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Alchemical discourse in the “Canterbury Tales”: Signs of gnosis and transmutation

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Rice University, 1988

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ALCHEMICAL DISCOURSE IN THE CANTERBURY TALES:
SIGNS OF Gnosis AND TRANSMUTATION

by

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Houston, Texas
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1988
For Larry

"Hond by hond we shullen us take,
And joye and blisse shullen we make."
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I wish to thank the members of my committee for their steadfast support and guidance. Each of them truly illustrates Chaucer's words, "And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche."

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ABSTRACT: Alchemical Discourse in the *Canterbury Tales*: Signs of Gnosis and Transmutation
Kathryn L. Hitchcox

Although most critics of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" agree that the tale's striking realism and wealth of detail suggest that Chaucer had an extensive knowledge of alchemical lore, they disagree about whether Chaucer condemned alchemy as a heresy or esteemed it as a divine science compatible with Christianity. For, the Canon's Yeoman begins his tale by asserting the impossibility of achieving the Philosopher's Stone, only to end his tale by affirming the Stone's existence, and describing it as a gift from Christ. In the past, most critics have investigated Chaucer's use of alchemical signs in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" by discussing medieval alchemy as an obscure laboratory procedure in which Chaucer did or did not have any faith. This study, however, proposes not only to reexamine the significance of Chaucer's references to alchemical apparatus, procedures, and philosophy in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," but also to show that Chaucer was primarily interested in alchemy as a symbolic language, and that he utilized alchemical signs in both the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale," which are linked by the prologue of the "Canon's
Yeoman's Tale," to explore how discourse itself is a kind of alchemy which mediates between man and God, or physical reality and spiritual reality, to communicate truth and enable the individual to convert from the "old man of Adam" to the "new man in Christ." Both tales begin with references to the baseness of matter, and end with alchemical allusions to the perfection of matter. Since Chaucer presented the alchemical allusions in the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" within a penitential framework, he also implied that both alchemy and Christianity seek salvation, which may be understood as the reconciliation of spiritual and physical nature. Chaucer's Parson defines salvation in these terms when he explains, "Than shal men understonde what is the fruyt of penaunce, ... ther as the body of man that whilom was foul and derk is moore cleer than the sonne" (ParsT 1. 1078).
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Introduction
Slaying Chaucer's Dragon:
Resolving Opposition in Part VIII of the
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He seith how that the dragon, doutelees,
Ne dyeth nat but if that he be slayn
With his brother; and that is for to sayn,
By the dragon, Mercurie, and noon oother
He understood, and brymstoone by his brother,
That out of Sol and Luna were ydrawe.


As Chaucer's pilgrims near Canterbury after hearing the
Second Nun's "Lyf of Seinte Cecile," a canon and his yeoman
burst upon the scene with a host of courteous words that
soon belie them as goldmakers or alchemists:

"I seye, my lord kan swich subtiletie--
But al his craft ye may nate wite at me,
And somwhat helpe I yet to his wirkyng--
That al this ground on which we been ridynge
Til that we come to Caunterbury toun,
He koude al clene turnen up-so-doun,
And pave it al of silver and of gold!"¹

Yet despite the Yeoman's credulous claim, the only transformation the pilgrims observe is his own from a loyal servant "ful of curteisye" to a raving opponent of both his master and their "slydyng science." The Canon's Yeoman's ensuing tale has been called perhaps the most difficult of Chaucer's tales, because the Yeoman's bitter and explosive invective against alchemy in the first and second parts of his tale, identified as prima pars and pars secunda, seems to exist in opposition to the tale's last fifty-four lines, which shift into a reflective and sober discussion of alchemical philosophy. Consequently, critics have speculated about Chaucer's actual experience with alchemy, and whether he was himself a "credulous medieval dupe," "alchemical initiate," or "modern skeptic." In the past, most critics have investigated Chaucer's use of alchemical signs by discussing medieval alchemy as an obscure laboratory procedure in which he did or did not have any faith. This study, however, proposes not only to reexamine the significance of Chaucer's


4 For a survey of these critics see footnotes 10 and 11 on p. 7.
references to alchemical apparati, procedures and philosophy in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," but also to show that Chaucer was primarily interested in alchemy as a symbolic language rather than as a laboratory procedure, and that he actually utilized alchemical signs in both the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" and the "Second Nun's Tale," which are linked by the prologue of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," to put forth an epistemology based upon alchemical philosophy.

Medieval epistemology was closely related to medieval sign-theory. For example, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and Dante professed a symbolic theory of knowledge in which human speech was cast as the faithful mediator between God and man. In addition, these thinkers agreed that language could accurately, though partially, express spiritual realities. However, Chaucer seems to have exploited the ambiguities inherent in language to examine the extent to which words can transcend the opposition between spiritual and physical nature, and accurately express spiritual realities. Unlike Dante, Chaucer rarely attempted to express, metaphorically or otherwise, spiritual realities such as the Trinity. In the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," he actually forsook traditional Augustinian

Incarnational Typology, in which spiritual realities are expressed in concrete terms, and utilized alchemical typology instead. Alchemical typology is based upon the idea that all matter consists of a body and a soul in opposition to one another. For the alchemists, language cannot directly express spiritual realities; rather it is limited to expressing man's experience of spiritual realities. Thus, alchemical typology exists as an inversion of Augustinian Incarnational Typology, and presents earthly realities in abstract terms. For example, the Canon's Yeoman's quotation from Arnald of Villanova's *Rosarium Philosophorum*, in lines 1435-40 of his tale, depicts the chemical compounds mercury and sulphur as the abstract figures of a dragon and his brother. These abstractions embody the spiritualization of these substances as they are literally transformed and perfected in the alchemical

6 Augustinian Incarnational Typology assumes that since God expressed Himself through Christ, the Word made flesh, "it is through words that we move from a verbal to transverbal knowledge of God." Consequently, Augustine believed in cognition through speech, and the power of language to provide the Christian with knowledge of God. Thus, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine explains that we can understand the doctrine of the Trinity by examining trinitarian analogies in the human soul, which he describes as consisting of memory, intellect, and will, "The soul gains knowledge of itself through the intellect, retains this knowledge through memory, and loves itself through the will." In fact, Augustine believed that the Aenigma of the Human Soul provided man with the fullest knowledge of God in this life. See Colish, pp. 4-80.
process. St. Paul's explanation that Christians must change their natures and become like Christ is analogous to the themes of transformation and perfection in alchemy:

... put off ... the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; ... put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. (Eph. 4:22-24)

A survey of Chaucer's use of alchemical signs reveals that he used alchemical typology in the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" to illustrate that language signifies not God Himself, but man's experience of God, or man's transformation from the old man into the new.

Alchemy appeared in the Alexandrian Age (4th c. B.C. to 7th c. A.D.) as a system of philosophy, cryptic in expression, that intended to develop an exact science of the regeneration of the human soul. Contrary to the aims of goldmakers, or false alchemists, who sought to create mineral gold, the object of the true alchemical endeavor was to produce that substance or effect in which all opposites were united. The alchemists named this substance the lapis philosophorum or Philosopher's Stone, which would perfect material reality by healing the disharmonies of the physical world, and the conflict between the purely natural and spir-

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itual man as well. The experimental attempts to create the Philosopher's Stone and transmute base metals into gold were carried out with the aim of adducing a material proof about the striving of man and matter towards perfection. Thus, the alchemical experiment was designed to represent a microcosm of the universe. Gold was considered to be a perfect metal since it was the only metal to resist fire, and its fusibility made it appear the union of two contraries, fire and water. In true alchemy, gold ultimately became a synonym for the Philosopher's Stone and regarded as a permanent, incorruptible, androgynous, spiritual and corporeal compound, or the unity of opposites par excellence.

As alchemy evolved in the Middle Ages, it became a subculture of the Church, and regarded by alchemists as the essential complement to the Christian work of redemption. As Jung explained:

Whereas the Christian belief is that man is freed from sin by the redemptory act of Christ, the alchemist believed that Christ's work of redemption was incomplete until the restitution of matter to the likeness of original and incorrupt nature was accomplished.


Just as the Church insisted upon the literal taking-up of the physical body into heaven to reconcile the opposition between physical and spiritual nature, so the alchemists believed in the actual existence of the Philosopher's Stone. By the fourteenth century, alchemists identified the Philosopher's Stone with Christ and treated the Hermetic Mystery as a kind of chemical reenactment of Christ's nativity and passion. Thus, the goal of true alchemy was salvation, the same theme that animates the journey of the Canterbury pilgrims.

Critical interpretations of Chaucer's knowledge and use of alchemical signs have primarily wavered between four points of view. Most studies have attempted to assess Chaucer's understanding of alchemical processes, and/or attempt to isolate his sources.\(^{10}\) Many early scholars even under-

\(^{10}\) Jung, *Mysterium Conjunctionis*, p. 34.

stood the Canon's Yeoman's invective against alchemy as a sign of Chaucer's actual disillusioning experience with this science. More recently, however, critics have concentrated on the dynamics of the tale itself, and have predominantly agreed that the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" reveals that Chaucer viewed alchemy as a heretical practice.


other hand, a number of critics have persuasively argued that the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" condemns the abuse of alchemy rather than the science itself. Although critics continue to debate about Chaucer's true feelings about alchemy, most agree that the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale's" striking realism and wealth of detail suggest that Chaucer had an extensive knowledge of alchemical lore. As early as 1477, for example, Thomas Norton, an English alchemist, credited Chaucer with introducing the word "Titanos" (CYT, l. 1455) into English:

Hir name [a stone] is magnesia, fewe people
hir knowe,
She is founde in hye places as well as in lowe
Plato knewe her propertie, and called hir by
hir name,
and Chaucer rehearseth how Titanos is the same.


In the Canon his tale, saynge what is thuse,
but quid ignotum per magis ignotius
that is to saye, what maie this be,
but unknowe by more unknowe named is she. 15

"Titanos" is a rare term signifying a calx or the residue
left over from the roasting of a metal or mineral. Every
subsequent alchemist who used this term cited either Chaucer
or Norton as his source. 16 According to Gareth Dunleavy,
extracts from the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" in Sloane MSS.
1098 and 1723 (c. 1550) and the mention of Chaucer among a
list of English alchemists including Roger Bacon, George
Ripley, and Thomas Norton in Francis Thynne's Another
discourse upon the Philosophers Armes, MS. Ashmole 766, ff.
85 b, 86, reflect the sixteenth-century tradition that
Chaucer not only knew alchemical philosophy but also was an
adept. 17 Furthermore, the discovery of an item of Chaucer
pseudo-epigrapha, a handwritten Middle English riming poem

15 Thomas Norton, Ordinal of Alchemy, ed. John Reidy,
The Early English Text Society, No. 272 (London, New York,
1159-65.

