Chaucer again inverts the standard usage of this genre. The audience didn’t witness the dream, it becomes familiar with it through the telling of Chauntecleer, mostly because Chaucer wanted the audience to find the meaning of the dream for themselves. The dream episode occupies most of the story. Through the discussion between Peretelote and Chauntecleer about the meaning of dreams and their role in the real life, Chaucer displays his philosophical knowledge. But since it is portrayed through the lips of chickens it gains totally different role in the story. Chickens discussing on medieval notions of philosophy, medicine, astrology and psychology produce a story of wit, irony, mockery and finally, but not the least important, sympathy.

During the Middle Ages dreams were considered as evil and their images were seen as temptations from the devil. The Bible alone has approximately seven hundred references to dream as a divine revelation. In *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* two different views on the origin and significance of dreams are presented and through the discussion of chickens the illustration of medieval genre exemplum is given.
Since stated examples have a moral purpose to it, they can also be seen as sermons. Pertelote stands on a ground view that dreams do not have a meaning and uses Cato's words to prove that. "Lo Cato, which that was so wise a man, Said he not thus: `Ne do no force of dreams?" (Chaucer, 2003: p. 220) She thinks that Chauntecleer’s dream of a beast wanting to eat him is a product of his indigestion and suggests that he should be healed with some herbs. Chauntecleer’s description of the importance and prediction of dreams in an ample monologue is much elaborate and supported with several examples from life and the Bible. Those examples are mostly based upon the Boethian ideas and the well known medieval themes of Fortune, Fate, Freedom and Providence. All the stories that Chauntecleer uses to sustain the notion of dreams as omens, make us believe that he will be considerate and cautious about his own dream.

“And therefore, faire Pertelote so dear,
By such examples old yet mayst thou lere
That no man shoulde be too reckeless
Of dreams, for I say thee doubteless,
That many a dream full sore is for to dread.” (Chaucer, 2003: p. 223)

But he chooses to reject his own conviction because the beautiful face of his wife made all the fears disappear and thus Pertelote forced him in submission. The only way in which Chauntecleer can prove his masculinity is through simple copulation. His expressed knowledge through rhetorical and philosophical examples seems useless at the end and we become aware that he only used it in order to impress Pertelote and prove her wrong. Since he rejected the dream warning, although he won the verbal battle, he had to be punished, but he managed to escape due to his inborn intelligence that has nothing to do with a dream vision.

The beast fables always ended with explicit moral, easily understood by the audience. But in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale there is more than one moral and they are not clearly stated. Priest evades telling us the correct lesson and advice because he wants us to find them for ourselves. The ones that obviously impose are to be aware of flattery, pride, influence and inconsiderate talking. Chaucer makes his moral conclusion more diverse and therefore more human. The moral actually depends on one’s point of view. If we are searching for it through the rooster’s experience we will learn not to be over proud and not to believe in flattery. Fox’s experience will teach us not to speak when we ought to be quiet, and Pertelote’s not to change someone’s convictions if you are not absolutely sure that you are right.

Furthermore, in the framework of the fable, Chaucer gives parodies of epic poetry and courtly love seen in medieval romances. The epic heroes are often described as super-humans, who are involved in great battles in which they have to fight with almost supernatural strength to prevail the obstacles. Chaucer uses the convention of epic and courtly love poetry for humorous purposes. The main char-
acters in our tale are described in terms better suited to the highly-born characters than chickens. Chaucer ascribes to Pertelote qualities expected of a lady in conventional love affair. She is sociable, reasonable, polite, sweet and sexual. She wants of Chauntecleer to accept all knightly qualities like wisdom, bravery and love and not to be afraid of simple dream that is just a product of his indigestion. Description of the Chauntecleer from the beginning of the tale resembles the one of a hero or a knight. The colors used to describe Chauntecleer remind us of the images of nobility. His chests are as red as coral, his beak is black and shiny, claws are as white as lily and his body the color of burnished gold. He is described by the sublime noble and heroic characteristics especially since he has a superior role in the entire society represented. First of all, he is the only man in the world of women and secondly he has the direct power over the entire community as he declares when their days begin and end with his majestic crowing. He is proud, superbly educated, sure of himself, great lover of seven hens, but truly devoted to one, Pertelote. He lives an ample life in singing, philosophical discussions and making love. His name, in French, means the one who sings clearly. But, Chaucer takes the trivial, natural and everyday event of snatching the rooster by the fox Don Russell to make out of this story an epic mockery through the high-styled and elevated language used normally in an epic poetry. He compares the turbulent and frightened hens that chase the fox who snatched Chauntecleer to the Roman senator’s wives on the night that Nero burned Rome. Confusion and noise of the entire household in chase of the fox is also compared with the Peasant’s rebellion and Chauntecleer’s situation with that of Priam, king of Troy. Mentioning the Peasant’s rebellion to compare the noise of the chase is the first utilization of some actual and contemporary historical event in The Canterbury Tales, but it is used as a parody concerning the context. Chaucer made the chase of the fox to resemble the battle and accordingly the language used to describe it is elevated and rhetorical just like in epic tales, but since it is used for the description of natural and ever existing strife between the animals, it gains a humorous overtone.

