

A Similar Iranian Legend: "The Story of the Chaplain Nun" by Geoffrey Chaucer

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Abstract

This article investigates the thematic parallels between Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale" from The Canterbury Tales and a similar Persian folktale found in collections of proverbs. Following a discussion of Chaucer's seminal role in establishing English as a literary language and a review of prior scholarship identifying similarities between other Chaucer tales and Persian narratives, this study focuses on a comparative analysis of the two fables. Both stories feature a nearly identical plot in which a fox uses flattery to capture a rooster, only for the rooster to later escape by exploiting the fox's vanity, concluding with the same proverbial moral. The central research question is to determine the nature of this connection: whether it constitutes a case of direct literary influence or a typological similarity arising from shared international narrative motifs. While acknowledging the historical context of East-West cultural exchange, particularly during the Crusades, the paper concludes that, in the absence of a clear historical-geographical transmission path, the resemblance is more accurately classified as a "wandering story" or typological similarity rather than direct influence. The study highlights the value of comparative literature in tracing the migration and adaptation of universal narrative themes across cultures.

Keywords: Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, Comparative Literature, Persian Folktale

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Introduction

French was a dominant language of culture and literature in Geoffrey Chaucer's time. As Wright notes, "In the court circles where the young Geoffrey Chaucer frequented, English was spoken, but the language of culture was French or Latin" (xv). Alongside French, Latin was the language of religion, the church, and the clergy, and it was so pervasive that even students of secular sciences felt compelled to learn it. Meanwhile, Middle English served as the common language for the majority of England's inhabitants.

While a few individuals wrote poetry in English before Chaucer, their work can be seen as foundational, paving the way for the serious emergence of English poetry. English poetry, in the strictest sense, began in the late Middle Ages with Chaucer (1340-1400), "the greatest English poet of his time... He is often called the father of English poetry, although, as we know, there were several English poets before him" (Thornley, 15). Chaucer was the first to elevate the English language to a level capable of expressing lofty literary themes. It is for this reason he is regarded as the "father of English poetry," a figure comparable to Homer in Greek poetry, Virgil in Roman poetry, and Rudaki in Persian poetry (Minoy, 77). Consequently, "It is very possible that Chaucer's works actually accelerated the formation of an independent English language" (Stephen, 81). John Dryden, in the preface to his book *Fables Ancient and Modern*, articulates this reverence: First of all, since he [Geoffrey Chaucer] is the father of English poetry, I [John Dryden] hold for him the same high place that the Greeks hold for Homer and the Romans for Virgil. He [Geoffrey Chaucer] is the eternal fountain of common sense, and learned in all the sciences and arts of the day, and therefore speaks on all good subjects. He [Geoffrey Chaucer] knew how to begin his speech and how to end it; an ability and balance which few writers, and scarcely any of the ancients, possess, except Virgil and Horace... (Abrams, 2132).

In other words, Chaucer's works were instrumental in forming and consolidating English as an independent and distinctive language, at a time when much courtly poetry was composed in Latin or French, and many did not consider English worthy of poetic expression. This article examines the thematic similarity between one story from Chaucer's collection, *The Canterbury Tales*, and a folktale from Persian literature.

Statement of the Problem

This article aims to investigate the thematic similarities between an English story and a Persian folktale, and to determine the nature of this connection. The central questions are: Does a thematic similarity exist between this English story and the Persian folktale? And if so, is this

similarity a) a case of parallel development and typological resemblance, or b) a case of direct influence? In other words, should this similarity be classified under "Travelling Legends" (Mojtabaei, 409), "Wandering Stories" (Zarinkub, 2005, 493), or "International Tales" (Hansen, 6), or is it a matter of literary influence?

Theoretical Foundations

Establishing a definitive lineage for such stories requires extensive historical and geographical research. In the absence of concrete documentation, the encounter between literary works with common themes can be explained in two primary ways: through Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, or through more overt, historical channels of transmission (Payandeh, 223).