16 Foster S. Damon, "Chaucer and Alchemy," Publications

17 Gareth W. Dunleavy, "The Chaucer Ascription in
These references are also listed in Caroline F. E. Spurgeon,
Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357-
1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), pp. 90
and 113.
from the sixteenth century entitled "The Verses [on the Elixir] Galfridus Chaucer his worke," testifies to the Elizabethans' respect for Chaucer's alchemical knowledge.18

The tradition of Chaucer as alchemist continued into the seventeenth century when in 1652 Elias Ashmole, an English antiquarian, published the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" in the Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum, containing "several poetical pieces of our famous English Philosophers who have written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language."19 Considering the tale's seemingly brutal attack on the practice of alchemy, one might wonder why Ashmole and his predecessors cited it as evidence that Chaucer himself was an alchemist. Ashmole explained:

One reason why I selected out of Chaucer's 
Canterbury Tales that of the "Chanon's Yeoman" was to let the world see what notorious cheating there has been ever used under pretence of this true (though Injur'd) Science; another is to shew that Chaucer himselfe was a master therein.20

However, only eighteen years earlier, Lord Edward Coke had

18 Dunleavy, p. 2.
20 Ashmole, p. 467.
praised the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" as a worthy illustration of why Henry IV passed a statute in 1414 forbidding the practice of alchemy.21 Paradoxically, as early as the seventeenth century, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" was used both to show that Chaucer was a bitter opponent of the art and an alchemist himself.

Historians of science have noted that it was not unusual for alchemists or their sympathizers to assume as noms de plume names of famous philosophers or writers to advance the reputation of the Hermetic Art. Spurious attributions include treatises assigned to Isis, Moses, Cleopatra, Thomas Aquinas, and Pope John XXII.22 Since early allusions and references to the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" indicate that the tradition of Chaucer as alchemist was advanced by practitioners of the art, it may seem likely that this tradition is unfounded, and that alchemists merely used the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" to their own advantage. Critics who purport that Chaucer viewed alchemy as a heretical practice tend to adopt this position, and imply that it is only through misdirected occult exegesis that anyone


credits Chaucer with having been an adept. In fact, Joseph Gennenn asserts that Chaucer's attitude toward alchemy is not only skeptical but ironic—that for Chaucer, alchemy is "at best an amusing mimicry, at worst a profane parody of the work of creation and redemption." 23

Contrary to this tradition, critics who maintain that the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" presents the abuse of alchemy accept Ashmole's claim that the tale depicts alchemy as an "Injur'd Science," and note that the Canon's Yeoman actually contrasts the false alchemy of prima pars and pars secunda with Arnold of Villanova's true or speculative alchemy quoted in the tale's last fifty-four lines. Studies in the history of science have established the existence of two branches of alchemy from its earliest period: spiritual alchemy, which existed as a mystical system by means of which man was to be perfected, and exoteric alchemy, which sought only to transmute base metals into gold. 24 During the 14th and 15th centuries, exoteric alchemy degenerated.


into false alchemy, or into goldmaking malpractices. Ultimately this fraudulent behavior resulted in prohibitions, such as Henry IV's, against the making of gold and silver.  

John Read pointed out:

> It would be a mistake, however, to regard Chaucer's 'canoun' and his fellow 'pseudoalchemists' as the only representatives of medieval alchemy. More credit attaches to the thought and work of contemporaneous alchemists of the philosophical and mystical types.

Considering the Canon's Yeoman's apparent shift in diction and tone at the end of his tale, it is historically accurate to read his last fifty-four lines as contrasting Arnald of Villanova's spiritual alchemy with the Canon's false alchemy. Nevertheless, the virtually cryptic nature of alchemical signs in general persists to confuse the issue, and to leave critics unresolved about what Chaucer meant the end of the tale to signify.

Although most critics interested in assessing Chaucer's attitude toward alchemy have primarily restricted their investigation to the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," others have explored the relationship between the "Second Nun's Tale" and

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25 Read, p. 22.

26 Read, p. 23.
the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale." Just as critics of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," scholars of Part VIII reach two opposing conclusions about Chaucer's use of alchemical signs: Grennen, Olmert, and Haskell insist that Chaucer juxta posed these tales to create a thematic opposition in which alchemy is presented as a heresy and perversion of Saint Cecilia's orthodox religious ideals; whereas Gardner and Rosenberg explore how alchemy is a metaphor for perfection in either tale—the "Second Nun's Tale" treating the theme of self-perfection common to both Christianity and spiritual alchemy, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" treating the theme of dishonesty in false alchemy. In the former critical interpretations, all points of opposition between the Second Nun's religious imagery and the Canon's Yeoman's alchemical imagery are based solely upon the Canon's Yeoman's prima pars and pars secunda. However, as Gardner

and Rosenberg have pointed out, the Canon's Yeoman's exposition of esoteric alchemical principles in lines 1427-81 implicitly establish the "Lapis--Christus" parallel in which the Philosopher's Stone is Christ. 28 Thus, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" may symbolically end with the idea of salvation, previously figured forth through the life of Saint Cecilia, and thereby establish spiritual alchemy and Christianity as complementary rather than in opposition. As Chaucer noted in his Treatise on the Astrolabe, "diverse pathes leden diverse folk the ryhte wey to Rome," (ll. 43-44).

Considering the vast corpus of Chaucer criticism, relatively little study has been devoted to either the "Second Nun's Tale" or the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale." Yet, since these tales virtually bring the Canterbury Tales to a close, they deserve closer scrutiny than they have heretofore received. For example, what role or roles do Saint Cecilia, the Yeoman's canon and alchemy play in relation to the larger thematic concerns of the Canterbury Tales as a whole? Was Chaucer's Christianity influenced by Hermetic philosophy? In Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences, Walter

28 From the beginning, esoteric alchemy was closely bound up with religious beliefs held by Jews, Christians, Gnostics and Neoplatonists. By the 14th century the Christian element had predominated to the point where the Philosopher's Stone became synonymous with Christ. For a discussion of this idea see Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible, trans. Stephen Corrin, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), pp. 156-57.
Curry admitted that Chaucer's "reading in alchemical literature must have been wide," but contended, "whether he read intelligently or was an initiate in the great secret must remain a mystery." Needless to say, we can only speculate about whether Chaucer himself ever practiced alchemy; however, it is possible to discover how he consciously used alchemical signs by examining the very nature of these signs themselves. In Chapter One, for example, we will review the Western alchemical tradition to discern how the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" accurately reflects that two distinct alchemies, one true and one false, existed in the Middle Ages. Having located the differences between true alchemy and false alchemy, we will next explore in Chapter Two how Chaucer characterizes the Canon's Yeoman as a false alchemist by making him a caricature of the goldmaking charlatan alchemists themselves warned about. Chapter Three will then examine how Chaucer constructs the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" within a penitential framework to illustrate that moral conversion requires linguistic regeneration, and that the Yeoman's false understanding of alchemy has made him an impenitent sinner who must discover the salvific meaning of true alchemy. In Chapter Four we will see how the Yeoman linguistically engages in the stages of alchemical trans-

mutation to discover the salvific meaning of true alchemy, and transform into a penitent sinner. Finally, in Chapter Five we will see that a study of the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" in relation to fourteenth century alchemical texts, especially Arnald of Villanova's *Rosarium Philosophorum*, reveals that the two tales do not oppose Christianity and alchemy, but rather typologically figure forth how spiritual alchemy is analogous to Christianity. Furthermore, Chaucer's use of alchemical signs in the "Second Nun's Tale" implies that he modified the "Life of Saint Cecilia" in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* to present the legend within a symbolic framework that implicitly corresponds with the symbolism of alchemical transmutation. Gardner and Rosenberg assumed that Chaucer merely established thematic parallels between Christianity and alchemy. Upon closer analysis it becomes evident that in Part VIII, Chaucer actually presented the theme of salvation in the language of alchemy to illustrate how language communicates man's experience of God, rather than signifies God Himself.
Chapter One
Distinguishing the True From the False:
Alchemists and Pseudoalchemists in Western Alchemy

For Covetous men that [philosopher's stone] findeth never
Though they seek it once and ever.
--Pearce the Black Monke, Theatrum Chemicum
    Britannicum p. 469.

Although the Canon's Yeoman speaks about alchemical apparati and substances throughout his tale, he never once mentions the science of alchemy by name. Instead he uses a series of apostrophes, such as "that science," "that art," "that slidynge science," "elvyssh craft," "oure werkyng," "oure craft," "this cursed craft," "elvyssh nyce loore," and "lusty game," to signify his goldmaking activities. Because in prima pars the Yeoman refers to the same metals, chemical compounds, laboratory equipment, and procedures common to alchemy, readers infer that his "slydyng science" accurately represents fourteenth century alchemical practice. However, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" actually pre-
sents three different views of alchemy: the prologue and *prima pars* depict alchemy as a futile scientific endeavor pursued by uninformed men who believe in the possibility of transmutation; *pars secunda* represents alchemy as a diabolical trick with no scientific purpose; and lines 1428–60 at the end of the tale define alchemy in figurative terms which elevate the science to a divine mystery. The Yeoman's references to false alchemy, or goldmaking, in *prima pars* and *pars secunda*, and to spiritual alchemy at the end of the tale, raise questions about what Chaucer wanted his readers to think about this science. For, critics have used Chaucer's alchemical references to argue both that he understood goldmaking and spiritual alchemy as different facets of the same fraudulent science, and that he distinguished between them, presenting spiritual alchemy as the ideal to which all alchemists should be striving.\(^{30}\) Resolving this paradox and determining Chaucer's attitude toward alchemy remains the most persistent and puzzling critical problem of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale." However, by tracing the origins and development of Western alchemy, we can see that, instead of presenting an inconsistent or ironic view of alchemy, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" accurately reflects how two distinct alchemies, one true and one false, existed in the Middle

\(^{30}\) For a survey of these critics, see Chapter One, footnotes 11 and 12, pp. 7-8.
Ages. Furthermore, an examination of medieval alchemical texts, church documents, legal briefs, and literature suggests that Chaucer as well as his contemporaries only condemned false alchemy while accepting spiritual alchemy as a legitimate philosophy compatible with Christianity.
The Origins and Development of Medieval Alchemy

In order to understand Chaucer's references to alchemy throughout the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," and to discover how he differentiated between false alchemy and spiritual alchemy, it is necessary to review the scientific principles upon which alchemy was based. For, as Joseph Grennen observed, Chaucer did not depend upon a single source for his information about alchemy; instead, he used the whole alchemical tradition.  
 Although alchemical practice in China dates back to around the fifth century B.C., the Western alchemical tradition originated in the Alexandrian Age somewhat around the first century A.D. and evolved into a "complex and indefinite aggregation of chemistry, philosophy, religion, occultism, astrology, magic, mythology, and many other constituents."  
 By the beginning of the Christian era, Egyptian metallurgists had virtually perfected the production of imitation silver and gold through four primary processes: alloying metals like copper and tin, treating the surfaces of metals with "sulphur water" (calcium sulphide), adding gold to a quantity of fused base metal, or dipping metals in mordant salts.  