Romance as a medieval genre explored the subject of love and war in a refined setting. Hero of the romance seeks adventure without any need for a motive. He behaves by the courtly chivalrous code that involves generosity, chastity and bravery. It usually revolves around highly idealized behavior of a knight and his courtship to a lady, but in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale romance is represented in a quite different setting. In Chaucer’s days chivalry had already become a farce. The practice of knighthood had degenerated, the old order was breaking down which is best shown in The Wife of Bath’s Tale. Chaucer didn’t take literary devices of romantic love seriously in his tales and in which it seems that he had, they are represented just as a nostalgic idealization. In The Nun’s Priest’s Tale he used satire to deconstruct the romantic genre because the love of two fowls is presented as open and
fulfilling sexual relationship in which the rooster is representative of manly, sexual chicken and his hen willing to satisfy him.

This approach towards love is very similar to those used in fabliaux, medieval genres that represent a comic, indecent tale with a plot that usually involves a cuckolded husband depicted through the lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. These stories were most often satirical towards conventional morality and institutions. Aside from the open sexual relationship of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, they act as a true married couple with deep and varied emotions towards each other. They get angry at each other, they advise each other and flatter each other, make love to each other but in their treatment towards each other there is no metaphysical nor idealized love. Everything in their relationship is quite normal and human. There is no typical medieval women’s subordination to men in this relationship; on the contrary, the domination of woman is accented as Pertelote manages to convince Chauntecleer that his dream has no meaning. Reacting to his fear about the dream she behaves as a stereotype off a nagging wife. Chauntecleer is stubborn but he relies on her rationality. Their relationship without social distinction between the spouses and without ideal courtly treatment is ironically almost the most real one of all Chaucer’s relationships represented in The Canterbury Tales.

The end of the story is realistic, neither white nor black. What made Chauntecleer easy target to the fox was his pride, carelessness and enjoyment in flattery. The pride also made him defend his attitude toward the dreams. Sly fox used its flattering tongue to convince the rooster not to be afraid because the fox came in peace to hear his majestic and all around the country famous voice. However, Chauntecleer managed to save himself from the jaws of the fox using the same persuasive devise. He convinced the fox to show its pride and self-assurance and brag of its success, taunting the pursuers. By opening his mouth to do that, Chauntecleer escaped and flew on the tree not letting the fox convince him again to trust him. Although Chauntecleer was aware of the prediction of the dream, he also knew that everything is in God’s hands.

But, as a digression, priest himself talks about mistake that Chauntecleer made when he trusted a woman. Because of the woman’s advice Adam had left the Paradise. Medieval people thought that Adam fell for Eve’s attraction and was blinded by his own sensuality, so was Chauntecleer. He let his infatuation with Pertelote to cloud his judgment. Bible interpreters of that time accentuated gluttony, pride and lust as main reasons of Adam’s fall. All these sins can be spotted in Chauntecleers’s behavior. This comparison of Chauntecleer and Adam made many critics search for much deeper allegory in this story. Indeed, the text of The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is full of allusions to the Fall of Man. Some critics went even further in identifying Chauntecleer’s captivity and salvation with the crucifix-
ion and resurrection of the Jesus Christ and the fox’s temptation with the Satan’s who challenged Jesus to demonstrate and prove his godliness by jumping from the top of the temple. The only difference is that Chauntecleer fell under the influence of fox, unlike Jesus. In the medieval art, Eden was usually represented as an enclosed garden and Chauntecleer does live in blessedness with his wife in a fenced yard with his enemy ravening. Furthermore, the tree became a salvation for the Chauntecleer when he flew on it escaping the fox, but was a damnation and death for Jesus. If we consider this story to be a religious allegory, that is most unlikely, we can see in Chauntecleer’s experience the medieval ideas on men’s temptation, fall and salvation.