Research Background

Scholars have previously identified thematic similarities between several stories in *The Canterbury Tales* and classical Persian works:

"The Pardoner's Tale"

This moralistic story warns of the dire consequences of greed. "The character of the Pardoner is one of Chaucer's masterpieces of creative art, even more artistic than The Wife of Bath. The prologue and tale, from the perspective of introspection, are an outstanding literary work that has a dramatic character and is narrated beautifully" (Abjadian, 264). The story follows three treasure hunters who find a hoard, betray each other, and ultimately all perish. "Many critics considered 'The Pardoner's Tale'... the best story in Chaucer's collection. This story resembles a very short modern story. No one can find fault with the motives of the characters in Chaucer's or his characters' stories" (Metal, 20). According to Minou, this story is familiar to Persian speakers, with the oldest Persian versions appearing in *Surabadi's commentary*, Ghazali's *Nasih al-Muluk*, Attar's *Tazkirat al-Awliya*, and one of the copies of *One Thousand and One Nights* (Minoy, 85).

"The Man of Law's Tale"

The story of Constance first appeared in Nicholas Trevet's *Anglo-Norman Chronicle* (c. 1335) and was later retold by Chaucer's contemporary, John Gower, in *Confessio Amantis*. Chaucer adapted the story from the *Anglo-Norman Chronicle* and was likely familiar with Gower's version (Abjadian, 248).

The theme of a chaste woman's steadfastness in this tale is reminiscent of the story in Attar's *Ilahi-Namah* ("The story of a righteous woman whose husband went on a journey"). In

Attar's narrative, a virtuous woman, blessed with youth and beauty, endures all hardships through faith and willpower, remaining devoted to her husband and resisting temptations of lust, wealth, and position (Yusuf, 91). According to Zarrinkoob, "The principle of the steadfastness of that good woman, which first appeared in *Ilahi-Namah*... is reminiscent of the story of Constance in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (The Man of Law's Tale)" (Zerinkoob, 2004, 162). In Chaucer, the female protagonist's name, "Constance," is apt, meaning both steadfastness and loyalty. All her hardships stem from this loyalty, and like Attar's heroine, she perseveres through persecution, emerging triumphant. This story likely traveled to the West during the Crusades, and "it was most likely a gift from the Eastern world to the Crusades" (Zarinkob, 2002, 331).

"The Merchant's Tale"

This story, found in the fourth book of Rumi's *Masnavi*, uses vulgar and obscene language to describe women's cunning and trickery. According to Zarrinkoub, "This story, which is told with slight differences in Ibn al-Jawzi's *Al-Azki'a*' and also in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, appears in Boccaccio's *Decameron*—Chaucer's source—with more grace and less insolence" (Zerinkob, 2003, 416). Furthermore, "the source [of Boccaccio's and Chaucer's stories] appears to be the tales that the Crusaders brought with them from the East to Europe" (Zerinkob, 2002, 328). The narrative differences between the *Masnavi*, Boccaccio, and Chaucer are likely due to alterations during the story's transmission from East to West, with each author adapting it to their audience's tastes and cultural context.

Before proceeding, a brief overview of Geoffrey Chaucer's life and *The Canterbury Tales* is necessary.

About Chaucer and The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer's literary career (c. 1340-1400) is divided into three periods:

- **The French Period (1359-1372):** A period of apprenticeship, heavily influenced by French literature. He translated part of *Le Roman de la Rose* and wrote *The Book of the Duchess*.
- **The Italian Period (1372-1386):** Chaucer's travels to Italy exposed him to the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, profoundly impacting his writing. Major works from this period include *The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*.
- **The English Period (1386-1400):** This final period marks his maturity, during which he composed his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, which comprises half of his total literary output.

The Canterbury Tales features a "General Prologue" and twenty-four stories, two in prose and the rest in verse; several remain unfinished. The work totals approximately 17,000 lines. The frame narrative involves a group of pilgrims traveling to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury, each telling stories to pass the time. Chaucer's initial plan was for 120 stories, but he completed only 24. The tales showcase a remarkable diversity of genres and styles.

Chaucer's writing style is vivid and realistic. As Thornley and Roberts note, "Chaucer was a well-read man who knew Latin and was also familiar with French and Italian poetry; but he was not interested only in books alone. Chaucer was a well-traveled man and used his eyes well; the people he describes in his works are alive and vibrant" (15). Beyond its literary merit, *The Canterbury Tales* is a valuable sociological document, a "best mirror of the social conditions of England in the fourteenth century" (Minoy, 82). It presents "an artistic gallery of images of the people of fourteenth-century England" (Shahbaz, 126).

Discussion: Thematic Similarities

As noted, scholars have identified similarities between three of Chaucer's tales and Persian literature. This article focuses on a fourth example: the thematic parallels between Chaucer's fable, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," and a Persian folktale found in collections of proverbs.