33 Arthur John Hopkins, Alchemy: Child of Greek
philosophers began applying Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotelian philosophy, to Egyptian metallurgy in an attempt to explain the color changes or bronzing effects of mordant salts. Once these color changes could be explained, alchemists hoped to discover a means of bringing about a true transmutation of base metal into gold. By accomplishing this feat, they would then possess a material proof for their theories about the striving of man and matter towards perfection. For, underlying all aspects of alchemical theory is Aristotle's belief, which he expressed in De Caelo, that all things in nature are striving towards perfection. The alchemists were particularly intrigued by gold since, as the only metal at that time to resist fire, it appeared to be an incorruptible, thus perfect, metal.

According to Aristotle, the universe consisted of four basic properties, hot and moist with their contraries cold and dry. In turn, these properties conjugated in pairs to create the four elements, earth, fire, air, and water. Depending upon environmental factors, such as heat, and the

Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), pp. 47-50. Goldsmiths worked in Egypt as early as 3000 B.C. However, the mere alloying and superficial tinting of these artisans must not be confused with alchemy since the alchemists endeavored to accomplish a real transmutation of base metal into gold. The earliest literature describing metal coloring consists of the Papyrus Ebers (1550 B.C.) and the Leyden Papyrus (1 or 2 A.D.) which both contain collections of recipes for the preparation of metals and alloys simulating gold and silver. See Read, pp. 7 & 39.
"formal cause," which endowed the object with activity through individualizing tendencies or seedlike potentialities, the four elements combined in different degrees to form all material bodies. Apart, these elements existed as primordial matter or prima materia. If any substance could be reduced to primordial matter, its elemental composition could be changed so as to give it the form of any other substance; thus, in theory, any substance could be changed by imposing upon it a new form. All metals, though initially composed of different degrees of the four elements, nevertheless shared the same seed-like potentiality to evolve into gold by slowly baking within the earth. Using Aristotle's theory of the four basic elements, the Egyptian alchemists ultimately developed the theory of the superferment. The superferment (usually a small quantity of specially refined gold) was supposed to change all other metals into gold by bringing into action and accelerating the seed-like potentiality that moved metals to evolve into gold.

In addition to Aristotle's theory of perfection and theory of the four elements, the early alchemists believed in the Hermetic doctrine that, like man, all matter contained spirit. Consequently, the Egyptian alchemists conceived of the superferment as the spirit of metallicity in

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which "yellowness," as a spiritual power, overcame the "earthy" by literally "washing away" all the metal's sin or corruption. This religious conception of regeneration as it was applied to metals has caused historians of science such as Pierre Berthelot to conclude that a "so-called mystical element not only entered early into alchemical literature, but brought it into being." Mircea Eliade goes even further to assert that "without a shadow of a doubt, the Alexandrian alchemists were from the very beginning aware that in pursuing the perfection of metals, they were pursuing their own perfection."

By the third century A.D., alchemists had travelled from Egypt to Byzantium to Greece, and had syncretized Egyptian metallurgy and Greek philosophy with symbols similar to those of ancient mystery religions, which dealt with the ritual suffering, death, and resurrection of a god.

35 Hopkins, p. 121.


38 Even from its early beginnings, alchemy was a controversial science. For example, in 292 A.D., Diocletian decreed that alchemists be expelled from Egypt and their books burned. According to Suidas' tract entitled, "These are the readings of John of Antioch from the 'Extracts of Constantine Porphyrogenetios,'" Diocletian expelled the alchemists, "lest wealth should accrue to the Egyptians
In fact, the oldest extant Graeco/Roman alchemical texts, the *Dialogue of Komarius and Kleopatra*, *Dialogue of Kleopatra and the Philosophers*, *Chrysopoeia of Kleopatra*, *Book of Ostanes*, and *Visions of Zosimos*, identify alchemy as a symbol for mystical regeneration. Accordingly, these texts describe the transmutation of metals in terms of the death and resurrection of a base metal like copper or lead, which died and corrupted to blackness only to be raised from its corruption as an incorruptible body of gold. Just as the neophyte of a mystery religion expected to change his mode of being or become immortal by participating in the ritual death and resurrection of the god, the alchemist was supposed to achieve spiritual ennoblement by participating in the perfection of matter. As H. J. Sheppard explained, "Alchemy is the art of liberating parts of the Cosmos from temporal existence and achieving perfection, which for metals is gold, and for man, longevity, then immortality, and, finally, redemption."40

The redemption theme in Greek alchemy also attracted a number of early Christian philosophers, such as Christian-

through this art and lest they emboldened by riches should in the future revolt against the Romans." See Hopkins, pp. 8 and 246.


40 H. J. Sheppard, p. 36.
ius, Sergius, Photius, Nicephoros, Cosmas, and Morienus, who added Christian theology to alchemy's philosophical system, which already consisted of natural philosophy, Hermetic doctrine, and mystical teachings such as Gnosticism, Orphic speculation, and Eleusinian mystery religion. These early Greek Christian alchemists identified the end of alchemical transmutation as concurrence with Christ, who, according to Nicephoros, "leads all things from non-being into being."\textsuperscript{41} In addition, Nicephoros affirmed that alchemy is a gift from God and that the alchemist is an agent of Christ who should allocate a tithe of his alchemical gold to the poor. The Canon's Yeoman's explanation, "For unto Crist it [philosopher's stone] is so lief and deere/ That he wol nat that it discovered bee/ But where it liketh to his deitee (CYT 11. 1467-69) comes directly out of the Christian alchemical tradition, originating with alchemists such as Nicephoros. In fact, \textit{De compositione alchemie}, attributed to Morienus and translated by Robert of Chester in 1144, was the first work on alchemy to reach Europe. Not only does this text discuss alchemy in relation to Christian piety and asceticism, but it also describes man himself as the true subject of alchemy.\textsuperscript{42} As we shall see, Christianity ultimately be-

\textsuperscript{41} Waite, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{42} According to medieval tradition, Morienus was a Roman Christian who travelled to Alexandria in hopes of becoming the disciple of Adfar Alexandrinus, an Arabian
came a key factor in the development of Western alchemy, especially in the writings of Petrus Bonus and Arnold of Villanova.

Greek alchemy, which significantly influenced medieval alchemists, flourished from the second to the seventh century. Throughout this period, alchemists began to use more and more obscure expressions in their texts to keep

philosopher and adept. Morienus became Adfar's disciple and, after Adfar's death, retired as a hermit outside Jerusalem where Hermes Trismegistos, the alleged divine source of alchemy, instructed him in the alchemical art. Renowned as a great alchemist, Morienus was invited to the court of the Arab King Khalid to instruct him in the alchemical art. Seeking to convert King Khalid to Christianity, Morienus became his teacher and De compositione alchemie, also known as A Testament of Alchemy, records his audience with the king. Lee Stavenhagen points out that, to some extent, Stephanos of Alexandria, court mathematician and alchemist, and Herakleios I, Byzantine Emperor (610-641 A. D.) were the models for Morienus and Khalid. In Christian legend, Herakleios restored the relic of the True Cross to Jerusalem, and with Stephanos' aid, had combined alchemy with Christianity. See Lee Stavenhagen, trans., A Testament of Alchemy, (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1974), p. 62. It is interesting to note that passages from Morienus' testament are also quoted in the works of the tenth century alchemist Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Umail t-Tamimi (Senior Zadith filius Hamuel), whom Chaucer quotes at the end of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale." Consequently, it is likely that Chaucer was acquainted with Morienus, thus Christian alchemy, through Senior's work.

43 Influential alchemists at this time include Pseudo-Democritus (1 or 2 A. D.), Synesius (2 or 3 A. D.), Zosimos (3 or 4 A. D.), Olympiodorous (5 or 6 A. D.), and Stephanos (7 A. D.). The best collection of these alchemists' texts remains, Pierre Eugene Marcellin Berthelot, Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs, Texte et traduction, (Paris, 1888), 3.
their sacred art a secret from the uninitiated. As Morienus explained in his Testament:

The ancients, however, did not refer to the matters pertaining to this science by their proper names, speaking instead, as we truly know, in circumlocutions, in order to confute fools in their evil intentions.

... This they did by formulating their convictions and true sayings always in parables, so that only those of great wisdom and resource would be able to uncover their true meaning.44

Expressing their experimental practices and mystical concepts in similes and parables, most Greek alchemists utilized poetic language rather than common prose. In fact, eighth century alchemists such as Heliodorus, Theophrastus, Hierotheos, and Archelaos actually wrote philosophic alchemical poems. For example, in "Archelaos Upon the Sacred Art," Archelaos vividly presents the transmutation of copper into gold as an allegory in which the corrosion of copper corresponds to the mortification of the flesh, the washing away of oxides to the purifying action of repentant tears, the heat of the furnace to the fires of Ghenna, and the gold of transmutation to the spiritual man, "made godlike by the

44 Stavenhagen, p. 11 and 13.
light of holy deeds." 45 In addition, Archelaos likens transmutation to the reconciliation of the soul, body, and spirit:

And knowledge of its facts, a science which
In theory and practice finds its end,
By linking soul to body in one bond
Through perfect combination of the two
The "Sacred Art" makes both live as one,
When spirit comes a third to crown the whole.

(11. 15-20) 46

These alchemists sought both to penetrate natural reality and to unfold its mysteries symbolically or allegorically through verbal signs.

Unfortunately, however, the metaphysical speculation and poetic language used by most Greek alchemists and subsequent alchemists has caused an overwhelming number of scholars to dismiss alchemy as a useless pseudoscience, hopelessly tangled in meaningless occult utterances. In fact, most critics who assert that Chaucer must have been skeptical of, if not completely opposed to, alchemy also

45 C. A. Browne, "Rhetorical and Religious Aspects of Greek Alchemy, Part II," Ambix 3 (1948), p. 25. Brown's article not only analyzes how Greek alchemy was used thematically as an allegory of man's regeneration, but also includes a translation of Archelaos' poem.

assess it as nothing but a series of pretentious and unscientific words and phrases. Yet, this point of view suggests a modern bias shaped by Newton's *Physics*, which, revolutionizing science in the process, exiled metaphysics and mythological modes of thought from the laboratory. According to Brian Stock, however, in ancient and medieval times "scientific thought and the language of science were inseparable from mythical [thus metaphorical] modes of explaining how the universe arose and functioned." 47 Consequently, scientific ideas often evolved through the framework of myth. For example, throughout the Middle Ages, astronomical discoveries were considered important insofar as they could be applied to astrology, which had assumed mythological dimensions. Interested in natural generation and change, the alchemists created a mythology of metallurgy, in which actual chemical changes brought about through processes such as oxidation, distillation, and sublimation were signified symbolically to express a more universal process of death and regeneration. Believing that "the outer universe [macrocosm] obeyed the same laws as those operative in the microcosm [soul and body of man]," 48 the


alchemists simply projected onto matter the initiatory function of suffering.\textsuperscript{49}

Although alchemy assumed a particularly religious vesture in its use of figurative expressions and allegorical symbols of death and regeneration, and was considered by all as a divine and sacred art, it is a mistake to consider alchemy (whether Greek, Islamic or Medieval) as a religion rather than as a science. The alchemists did not worship the Philosopher's Stone, nor believe in their art as a matter of faith. Above all, the early alchemists recognized the purification of base metal into gold as the perfect analogy for the purification of the human soul, and sought to substantiate a philosophy of nature (\textit{physikos logos}) which would give them access to the "full meaning of the eternal and saving message of revelation."\textsuperscript{50} The experimental and symbolic aspects of alchemy must, therefore, be understood as initially two aspects of one and the same tradition. Lee Stavenhagen perfectly summarized the alchemists' position when he explained, "For if science could not substantiate man's claim on immortality, what use was it?"\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{49} Eliade, p. 151.