Interesting epilogue of this story makes us question again the point that Chaucer assigned to the story. In it, the Host, Harry Bailey, expresses similarity between Chauntecleer and the nun’s priest which makes us question priest’s sanctity. Although we don’t know much about his life, character and physical appearance because they were not described in The General Prologue, we do know that he lives in a nunnery among women. Chauntecleer was the only man at the household and the similarity is too obvious to be accidental. But that comparison ends there, because Chaucer didn’t want to go deeper in the laws of the church. What also makes us doubt priest’s celibacy is the way in which Chaucer created all his characters. He resigned from the medieval canon according to which types of people should be represented in literature and not the individuals. Chaucer managed to accomplish fortunate conjunction of typical and individual. Individuality of his characters is emphasized through the context of typicality so that human qualities or flaws can be expressed. Many prejudices concerning medieval professions were broken in his tales. That holds true for many pilgrims, so why wouldn’t it be the same for the priest?

Through The Nun’s Priest’s Tale Chaucer established humorous approach to the elevated themes of destiny, free will, omen and providence, made jokes with the romantic love and used irony to avoid open assaults on the phenomenon he tackled. This is one of the most complex and multi-layered tales of all The Canterbury Tales, and the fact that Chaucer managed to introduce, through seemingly simple story, such deep ideas, morals and medieval thoughts, all through the animal characters, just shows his magnificence as an author. In it, he gave us almost a microcosm of the entire The Canterbury Tales, or as Dryden put it “Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God’s plenty”. (Dryden, 2003: preface)

To confirm Chaucer’s inversion of normative genres and usage of multigenreic construction in the tales, we can mention another tale in the form of bestiaries. That is the second and the last tale in the form of the bestiaries in The Canterbury Tales. The Manciple’s Tale is a mixture of beast fable, fabliau and exemplum. Chaucer surprises us again with changing the traditionally expected happy ending
in the beast fables. This story explains how and why particular animal’s behavior and appearance is what it appears to be today. Through *The Manciple’s Tale* we are introduced with a reason how and why the crow got its black feathers and hoarse voice.

By using the educated language, the manciple, or should we say Chaucer, manipulates the story into a much more complex and multi-layered meaning. The fabliau element in this tale is quite subordinate, it takes second place to moral, but the moral that comes at the end of the story is more of a pseudo-moral. It is odd and unexpected to draw a maxim on keeping your mouths shut out of the adultery and murder. Instead of the happy ending, like in most beast fables, Chaucer describes a very tragic event of murder. The story line or physical action is thin and not primary while moralizing about the murder and adultery is a main focus in *The Manciple’s Tale*. Characterization of major actors is feeble. That is to say, a protagonist Phoebus who is the earthly Apollo, God of Poetry, is described as a very handsome, heroic and musical man with one flaw – jealousy, but he is nothing more than a figure, stereotype. His wife is not described at all, she doesn’t even have a name in the story and her lover is presented vaguely. Thus, the entire story is actually built upon a moral that it is not that important in order to be drawn from the murder.

Phoebus is guarding his wife like a bird in a golden cage, but infidelity or even freedom is something that cannot be prevented if it is in an animal’s or woman’s nature or mind. Manciple is comparing woman to a bird, cat and a wolf, as a part of medieval genre exemplum. All of them will show its natural, inner impulse in non-natural surroundings. “Desire has its dominion, and appetite banishes discretion”. (Chaucer, 2003: p. 480) Although Phoebus gave to his wife everything, she lived almost like in a cage, always guarded and overlooked so she cheated on him with a less worthy man. That the lover was from the lower social class is another great mistake that she had made. The crow pet, which in those days, according to the story, was as white as a swan, with beautiful singing voice and the ability to speak, told Phoebus about the adultery. Struck by anger and pain, upon a spur of the moment, he killed his wife and then confronted the messenger – the crow. He attacked the crow for being a liar and reproached himself for the impulsiveness and jealousy. As revenge that the crow told him the truth, Phoebus took its ability to sing and talk, pulled out its white feathers and cursed it to have black ones for the eternity together with the hoarse voice. The story of the crow was told to manciple by his mother as an exemplum what assumed ethical obligation to discard and reject.

