



**Superior to ‘a clokke or an abbey orlogge’:  
Time and Virtue in Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest’s Tale**

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Writing at a turning point in the history of timekeeping, Chaucer makes several references to time as a measurable phenomenon, including variations on ‘clokke’ and ‘orlogge’, terms which appear to have been interchangeable in medieval England. In particular, Chaucer emphasizes the distinct ability of birds to keep time by comparing their wake-up calls to clocks; the *Parliament of Fowls* describes the ‘cok’ as the ‘orlogge ... of thropes lite,’ while in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Nun’s Priest describes the rooster Chaunticleer as a more reliable timekeeper than any ‘clokke or an abbeye orlogge.’ These references evoke the bedazzlement with clocks in other Middle English works, such as *The Book of John Mandeville*, where the narrator witnesses ‘orlages wel y-dight’—no ordinary timepiece but a marvel—when he visits the Great Khan on his quasi-mythical pilgrimage.

However, Chaucer’s mentions of time are often more consequential for how they shape moral readings of his poems. The late medieval association of timekeeping with the cardinal virtue of temperance invites us to understand the cultural, not only technological, breakthrough of the clock, and to pay attention to the real concerns underlying Chaucer’s timekeeping references. My paper argues that the time-measurement detail in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale is not merely a mock-heroic feature of Chaunticleer’s excellence, but a way to intensify the ethical distinction between Chaunticleer and the poor widow who oversees the barnyard. Whereas the widow is characterized by temperance and patience, two virtues Chaucer encouraged as strategies to counter the suffering of time, Chaunticleer’s haughtiness as a calculator and sense of timekeeping superiority become an ironic sign of his *lack* of moderation and virtue. My paper will explore how this seemingly minute detail affects our reading of the entire ethical program of Chaucer’s beast’s fable, lending even to the idea of Chaucer’s class consciousness, and further underscoring the centrality of ethical time to Middle English works.