\textsuperscript{51} Stavenhagen, p. 66.
The transmutation of base metal into gold was never originally intended to be an end in itself; rather, alchemy was pursued as a means for the alchemist to achieve some form of inner revelation or knowledge of God, which would subsequently result in his regeneration or redemption. At the same time, however, particularly in the Islamic and Western schools, alchemy was seriously pursued as an experimental science. In fact, the alchemists developed laboratory equipment and technique without which modern chemistry could not have been born. Thus, despite its allegorical mode of expression, alchemy should literally be understood as early chemistry, but a chemistry ultimately pursued for spiritual ends. In addition, as a *physikos logos*, alchemy may also be described as a philosophic movement from creatures to God as opposed to a theological movement from God to creatures.

By combining the mystical doctrine of regeneration with their attempt to transmute base metal into gold, the Egyptian and Greek alchemists established the tradition of spiritual alchemy. However, when Greek alchemy was transmitted to Islam from 450 to 700 A.D., the Arab alchemists virtually abandoned alchemical mysticism in favor of laboratory experimentation. As a result, as early as the fifth century, alchemy divided into two traditions, the esoteric, or spiritual tradition, and exoteric, or practical tradi-
tion. In the Middle Ages, the exoteric tradition degenerated into goldmaking malpractices, while the esoteric tradition syncretized Egyptian, Greek, and Arabic alchemical theory with Christian doctrine. In order to understand spiritual alchemy in the Middle Ages, we must briefly examine Arabic alchemy, from which Western alchemists derived the Sulphur-Mercury Theory of the Composition of Metals.

As Arabic alchemists discovered more information about the individual character of metals, and exposed ever-increasing numbers of charlatans, doubts arose among them regarding the possibility of transmutation. For example, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), once an advocate of alchemical theory, ultimately denied the possibility of transmutation. Yet, Jabir ibn Hayyan (Geber), the most prominent of the Islamic alchemists, upheld the veracity of alchemical transmutation, and his *Summa perfectionis* became the most important source for medieval alchemy.52 Unlike the Greek alchemical texts which proliferate with poetic language, the *Summa perfectionis*, like most Islamic alchemical texts, consists

52 Whether or not Jabir actually existed is a controversial question which continues to perplex many historians of science. To date, most historians seem to agree with Sherwood Taylor's view that the vast body of Jabir's writing was actually composed by a secret sect of natural philosophers known as the *Ikwan al-safa* or Bretheran of Purity. See Taylor, *The Alchemists*, p. 79. For medieval alchemists, however, there was no question about whether Jabir (Geber) actually existed, and he was considered one of the most prominent adepts.
of a rather straightforward, though less than detailed, account of alchemical theory and practice. The *Summa perfectionis*, for example, discusses the Sulphur-Mercury Theory of the Composition of Metals, explains chemical methods, provides illustrations of furnaces, and describes how to determine whether a metal is genuine gold.

Jabir is most noted for developing the Sulphur-Mercury Theory of the Composition of Metals, which became the primary scientific principle underlying medieval alchemical philosophy. According to Jabir, fire and water were the most important pair of elemental opposites, fire representing that which makes things combustible and water representing that which makes things liquid. Furthermore, he believed that all metals were engendered from varying degrees of pure and impure forms of sulphur and mercury. As the metallic principle of combustibility, the spirit of sulphur was considered masculine and related to *Sol* (Sun) or gold, while, as the metallic principle of liquidity, the spirit of sophic mercury was understood as feminine and associated with *Luna* (Moon) or silver. Impure sulphur and mercury conjoined within the earth to form the base metals like tin and lead; sulphur and mercury of an ordinary purity produced gold, whereas sulphur and mercury of a quintessential purity created an elixer (the Islamic conception of the Philosopher's Stone) which had such an overabundance of the spirit
of gold that it could transmute this spirit to other metals, thereby changing them to gold. Consequently, a metal's relative purity or impurity indicated whether it had an abundance or lack of the spirit of gold. If ordinary or organic mercury and sulphur were divested of their physical properties through enumerable sublimations so that they became quintessentially pure, they would yield philosophical or sophic mercury and sulphur, the essences from which the elixir could be made. This elixer could not only transmute all base metals into gold, but also cure all human ills and confer longevity.

In the twelfth century, major alchemical texts such as Jabir's Summa perfectionis reached Western Europe via Syria, Constantinople, Italian commercial cities, and Spain, and initiated the European alchemical tradition. As previously mentioned, Robert of Chester translated the first alchemical text into Latin in 1144, and captured the imagination of many men in the process. In fact, by 1300 there was a proliferation of alchemical texts, the most influential being the Turba philosophorum, anonymous; Liber secretorum artis, attributed to Khalid, King of Egypt; De vita proroganda, Clavis majoris sapientiae, and Liber secretus, attributed to Artephius; Assertio artis alchemiae, attributed to Alfarabi; De anima and Tractatus alchimiae by Avicenna, De perfecto magisterio, and De practica lapidis philosophorum,
attributed to Aristotle, the _Summa perfectionis_, attributed to Geber, _De aluminibus_ and _Lumen luminororum_ of the pseudo-Rases, the _Liber quartorum, Sublimacio mercurii secundum Platonem_ and and _Liber activarium institutionum_, attributed to Plato, and the _Emerald Table_, attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, the alleged father of alchemy, who was the Greek equivalent of the Egyptian moon-god Thoth, and the patron of healing, intelligence, and letters. Cryptic in expression, the _Emerald Table_ became the creed, as it were, of medieval alchemists. Not only were these alchemical texts extant throughout Europe in various manuscripts, but the great encyclopedists such as Vincent of Beauvais and Bartholomew Anglicius accepted the theoretical possibility of transmutation, and, therefore, described the facts and theories of alchemy in their compendiums of knowledge. 53 By the mid-thirteenth century, in addition to these alchemical texts,

53 For example, in his _Speculum majus, Speculum Doctrinale_, and _Speculum naturale_, Vincent of Beauvais discusses alchemical ingredients, utensils and processes. In fact, after analyzing these texts and comparing their content with the Canon's Yeoman's catalogues, Pauline Aiken concluded that Vincent of Beauvais provided Chaucer with his knowledge about alchemy. See Pauline Aiken, "Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Knowledge Of Alchemy," _Studies in Philology_ 41 (1944), 371-89. In addition to Vincent's accounts of alchemical practice, however, was Bartholomew Anglicius' in _Liber de proprietatibus rerum_, which familiarized clergy and universities alike with the chemical theories of the Islamic school. Albertus Magnus' _De rebus metallicis et mineralibus_ also describes the methods and means of alchemy.
Averroes' complete works of Aristotle became available, thus providing medieval alchemists with the Aristotelian background necessary for understanding some of the fundamental principles behind alchemical theory. Furthermore, Hermetic philosophy was being studied at Paris by scholars such as William of Auvergne, Petros Theoctonicos, and Nicholas Polonus.54

Although alchemical texts originating in the Islamic school were virtually free of poetic language since they were of a more practical than theoretical nature, Arabic translations of the Greek texts puzzled many Western translators who, inadvertently, distorted the ideas and allusions of the original writers by obscuring the larger philosophical concerns of alchemy with an emphasis on the production of gold. To complicate matters further, even those alchemical texts which were more or less faithfully translated were apt to be misread by eager novices unfamiliar with the meaning of alchemical symbols. Considering that between 700 and 1200 there was a gold shortage in the West due to a decline in mining, it was no wonder that the possibility of making gold excited both princes and clerks alike. As Sherwood Taylor explained, "Alchemy swept like a fever over thirteenth century Europe, and it remained

for at least three centuries the chief preoccupation of those inclined to the discovery of nature's secrets.55

Although a true Hermetic Brotherhood of alchemists, who understood the salvific aims of alchemy, arose in the West, they were a minority as compared with the charlatans and imposters who were motivated by greed either to pursue alchemical experimentation or to rob people of their money by pretending to the art. Consequently, the Middle Ages saw the division of alchemy into two branches: false alchemy, or goldmaking, and spiritual alchemy. Although both false alchemy and spiritual alchemy were signified as "alchemy," the true adept, like his predecessors, never pursued alchemy only for the sake of producing gold. Thus, true alchemists, such as Thomas Norton, distinguished themselves from gold-makers by advising readers about the goldmaker's avarice:

The fals man walkith fro towne to towne,
For the moste parte with a thredbare gowne,
Euyr serching with diligent a-wayte
To wyn his pray with som fals disceyte. . . .
With his faire promyse and with his fals othis
The covetise is broght to thredbare clothis,

(lines 323-26 and 337-38)56

55 Taylor, The Alchemists, p. 100.

While some translators obscured the significance of alchemical experimentation by designating the production of gold as the primary goal of alchemy, others, more sensitive to the metaphysical implications of Greek alchemical allegory, reshaped alchemical beliefs to be more compatible with Christianity. As D. W. Robertson explained, by the mid-twelfth century, both poets and clergyman alike sought to discover classical patterns of thought which were analogous to Christian patterns—hence, the development of medieval mythography. Consequently, throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many clerical translators redefined alchemical procedures in relation to Christian mysteries. For example, they referred to washing as baptism, dissolving as mortification, melting as death, digesting as burial, and distilling as resurrection. Just as Greek alchemy ultimately assumed the ritual forms of expression used in mystery religions, western alchemy gradually assumed more and more Christian forms of expression. In fact, during the seventeenth century, Michael Maier, a prominent alchemist, wrote a kind of alchemical mass, which summarized how the alchemical mystery engages in the Christian mystery:


It is said also 1) that in the Sacrament of the Altar are concealed the most profound secrets of spiritual Alchemy; 2) that the perfection of the Great Work is the birth of the Philosopher's Stone in the Sacred Nativity; 3) that its sublimation represents the death on Calvary; and 4) that the perfection of the red state corresponds to the resurrection of Easter and the Divine Life thereafter. 59

As early as the twelfth century, however, the true Christian alchemist, like the Egyptian and Greek alchemists before him, was instructed by many alchemical texts, such as the Turba philosophorum, to participate in the perfection of matter as a means of achieving knowledge of God and redemption, while restoring Nature to her unfallen state.