There is something greatly destructive about this tale, especially because the God of Poetry, whom we can look upon as a representative for the whole idea of *The Canterbury Tales*, becomes a petty, jealous murderer. As the tale starts we ex-
pect the same brilliant eloquence of a crow and funny development of a story underlined with the moral as in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, but what we come across is just bitterness, jealousy, murder and causeless vengeance. The happy, metaphorical beginning collapses into a severe reality. Unlike the earlier tales in which the adultery is a comical subject here it provokes vicious and realistic violence of the main character. The action of murder was not expected from the earthly God, a man with so many humane talents (singing, playing instruments, pampering his wife) but again when the man’s pride is at stake, we learnt from Chaucer, everything is possible. The unnecessary violence against the crow is something that astonishes us and the moral, that you should pay attention to what you say and to whom you say it or even that it is better to keep painful truths to yourself, seems hypocritical and not a worthy instruction for leading the moral way of life.

“The author’s purpose, some say, was to give a picture of human life in its entirety. He is not to be censured because some of its aspects are disagreeable and degrading. Rather is he to be commended for holding the mirror up to nature. According to this view, there is nothing more objectionable in his course of conduct than there is in the representation of the nude in painting or sculpture. Another group of critics defended Chaucer’s views on the ground that tales were in conformity with the taste of the times. Virtue is as old as the race; delicacy is quite a modern invention. The coarseness exhibited in some of Chaucer’s stories, therefore, was not anything personal to the author, but a characteristic of his century. The only fault, accordingly, that can be found with the poet is that he was not superior to his contemporaries. While this is something that may be desired, it is hardly a thing that can fairly be demanded. The merits of Chaucer, consequently, are wholly his own. His failings are the failings of his age.” (Lounsbury, 1892: p. 439)

We can conclude that Chaucer deliberately mixed medieval genres and used them unconventionally in order to interweave the story with very complex ideas usually used in one specific genre. In the beast fables he managed to incorporate philosophical ideas of the time like destiny, free will and punishment. Many human flaws of the time come alive in these two stories and characters remain quite vivid in our mind, especially the humanlike Chauntecleer. The most important result that he managed to achieve through these seemingly simple stories is very contemporary and ever-present subject matter and that is all due to unconventional usage of different medieval genres.

**LITERATURE**


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МЕШАЊЕ ЖАНРОВА У ЧОСЕРОВИМ „КЕНТЕРБЕРИЈСКИМ ПРИЧАМА“

Резиме

Овај рад истражује Чосерову употребу различитих жанрова у појединачним причама и покушава да објасни предности њиховог мешања. На пример, витешка романса никада није чиста романса код Чосера. Она може да прерасте у причу о класној дистинкцији, у моралну дебату или у религиозну причу. Басна никада није једноставна прича са једном експлицитном моралном поуком на крају и стереотипним карактерима. Мулти-жанровска форма коју Чосер користи чини разумеване дела тежим, мање ограниченим у значењу и зато ближим модерном књижевном уму. Прича у којој је интер-жанровска промреженост највјероватнија јесте Прича Калијеричиног свештенника, али је присутна и у другим. Поменута прича је главни предмет овог рада у којој су басна, романса, визија у сну и морална дебата успешно помешане да би осликале највеће људске мане тог времена кроз контекст животињских карактера. Међутим, ови жанрови нису традиционално употребљени, већ су обично примећени да би се прилагодили ауторовој идеји у приказу одређеног предмета. Иако је главни оквир приче басна, кроз њу Чосер прожима идеје, карактере и поуке које нису конвенционални део тог жанра. У Настојницијовој причи, која је такође басна, још више меня конвенцију овог жанра, јер од очекиваног срећног краја ми добијамо мрачан и песимистични завршетак и не тако позитивну поуку. Тиме Чосер само потврђује могућност и успешност у прилагођавању средњовековних књижевних стереотипа личним идејама и аспирацијама аутора, макар то понекад водило конфузно мешавини традиционалних жанрова.

Кључне речи: Жанр, басне, жанровски стереотип, конвенција, пародија, сан, поука.