"The Nun's Priest's Tale" is one of only two tales whose teller is not described in the "General Prologue." It is a beast fable and a mock epic, where the main characters are animals. "*The Nun's Priest's Tale* is probably one of Chaucer's most famous writings. These characters [the rooster, the hen, and the fox] are so well and realistically portrayed, and so full of the oddities of human behavior, that the reader sometimes forgets that they are animals" (Metal, 20). The tale is humorous, epic, and romantic, a masterpiece where "Chaucer depicts the images of the rooster, hen, and fox in such a way that we are reminded of Achilles' fight with Hector and forget that they are animals" (Abjadian, 275).

The story is a prime example of a mock epic, which parodies the grand style of epic poetry for a trivial subject. "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is, in fact, "taken from/retold from a story in the French animal epic called *Le Roman de Renart*" (MacLaine, 252). Chaucer adapted this theme, infusing it with his own creative spirit. The core plot bears a striking resemblance to a fable found in Persian folk literature, such as the one recorded in Anwari's *Culture of Proverbs and Sayings*:

A fox spotted a fat rooster. To catch it, he approached and greeted it. He asked after the rooster's father, and the rooster replied that he had died. The fox said, "It's a pity; the deceased had such a beautiful song. May God grant that you may be as beautiful as he was." The rooster said, "I am also a good singer," and closed his eyes to sing. The fox attacked, seized him, and ran away. The

village dogs gave chase. On the way, the rooster said: "If you want to get rid of the dogs, tell them this rooster is not from your village!" The fox opened his mouth to speak... The rooster fell from his mouth and escaped, saying: "Cursed be the eye that closes at an untimely time." And the fox replied: "Cursed be the mouth that opens at an untimely time" (Anwari, 942).

A summary of Chaucer's tale reveals the parallel: In the morning, Chanticleer the rooster is strutting in the yard when he spots a fox hiding in the herbs. He tries to flee, but the fox flatters him, claiming he has come only to hear Chanticleer's magnificent singing. Drunk with pride, the rooster closes his eyes to crow. The fox seizes him and runs. The widow, her daughters, and the animals give chase. When the fox pauses, Chanticleer suggests he turn and taunt his pursuers. As the fox opens his mouth to do so, the rooster escapes into a tree. The rooster then declares, "Curse be upon the eye that closes at the wrong time," and the fox retorts, "Curse be upon the mouth that opens at the wrong time" (Lumianski, 151-166). This type of fable has a long and brilliant history in Persian literature, and is "not only in some cases equal to stories of this type in European literature, but sometimes European literature is indebted to it" (Zerinkoob, 2005, 518). The general outline and central moral—do not be seduced by flattery—are identical in both works. Both stories echo Saadi's wisdom: "The enemy's deception is invincible, and the admirer's pride is invincible" (Yousefi, 2005, 175). However, the Iranian version is more concise, with archetypal characters, whereas Chaucer's characters are more individualized. Furthermore, the Iranian fable states its moral explicitly, while Chaucer's leaves it for the reader to infer.

Conclusion

Cultural and literary exchanges have long occurred between the West (Greece and Rome) and the East (Iran, India, Egypt, and Mesopotamia). Comparative literature facilitates this spiritual communication between nations. From the Middle Ages onward, Eastern and Western literatures have maintained contact. The Crusades, despite their violence, provided a conduit for the transmission of Eastern narratives to Europe, traces of which are visible in the works of Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Shakespeare.

However, it cannot be definitively claimed that Eastern literature is the source for all of Chaucer's tales. In many cases, similarities may result from parallel circumstances and shared human experiences. Chaucer scholars agree that he adapted the plots of most of his stories from various Western and Eastern sources, but he transformed them artistically. As Coghill states, "In the 14th century, the role of the storyteller was not to be the originator of the stories he narrated, but

rather the narrator's duty was to embellish and retell previous stories... for the enjoyment and instruction of readers" (17).

While the thematic similarity between "The Nun's Priest's Tale" and the Persian fable is significant, the lack of a clear historical-geographical path of transmission, specific transfer methods, and highly detailed similarities makes it difficult to prove direct influence. According to Ian Brown's theory, due to these absences, the similarity between Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale" and the Persian "Fable of the Fox and the Rooster" cannot be classified as influence. Instead, it is more likely a case of typological similarity or a "wandering story" that emerged from a shared pool of international narrative motifs.

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