Apart from the encyclopedists, a number of prominent thirteenth century theologians also accepted alchemy as a legitimate philosophy compatible with Christian beliefs. For example, in De Mineralibus, genuinely accepted as an authentic text, Albertus Magnus describes Jabir's Sulphur-Mercury Theory of the Composition of Metals as well as many alchemical processes and apparati. Ascribing to Aristotle's theory of perfection, Albertus intimates his probable belief in transmutation:

59 Read, p. 115.
For what can be done in nature's vase can perhaps be done in that vase of art, and what nature does by the heat of the sun and the stars, can be done by the fire of art.60

Later, in Libellus de alchimia, he even suggests that he has successfully accomplished the alchemical experiment:

I persevered in studying, reflecting, laboring over works of this same subject until finally I found what I was seeking, not by my own knowledge, but by the grace of the Holy Spirit.61

Each of the many alchemical texts attributed to Albertus describes actual laboratory procedure, and lacks any significant occult features.62 As an acute critic of alchemy, Albertus was definitely a man of the laboratory, who opposed any deceivers that merely attempted to color the metals rather than actually transmute them into gold.


62 Alchemical texts attributed to Albertus include Semita recta, Alkimia minor, Libellus de alchimia, De secretis mulierum, Liber aggregatoniun sine de virtutibus herbarum, Lapidum et animalium, and De mirabilibus mundi. As with Geber's alchemical texts, however, most of Albertus' are now considered spurious works. However, medieval thinkers accepted Albertus' texts as authentic, and, according to Partington (p. 17), Albertus' reputation as a practical alchemist was well-established by the thirteenth century.
Like Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon was devoted to experimental science, and accepted the possibility of transmutation. However, whereas Albertus was primarily interested in laboratory technique, equipment, and procedure, Bacon focused his attention on alchemical theory, analyzing its tenets in authentic texts such as the *Opus minus*, *Opus tertium*, *Epistola de potestate artis et nature*, and his commentary on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum*. Seeking to show how alchemy may be understood within Christian terms, Bacon often drew analogies between the alchemical experiment and Christian mysteries. For example, in the *Opus Minus*, Bacon explains how the Philosopher's Stone, which he designates as the elixer that prolongs life, may be understood in relation to the resurrection of the dead:

This prolongation of life in itself is a kind of proto-salvation, for just as the elixer works by bringing the elements and humours of the body into as perfect a harmony as possible in this life, so at the Resurrection, the bodies of the saints will be brought into perfect harmony while the damned will be tormented in hell by an eternal affliction of bodily humours.

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63 A particularly good review of the alchemical writings ascribed to Roger Bacon may be found in Dorothea Waley Singer, "Alchemical Writings Attributed to Roger Bacon," *Speculum* 7 (1932), 80–86.
In *De Augmentia scientiarum*, Bacon even freely adapts Christ's metaphors of the vineyard in the gospel of Matthew to defend alchemy against those who would accuse it of being a worthless pursuit:

Alchemy may be compared to the man who told his sons that he had left them gold buried somewhere in his vineyard; where they, by digging found no gold, but by turning up the mould about the roots of the vines, procured a plentiful vintage. So the search and endeavors to make gold have brought many useful inventions and instructive experiments to light.\(^{65}\)

Although medieval thinkers such as Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon attempted to show how alchemy and Christianity were compatible, it was the true alchemists themselves who advocated and elaborated upon the Christian nature of their work. The earliest Christian alchemists to rearticulate Nicephoros' conception of alchemy as concurrence with Christ were Raymon Lull in the *Codicillus* and Petrus Bonus in the *Pretiosa margarita novella*. These two thirteenth century texts were extremely influential, and clearly established

\(^{64}\) R. Brehm, "Roger Bacon's Place in the History of Alchemy," *Ambix* 23 (1976), 56.

the Lapis/Christi parallel, in which the Philosopher's Stone is identified as Christ. Sherwood Taylor explained the logic behind this identification by noting, "Christ was the perfect man and God, so constituted for the purpose that man should be redeemed and perfected. In like manner, the stone was the perfect matter made up of God's light and a spiritual body, by which bodies were to be redeemed and perfected."66

Ramon Lull (1225-1315), traditionally identified as the Spanish theologian and member of the Franciscan order who was ultimately martyred in his attempts to convert the African Moslems to Christianity, is a particularly interesting figure in relation to English alchemy since legend recounts that he transmuted thousands of pounds of gold at the request of King Edward I (1272-1307), who needed gold to finance a crusade against the Turks.67 Although most historians today believe the alchemical texts attributed to him are spurious, contemporaries of Lull not only believed his


67 In Raymund Lully: Illuminated Doctor, Alchemist, and Christian Mystic (New York: Gordon Press, 1975), pp. 49-57, Arthur Waite notes that the legend is extant in the Liber ad Serenissiman, Reginam Eleanorum Uxorem Serenissimi Re Eduardi, and Compendium Animae Transmutationis, texts attributed to Lully. He adds that the incident is also recorded in the Testament of Cremer. Cremer was Abbot of Westminster and a Benedictine friar during Edward's reign. However, Waite maintains that Lull was never in England.
alchemical texts were genuine, but revered him as an adept. In his Testamentum, Lull explains that the regenerative process in matter or in man is one and the same. Thus the Philosopher's Stone, which he terms the elixir, not only transmutes every metallic body into silver or gold, but also restores the human body to perfect health. In the Codicillus, Bonus elaborates upon the regenerative process by comparing the death and resurrection of Christ to the death of the metallic seed, when the metal was divested of its physical properties before regenerating into gold. Focusing on how the alchemist must live a holy life to successfully create the elixir, Bonus also intimates that by participating in the transmutation of metals, the alchemist, like the communicant, participates in Christ Himself, the only difference being that, as God's instrument, the alchemist restores Nature to her unfallen condition as well.

Like Ramon Lull, Petrus Bonus discusses alchemy in terms of religious truth. He is usually identified as a municipal officer and physician of Lombardy, who lived in the early fourteenth century. His Pretiosa margarita novella, written in Pola circa 1330, is a defense of alchemy, which, by relying upon references to ancient Greek and Arab writers for support, exists as an extensive review.

of the alchemical texts, sources, and theories available in the early fourteenth century. Perhaps the most lucid of the medieval alchemical texts, the Pretiosa margarita novella not only summarizes laboratory technique, but also attempts to elucidate the meaning of alchemical allegory. For Bonus, the ancient alchemists, like Vergil, were seers who prophesized the birth of Christ:

We can prove incontestably that the ancient philosophers of this art were seers who truly prophesized through this divine art about the manifestation of God in the flesh of man—namely, Christ—and his identity with God by means of the inglowing and emanence of the Holy Ghost.

As the conjunction of all opposites, both human and divine, male and female, the Philosopher's Stone bears all the aspects of Christ, and makes the art of alchemy itself, "more noble and precious than any other science, art, or system with the single exception of the glorious doctrine of Redemption through our Saviour Jesus Christ." Furthermore,

69 An excellent review of this text is found in C. Crisciani, "The Conception of Alchemy as Expressed in the Pretiosa margarita novella of Petrus Bonus of Ferrara," Ambix 20 (1973), 165-81.

70 Crisciani, p. 171.

as the remedy to all earthly disease, alchemy is a gift from Christ, who commanded, "Freely ye have received, freely give." Thus, the imposter to the science was the man who meanly pursued alchemy through an illiberal love of gold, rather than through the love of mankind.

Like Ramon Lull and Petrus Bonus, Arnald of Villanova (1235–1311) understood alchemy as a Christian art. He was not only a renowned alchemist, but a key figure in the development of medieval pharmaceutical theory. Aside from alchemy and medicine, Arnald also wrote tracts on prophecy, theology, and ecclesiastical reform. His alchemical texts include, Rosarius phæbi, Rosa novella, De floratio philosophorum, Flos florum, Semita recta, De secretis naturae, Novum lumen, and the Rosarium philosophorum. His Rosarium philosophorum, to which Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman refers, was a particularly popular alchemical text, and, according to Pearl Kibre, thirteenth and fourteenth century manuscripts of this text are very numerous.72 Significantly, although Arnald was condemned as a heretic by ecclesiastical authorities at the Sorbonne, it was not because of his alchemical writings, but because of his tracts on astrological determinism.73

72 Pearl Kibre, "Further Manuscripts Containing Alchemical Tracts Attributed to Albertus Magnus," Speculum 34 (1959), 238-47.

73 See Serge Hutin, La Vie Quotidienne Des Alchimistes
As three of the most influential medieval alchemists, Ramon Lull, Petrus Bonus, and Arnald of Villanova initially set the precedent for alchemical experimentation in the fourteenth century. Although legend suggested that Ramon Lull had practiced alchemy in England during the late thirteenth century, most historians agree that English alchemy actually began in the fourteenth century. By the time alchemists began practicing their art in England, however, alchemy had already become a controversial science. Hoping to witness the transmutation of base metal into gold, Edward III summoned two alchemists, Johannes de Rous and Williemus de Dalby, to his court in 1329. Although there is no record of what transpired at this meeting, it is unlikely that Edward became disillusioned with alchemy since in 1336 he actually prevented the imprisonment of an alchemist.74 The earliest English alchemists on record include John Dastin, Robert of York, and Walter of Odrington, while the most influential alchemical treatises of the period include the Turba philosophorum and Liber Compostella as well as the works of Geber, Lull, Bonus, and Arnold of Villanova.75

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74 Crisciani, p. 177.

According to Noel Brann, for some clerics such as Nicholas Oresme (Livre de divinacions), alchemy was too closely associated with divinatory astrology, thus in violation of the doctrine of free will. In addition, alchemists seemed particularly vulnerable to the vices of avarice and melancholy (tristitia); thus, alchemy was viewed as a potential occasion for sin. Perhaps because of this latter view, as early as 1272, Franciscans in Nabonne were forbidden from practicing alchemy, while similar prohibitions were issued in Bordeaux (1287), Treves (1289), and Barcelona (1323). Likewise the Dominican order instituted sanctions against alchemy in Pest (1273), Bordeaux (1287), Treves (1289) and Metz (1313). For both Orders, punishments against offenders ranged from imprisonment to excommunication. In 1317, Pope John XXII (1316-1334) issued a bull at Avignon entitled De Crimine Falsi, Titulus VI (The Crime of Falsification, Title VI), which most historians understand as an edict against alchemy. However, although the bull prohibits what it calls "alchemies," it appears to be primarily concerned with counterfeiting (the coinage of money) rather than with alchemical experimentation:


Those, however, who in their regrettable folly go so far as not only to sell moneys thus made but even to despise the precepts of the natural law, pass the bounds of their art and violate the laws by deliberately coining or casting or having others coin or cast counterfeit money from alchemic gold or silver, we proclaim as coming under this, and their goods shall be confiscated, and they shall be considered as criminals. 78

As Ronald Pearsall has pointed out, there is no evidence that John XXII saw anything theologica lly wrong in the transmutation of base metal into gold. Instead, he understood counterfeiting, which was practiced under the auspices of alchemy, as an economic threat with the potential of disturbing the balance of riches within a kingdom. 79 Referring to such counterfeiting as sophistica transmutatione (sophistic transmutation), John implies that

78 "Illos vero qui in tantae ignorantiam infelicitatis proruperint, ut nedom hummos vendunt, sed naturalis jurispraecpta contemnunt, artis excendat metas, legumque violent interdicta sciento r videlicet adulterinam ex auro et argento alchimico cubiendo seu fundendo, hac animadversione percilli jubemus, ut ipsorum bona deserantur carceri, ipsique perpetuo sint infames." The Latin text and English translation may be found in J. J. Walsh, "Pope John XXII and the Supposed Bull Forbidding Chemistry," Medical Libraries 3 (1905), 248-63.

his decretal is directed towards those individuals who make
some form of adulterated gold rather than genuine gold. In
fact, his decretal penalizes such counterfeiters by
requiring them to "forfeit to the public treasury for the
benefit of the poor as much genuine gold and silver as they
have manufactured of the false or adulterate metal."80
Instead of denouncing all alchemists as counterfeiters,
John's bull actually addresses the problem of the
pseudoalchemists who counterfeited coins with adulterate
gold. Nowhere in his bull does John condemn the
transmutation of metals into genuine gold, or suggest that
such a transmutation is impossible. By only prohibiting the
production of adulterate gold, John neither affirms nor
denies his belief in true alchemy where the transmutation of
base metal into genuine gold was supposed to occur. Thus,
John's bull cannot be accurately interpreted as representing
some kind of orthodox ecclesiastical bias against true
alchemy; rather it reveals how the pope wanted to protect
people from the kinds of imposters or goldmakers we find in
the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale."

As we have seen, thirteenth century theologians such as
Albertus Magnus and Roger Bacon accepted the possibility of

80 "quoniam tantum de vero auro et argento debent
inference in publicum, ut pauperibus erogetur quantum de falso
et adulterino posuerunt." Walsh, p. 250.
transmutation, and found nothing particularly heretical about alchemical doctrine. Both Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas also recognized alchemy as a legitimate science. For example, in *De rerum principio,* Duns Scotus discusses alchemical beliefs, including the doctrine of vitalism (all matter contains spirit) and identifies the four humours in metals as chalk—melancholy, *aqua vitae*—phlegm, fiery virtue—cholera, and subtle air—blood. 81 In his commentary on the third book of Aristotle's *Meteorologia,* Thomas Aquinas observes:

> And so the alchemists, through the true art of alchemy (but yet a difficult art because of the occult operations of the celestial virtue, namely the mineral virtue, which because they are hidden, are imitated by us only with difficulty), these alchemists, by the above principals or by principals laid down by themselves, sometimes make a true generation of metals, sometimes indeed from the aforesaid sulphur and mercury without the generation of the exhalation . . . 82

Theologians such as Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus, and Thomas Aquinas remind us that, although the


monastic orders prohibited the practice of alchemy and John XXII published a bull against counterfeiting, we cannot generalize that the Church predominantly viewed alchemy as a heresy. Actually, up through the fourteenth century, the Church is relatively silent on the subject of alchemy, so its attitude toward true or spiritual alchemy is best summarized as ambivalent. For we should keep in mind, as Arthur Hopkins has pointed out, that "However much the theories of alchemy were held in doubt, however carefully one felt compelled to guard himself against the pretended adept, yet all the world believed that gold could be made and had been made." 83

83 Hopkins, p. 199.
Chaucer and the Alchemical Tradition

Although it is impossible to say exactly what directed Chaucer's attention to alchemy in the first place, it is significant that during Chaucer's lifetime there were some rather notorious court cases in England and the Continent against swindlers who called themselves alchemists. Perhaps the best known of these cases concerns one William de Brumley, chaplain, who, accused of counterfeiting gold, admitted to making adulterate metal according to the teaching of William Shuchirch, Canon of the King's chapel at Windsor. De Brumley's crime was not that he attempted to transmute base metal into gold, but that he attempted to pass off his adulterate metal as genuine gold. Interestingly enough, his counterfeit pieces were not worthless, but actually valued at thirty-five shillings by two separate juries. Had the pieces been pure gold they would have been worth six and one half marks. Since the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" recounts the alchemical exploits of two canons, many critics, including Thomas Tyrwhitt and Albert Hartung, believe that William

84 An excellent summary of this case may be found in H. G. Richardson, "Year Books and Plea Rolls as Sources of Historical Information," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 5 (1922), 38-39.

de Brumley's case may have inspired Chaucer to write about the malign influence of a canon who poses as an alchemist.

Canons were not the only clerics, however, who had scandals with alchemy. As early as 1327, William of Somerton, Prior of the Binham Priory in Norfolk, supposedly slipped into apostasy and expended his priory's riches on alchemical experiments. Subsequently he was arrested, released and returned to the priory. After slipping into apostasy again, William finally repented of his sins and forsook alchemy. In addition to William de Brumley's and William of Somerton's cases, in 1350 there was an inquiry into the cause for John de Walden's imprisonment, which had lasted for more than seven and a half years in the Tower of London. The inquiry revealed that Philip de Weston had given him 500 crowns of gold and 20 pounds of silver from King Edward III's treasury to multiply in alchemical experimentation. As H. G. Richardson explained, "Apparently he failed."

Although these court cases might seem to imply that alchemy was in particularly bad repute during the fourteenth century, most jurists who wrote opinions on alchemical ex-

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87 H. G. Richardson, p. 38.
perimentation nevertheless distinguished between counterfeiters, those alchemists who merely pretended to make gold, and true alchemists, who could genuinely transmute base metals into gold. For example, Lynn Thorndike explains how three influential jurists, who antedate Pope John XXII's decretal, took a rather liberal view of honest alchemical experimentation. In the early fourteenth century, Oldrado da Ponte, Consistorial Advocate in the Papal Curia, stated in his Consilium that anyone who makes gold from viler metals is a public benefactor the way a miner of precious metals is. Like Oldrado, John Andrea accepted the practice of true alchemy and added that Arnold of Villanova was a great physician, theologian, and alchemist, who had made rods of gold. Finally, in his dictionary of Canon law, Alberico da Roscitate repeated Oldrado's views while emphasizing that if alchemical gold was genuine gold, it was perfectly proper to sell it as such. Pope Clement VI (1342-52) remained completely silent on alchemical experimentation, issuing no legislation on it as far as extant records show. It must be admitted, however, that as increasing numbers of pseudoalchemists, who sought to swindle people, were brought to light, alchemy fell more and more into ill-repute. By 1380, Charles V of France completely forbade the

88 Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science 3, p. 50.
practice of alchemy and the possession of alchemical equipment. In the same year, having been discovered to possess an alchemical laboratory, Jean Barillon, a French chemist, was the first alchemist to be executed under Charles' decree.

Like most medieval theologians and men of science, jurists condemned fraudulent alchemical practice, not the transmutation of base metals in and of itself. Charles V's prohibition against alchemy, as well as Henry IV's issued later in 1414, does not indicate that educated people had stopped believing in the possibility of transforming base metal into gold. It is true that other theories, such as the phlogiston theory, challenged the alchemists' conception of matter. Yet, legitimate alchemical experimentation continued to prosper rather unmolested for at least two more centuries. Assuming that Charles and Henry prohibited alchemy because a significant need for this kind of legislation had been demonstrated, instead of indicating a skepticism against alchemical theory, their statutes imply that a belief in alchemy must have prevailed for people to have been duped by false alchemists in the first place. And these victims of alchemical fraud were from the educated upper classes that possessed the gold desired by the pseudoalchemists. Since false alchemists greatly outnumbered the serious students of this art, legislation was necessary
to protect the people. It is significant, however, that despite Henry's statute, serious fifteenth century English alchemists, such as Thomas Norton and George Ripley, were free to pursue alchemy openly without fear of prosecution. Thus, despite signifying either as "alchemy," both the Medieval Church and law recognized the existence of two alchemies, one false and one true.

Although few medieval writers refer directly to alchemy, those who discuss alchemical practice also seem to distinguish between pseudoalchemy and true alchemy. In "De alchimia," the one hundred and eleventh dialogue in the first book of De remediosis utruisque fortunae, Petrarch attacks alchemy in a manner similar to Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman. Yet, according to Lynn Thorndike, Petrarch's personal letters reveal that his attitude toward alchemy actually seems to have varied depending on his mood, circumstance, and the person addressed. Unlike Petrarch, Jean de Meun affirmed his belief in the possibility of genuine transmutation by devoting eighty-four lines (16005-16089) of his section of the Roman de la Rose to a discussion of alchemical theory.


90 Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science 3, p. 221.
In section 78 of the *Roman de la Rose*, "The Poet tells how Art strives with Nature," Jean de Meun asserts that Nature surpasses Art since Nature's creations "live and move and feel and speak," (I. 46) whereas Art produces mere reproductions of reality. Identifying alchemy as an Art, however, Jean points out that, like Nature, the alchemist who possesses *sapience* can work transmutations in which species assume different forms:

> Those who know how to consummate the work<br>Can do likewise with metals, from the ore<br>Extracting all the dross and rendering it<br>Pure bullion, using the affinity<br>Of substances that like complexions have;<br>Which shows that they a common nature own,<br>However Nature may have sundered them. (ll. 88-94)

Although Jean de Meun seems initially to discredit alchemy when he says, "Though he [the alchemist] should work himself to death, he ne'er/One species could transmute to other kind" (ll. 50-51), he actually recapitulates the alchemical tenet that transmutation is impossible unless the first sub-

91 English references to the *Roman de la Rose* are from Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Harry W. Robbins, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962), and will be cited in the text according to the lines of the English translation.
stance of the original object and desired mutation is the same. For example, in the *Pretiosa Margarita Novella*, Petrus Bonus explains it is impossible to change common flints into diamonds since both lack a mutual first substance. Similarly, Bonus points out that it is a mistake to attempt extracting the Philosopher's Stone, a mineral substance, from various animal and vegetable substances.\(^{92}\) In addition to the alchemical tenet of first substances, Jean de Meun also acknowledges the Sulphur/Mercury Theory of the Origin of Metals and maintains:

... Those who have mastery
Of the alchemist's art can bring to birth
From finest silver finest gold, and give
It weight and color from an ore less dear;

\(11. 104-08\)

Furthermore, he identifies the false alchemists as those who do not follow nature, but work only by sophistications:

But sophisters can ne'er accomplish this;
Though they may work as long as they may live,
They never can attain to Nature's skill.

\(11. 113-15\)

Like Chaucer, Jean de Meun was later revered as an adept by alchemists, and a number of alchemical texts were spuriously attributed to him.\(^{93}\)

\(^{92}\) Bonus, pp. 136 and 244.
Like Jean de Meun, John Gower was familiar with alchemical theory. In Book Four of the *Confessio Amantis*, for example, the Confessor lectures Amans about the seven bodies (metals) and seven planets integral to alchemical theory (ll. 2463-74), discusses the Sulphur-Mercury Theory of the Origin of Metals (ll. 1275-97), cites alchemical processes such as distillation, congelation, solution, dissension, sublimation, calcination, approbation, and fixation (ll. 2510-25), describes how the Philosopher's Stone bears an animal, vegetable, and mineral nature (ll. 2534-64), and mentions Hermes, Geber, Ortolane, Morienus, and Avicenna as authorities on alchemy (ll. 2606-17). Admitting that transmutation "Which grounded is upon nature" (l. 2624) is indeed possible, "The science of himself is trewe," (l. 2598) the Confessor decries the ineptitude of contemporary alchemists who are unable to decipher alchemical texts:

Of thilke Elixer which men calle
Alconomie, as is befalle
To hem that whilom weren wise.
Bot now it stant all otherwise;

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93 These texts are *Le Miroir d'Alquimie, La Complainte de Nature 'a l' Alchimiste Errate et la Response de l'Alchimiste,* and *Aux Amoureux de Science.*

94 References from the *Confessio amantis* are taken from G. C. Macaulay, ed., *The Complete Works of John Gower II* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1901), and will be cited in the text.
Thei spoken faste of thilke Ston,
Bot how to make it, nou wot non
After the sothe experience. (ll. 2577-83)

Observing that these alchemists, who are ignorant of alchemical doctrine, inevitably ruin themselves through poverty and debt, he advises:

It were betre be refused
Than forto worchen upon weene
In thing which stant noght as thei weene.

(11. 2594-96)

The preceding passage combined with the Confessor's final point:

Upon this craft, fewe understonde;
Bot yit to put hem in assai
Ther ben full manye now aday,
That knowen litel what thei meene, (11. 2614-17)

is clearly reminiscent of the Canon's Yeoman's admission, "Ne wil nat that the philosophres nevene/How that a man shal come unto this stoon,/ I rede, as for the beste, lete it goon (ll. 1474-75). However, whereas Gower has the Confessor explicitly profess to alchemy's truth before decrying the incompetence of contemporary alchemists, Chaucer solely focuses his attention on contemporary alchemists and how they perceive their science. Just as the Confessor's condemnation of contemporary alchemists in the Confessio
amantis does not reflect a corresponding denunciation of alchemy (rather, competent alchemical practice is praised as virtuous work), Chaucer's tale of inept and deceitful alchemists does not immediately signify that Chaucer rejected alchemy.

Although there are no extant alchemical texts spurious or otherwise attributed to Gower, later alchemists also considered him as an adept. In his Theatrum Chemicum, for example, Elias Ashmole explains:

In this little fragment it appears he fully understood the Secret, for he gives you a faithful account of the properties of the Minerall, Vegitable, and Animal Stones, and affirmes the Art to be true.95

Furthermore, Ashmole cites Gower as the person who instructed Chaucer in the alchemical art:

Now as Concerning Chaucer... he is ranked amongst the Hermetick Philosophers, and his Master in this Science was John Gower, whose familiar and neere acquaintance began at the Innes Temple upon Chaucer's returne into England... 96

95 Elias Ashmole, ed. Theatrum Chemicum Brittanicum (J. Grismond for Nath: Brooks at the Angel in Cornhill, 1552), p. 484.

96 Ashmole, p. 470.
Needless to say, it is impossible to determine whether Gower was instrumental in familiarizing Chaucer with alchemical theory. It is significant, however, that, as influences upon Chaucer's thought, both John Gower and Jean de Meun affirm the possibility of transmutation, demonstrate more than just a passing acquaintance with alchemy, and condemn false alchemists as those who either do not understand alchemy properly or abuse it for their own fraudulent purposes. Most importantly, these two writers, like the Church and the Law, affirm that medieval society recognized the existence of two alchemies, one true and one false. Given this historical context, it seems likely that the real puzzle in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is not whether Chaucer distinguished between true alchemy and false alchemy, but how he distinguished between them.

With alchemy as its central theme, "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is the most extensive literary view of alchemy in medieval literature. The tale differs from the alchemical passages in either the Roman de la Rose or Confessio amantis primarily because Jean de Meun and John Gower chose to elaborate on alchemical theory, while Chaucer chose to scrutinize the ways and means of false alchemists. However, Chaucer's decision to expose the charlatans of this science does not indicate he believed all alchemists were frauds or heretics. On the contrary, as we have seen whether in
Church documents, legal briefs, or medieval literature, the prevailing view seems to have been that, despite the uninformed alchemists who toiled themselves into oblivion, and the diabolical tricksters who swindled people out of their gold, a true alchemy existed and was practiced by individuals who shared a place within Christian tradition.
Chapter Two

The Canon's Yeoman As Alchemist: Alchemical Practice Without Theory in Prima Pars

No thing is wroght but bi his propre cause
wherefore practice fallith ferre behynde
where knowlich of the cause is not in mynd,
wherefore remembre euyrmore wisely,
To werch nothing but ye know how & whi.

---Thomas Norton, The Ordinal of Alchemy

In order to discover how Chaucer manipulates alchemical signs in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," and whether he, like his contemporaries, distinguished between true alchemy and false alchemy, we must first carefully examine what the Canon's Yeoman has to say about alchemical experimentation in prima pars. Did Chaucer construct the Yeoman's narrative to cast all alchemical practice into doubt, or to present the experiences of a pseudoalchemist unfamiliar with correct alchemical procedure? The Canon's Yeoman's references to fifty-six alchemical reagents, twelve alchemical utensils, and nineteen alchemical processes have led most critics of the tale to conclude that he presents a fairly complete description of the alchemical magistry. Consequently, they assert that the Yeoman's failure to successfully transmute
base metal into gold both reveals the folly behind all alchemical experimentation and represents how alchemy leads men into sin. However, although the Yeoman is able to name many substances, apparatus and processes commonly found described in medieval alchemical texts, the question remains whether he really possesses a complete understanding of alchemical procedure. For anyone with the most rudimentary knowledge of chemistry can recite the elements of an experiment without having the least idea of how actually to perform it. Establishing the Yeoman's reliability as an alchemist is crucial to understanding the meaning of alchemy in the tale, for, if he is a competent and knowledgeable scientist, his denunciation of alchemy does indict the whole tradition. On the other hand, if he possesses no real understanding of this science, his words only belie his own ignorance and folly. An analysis of *prima pars* in relation to alchemical theory, especially the works of Petrus Bonus, Albertus Magnus, and Arnald of Villanova, reveals that Chaucer presents the Yeoman's futile science as a false alchemy stripped of any theoretical basis. For the Yeoman can only name the "matter" of alchemy or alchemical substances, apparatus and processes, not explain the scientific principles behind the endeavor to create the Philosopher's Stone. In addition, Chaucer characterizes the Yeoman's ignorance of alchemical theory in terms of blindness to
figuratively and literally signify that the Yeoman suffers from mental, physical, and spiritual deprivation.

After momentarily reflecting on how the "queynte terms" of his "elvysshe craft" have made himself and others "semen wonder wise" (ll. 751-52), the Yeoman speaks of alchemy in a series of virtually incoherent catalogues that intimate he is merely reciting every alchemical term he can think of rather than presenting an accurate description of the alchemical magistery. Admitting, "Though I by ordre hem [aspects of the alchemical experiment] nat reherce kan/ By cause that I am a lewed man" (ll. 786-87), the Yeoman excuses his incoherent recitation as an irrevocable part of his nature. Dismissing the Yeoman's confusion as a result of his excited emotional state, many critics have accepted his apology at face value, and understood his inability to present a clear description of the alchemical experiment as a rhetorical problem rather than as a lack of alchemical knowledge. However, upon closer analysis it becomes ap-

97 Karl Felsen has pointed out that although the alchemical terms in each catalogue rarely relate to one another in any particular order, the catalogues possess a rhetorical order in which each catalogue begins with a disclaimer (occupatio), continues with a description and catalogue of the raw materials of alchemy (descriptio), and concludes with the "poynt" of the Yeoman's tale (sententio). See "Chaucer's 'Canon's Yeoman's Tale,'" Explicator, 41 (1982), 2-3.

98 For example, although Edgar Duncan concedes that the Yeoman's lack of order and mention of many things not useful in the alchemical experiment reveal he does not have a
parent that the Yeoman's rambling is not a sign of mental confusion, but actually a cleverly constructed rhetorical strategy designed to hide his ignorance about alchemical theory while drawing attention to his "queynte" impressive terms.

Although each of the Yeoman's catalogues may appear to be similar haphazard accounts of alchemical substances, apparatus and processes, his first catalogue (ll. 754-85) differs significantly from the others. Not only does the first catalogue lack the preponderance of alchemical terms that the others share, but it also possesses a degree of unity that implies the Yeoman initially intended to present a step-by-step analysis of the alchemical experiment. Consequently, throughout this first catalogue, we sense that the Yeoman is describing how he practiced alchemy. For example, he begins his first catalogue with a description of the first steps he used to take in the experiment:

And bisye me to telle yow the names

complete understanding of alchemy, Duncan, nevertheless, maintains that the Yeoman's words are fairly accurate and describe the process of citrination (turning silver into gold) according to Geber's *Summa perfectionis*. See Edgar Duncan, "The Yeoman's Canon's 'Silver Citrinacion'," *Modern Philology*, 37 (1935), 241-62. Likewise, Pauline Aiken admits that in spite of the fact the Yeoman confuses two mutually contradictory alchemical theories, and consequently makes several mistakes, he possesses a quite accurate knowledge of the more technical alchemical processes. See, Pauline Aiken, "Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Knowledge of Alchemy," *Studies in Philology*, 41 (1944), 371-89.
Of orpyment, brent bones, iren squames,
That into poudre grounden been ful smal;
And in an erthen pot how put is al, (ll. 758-61)
However, he immediately qualifies himself when he realizes
that he inadvertently skipped the first step:
And salt yput in, and also papeer,
Biforn thise poudres that I speke of heer; (ll. 762-63)
That the Yeoman is able to recall a step he missed suggests
his confusion in the ensuing catalogues is not a result of
poor memory. However, if he can accurately recall the pro-
cedures he followed in his experiments, we must ask why, in
the subsequent catalogues, he abandons his process analysis
for a mere recitation of alchemical terms. The answer lies
at the end of the first catalogue where he suddenly reflects
on his failure to successfully complete the first stage of
the experiment:
Noght helpeth us. Oure labour is in veyn.
Ne eek oure spirites ascencioun,
Ne oure matires that lyen al fix adoun,
Mowe in oure werkyng nothyng us availle,
For lost is al oure labour and travaille;
And al the cost, a twenty devel waye,
Is lost also, which we upon it laye. (ll. 777-85)
Once again coming up against his failure to succeed in al-
chemy, the Yeoman abandons speaking about a process he has been unable to master. To draw his audience's attention away from the chronological principle of order he has established in the first catalogue, the Yeoman assures the pilgrims that he can not rehearse the things pertaining to alchemy in an orderly fashion after all, "Though I by ordre hem nat reherce kan/ By cause that I am a lewed man." Consequently, he indulges himself instead in the "queynte" terms which he has indeed mastered, and which he believes make him seem "wonder wise."

Yet, upon examination, the Yeoman proves himself to be less than wise about alchemical practice. For his first catalogue contains several mistakes in procedure that true alchemists often warned against. In the first place, the Yeoman cites an "erthen pot" (l. 761) as the type of vessel he had used to perform the first stage of the experiment. Yet, true alchemists favored glass vessels, and avoided using porous vessels "for fear that they absorb the tincture and the flower of the tincture." Albertus Magnus even listed the use of porous vessels as a primary reason for an alchemist's failure to successfully complete the experiment.100


100 Albertus Magnus, Libellus de alchimia, trans.
In addition to revealing he has been using the wrong kind of vessel for his experiments, the Yeoman also implies that he does not really understand the use of quicksilver, or mercury, in the alchemical magistry. As we have seen, the Yeoman implies that he usually began the experiment by adding "papeer" and "salt" as well as ground "orpyment" (arsenic), "brent bones," and "iren squames" to his pot. However, true alchemists stressed that the beginning of the magistry consisted of but one substance--quicksilver (argentum vivum, or mercury)--which, as the basis of silver and gold, had to be purified before the Philosopher's Stone could be attained.101 Adhering to Jabir's Sulphur/Mercury Theory of the Origin of Metals, most medieval alchemists believed that all metals consisted principally of mercury and sulphur. Albertus Magnus explained:


101 Significantly, in the Rosarium philosophorum, which the Yeoman quotes at the end of the tale, Arnold of Villanova discusses the Sulphur/Mercury Theory of the Origin of Metals in chapters II-V, and stresses how purified quicksilver is the perfecting agent for all metals:

Dicit ergo Aristoteles, quod Argentum vivum est Elementum omnium liquabilium: quonia omnia liquabilia cum ligantur, in eo convertetur, & admiscetur cum ipsis; quia est de substantia eorum. . . . Et illud est rest optima quam suscipere possunt qui Alchimiam operantur, & convertunt illud in argentum bonum.

It [mercury] is the matter of metals when combined with sulphur, that is, as a red stone [cinnabar or red sulphide of mercury] from which quicksilver can be extracted. 102

It was mercury which represented a metal's occult properties such as fusibility, while sulphur represented a metal's visible properties such as color. According to Jabir's theory, the base metals such as lead, tin, and copper, were corrupted by contaminated sulphur or foetid earth, which inhibited these metals from evolving into gold. 103 The alchemist's task was to remove a metal's impurities so that it could then become commuted into gold and silver of its own accord. 104 Petrus Bonus explained:

... no metal is, therefore, complete and perfect from which the sulphur has not become separated;

102 Albertus Magnus, Libellus de alchimia, p. 21

103 Albertus Magnus elaborates upon this point by explaining, "As a boy contracts infirmity from a diseased womb, so the metals become corrupted by contaminated sulphur." See Libellus de alchimia, p. 8. Furthermore, Arnald of Villanova elaborated upon this point by noting that within the earth good quicksilver and impure combustible sulphur created copper; porous impure mercury and impure sulphur created iron; good pure quicksilver and bad sulphur ill-mixed created tin; and that gross, bad, ponderous, earthy quicksilver and bad, fetid, and feeble sulphur created lead. See Petrus Bonus, The New Pearl of Great Price, p. 309.

and since this is the case only in gold, gold alone can properly be called a perfect metal . . . The transmutation of metals into gold, then, must consist in the elimination of this sulphur (which causes metals to evaporate and burn), which result is brought about only by the Philosopher's Stone.105

As Albertus Magnus noted, quicksilver and sulphur combined as cinnabar to become the matter of all metals. In order to attain quicksilver in a quintessentially purified state, the alchemists had to separate the corrupting sulphur within cinnabar from the quicksilver. In addition, the alchemists sought to purify the sulphur so that it would become the "quintessence," or fifth element, which would hold the four elements together in an indissoluble union where there was neither hot nor cold, moist nor dry.106 In order to accomplish this task, the alchemists subjected the cinnabar to a series of digestive processes:

When the two kinds of superfluous sulphurs are separated from the quicksilver, divine sulphur (the perfecting agent) [quintessence] of the na-


ture and form of the Sun (gold) coagulates with the quicksilver of the nature of the Moon (silver). The whiteness of these substances when in a liquid state signifies the eternal peace and concord of the elements.\textsuperscript{107}

Not only does the Yeoman fail to mention the digestion of cinnabar as the first step of the alchemical experiment, but when he refers to "mercurie" towards the end of his first catalogue, he also suggests that he has performed the wrong operations upon it:

... and of the care and wo
That we hadden in oure matires sublymyng;
And in amalgamyng and calcenyng
Of quyksilver yclept mercurie crude? (ll. 771-72)

Alchemists used the term "mercurie crude" to signify quicksilver that had not been quintessentially purified. As previously discussed, alchemists did not initially work with quicksilver itself; instead, they digested cinnabar to attain what they believed would be a purified form of quicksilver.\textsuperscript{108} Calcination and amalgamation were operations

\textsuperscript{107} Petrus Bonus, \textit{The New Pearl of Great Price}, p. 204.

\textsuperscript{108} Digestion may, perhaps, be best understood as the process of treating a substance with a low heat to change its composition or state. Arnald of Villanova explained that the digestion of cinnabar could take as long as thirty days before the danger of combustion (from the sulphur) could be removed. See Petrus Bonus, \textit{The New Pearl of Great Price}, p. 320.
that came later in the experiment as steps in the process of transmutation. Not only does the Yeoman's narrative reveal that he neglected to begin his experiments by digesting cinnabar, but he even fails to mention either cinnabar or the process of digestion in any of his other catalogues. Since the digestion of cinnabar was perhaps the most crucial operation in the experiment, the Yeoman's failure to mention it suggests that he and the Canon never adequately purified their quicksilver, here referred to as "sublymed mercurie":

... Oure orpyment and sublymed mercurie,
Oure grounden litarpe eek in the porfurie,
Of ech of thise of ounces a certeyn,
Noght helpeth us. Oure labour is in veyn.

(11. 771-72 and 774-77)

In these lines, "oure" becomes a particularly ironic modifier of "sublymed mercurie," considering that the Canon and Yeoman virtually insured the failure of their experiments by subliming, or purifying, their mercury incorrectly.

Although the Yeoman ends his first catalogue by asserting the vanity of alchemical experimentation, he, nevertheless, recites five more catalogues consisting of

109 Since quicksilver is also an inflammable substance, it would have been impossible for the Yeoman to subject it to calcination, a process in which the volatile matter of a substance was freed by the action of heat. Quicksilver would have lacked this volatile matter in the first place.
everything he can think of that relates to alchemy. As previously noted, critics have been quite impressed by the multitude of alchemical terms that the Yeoman rehearses. However, as we have seen, what is truly conspicuous about the Yeoman's discussion is what he omits from his recitation rather than what he includes. Not only does he fail to mention either "digestion" or "cinnabar" in his catalogues, he also makes no mention of the colors that were supposed to appear during the magistry. As H. J. Sheppard pointed out, "Any description of the opus would be incomplete without a reference to the colors which were said to appear at consecutive stages of the work."110

After the quicksilver had been quintessentially purified, the alchemical experiment basically divided into four stages: 1) *Melanosis*, in which the alchemist produced a black metal, or alloy, known as the *tetrasomy* or *prima materia*, which was considered to lack any individualizing qualities; 2) *Leukosis*, in which the black alloy was changed to white (silver) by treatment with the purified quicksilver; 3) *Xanthosis*, in which the silver was fused and tinted with a "ferment of gold;" and 4) *Iosis*, (the production of the Philosopher's Stone) in which the gold ferment within the silver gathered unto itself an "occult" gold, red or

purple in color, that could change other metals into gold. 111 These color changes were very important in the experiment since the color of a metal was considered spiritual. Consequently, each color change signified how the metal's spirit was overcoming and, thus, transforming its body to perfection. 112 For example, black (also known as the nigredo) corresponded to mortification, or death, while white, yellow and red corresponded respectively to resurrection, perfection, and ennoblement. By neglecting to mention the color imagery integral to alchemical theory, the Yeoman once again reveals his ignorance of alchemy's true spiritual significance. Lacking these references to color, the Yeoman's catalogues indeed consist of nothing but what Charles Muscatine called a "solid, unspiritual mass of 'realism.'" 113

In addition to omitting any references to color symbolism, the Yeoman also fails to make any mention of Nature, whom alchemists considered to be the guiding principle in their experiments:

111 For a very clear and concise discussion of these stages see Arthur J. Hopkins, Alchemy: Child of Greek Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), pp. 95-97 and 120.


"It is to be borne in mind that this Art is the minister and follower of Nature... Nature herself is set upon changing these metals into gold; the Artist has only to remove the cause which hinders this change (i.e., the corrupting sulphur), and then he can depend upon Nature for the rest."114

As most medieval thinkers, the alchemists believed that all things in Nature aspired to rise in the scale of existence, grow more perfect as they grew higher, and, finally, ascend to unity.115 Understanding the generation of metals in terms of human generation, the alchemists believed that, like embryos, ores grew ripe in their "telluric darkness," and in time, if permitted by Nature's ministry, reached a state of perfection, i.e., became gold.116 First drawing an analogy between seeds and metals, and then between humans and metals, Petrus Bonus explains:

The same holds good with regard to the seeds of plants, which are specifically complete as seeds,


115 Dante the Pilgrim's ascent through the heavens to union with God poetically expresses this idea.

yet Nature nevertheless designs them to be perfected into living plants. In the same way, tin, lead, and iron are perfect in their own species, yet in another sense are not perfect, are at once noble and ignoble, and still have not yet achieved the highest possibilities of their nature . . . just as the human embryo and the little children are complete and perfect as far as they go, but have not yet attained to their ultimate perfection . . .

Furthermore, Petrus points out that Nature only allows imperfect metals to exist for man's benefit:

The delay in their [base metals] development is caused by Nature for the sake of man, because the common metals can be turned into uses for which gold and silver could not be employed.118

However, through his art, the alchemist believed he could, like Nature, remove the hindrance (i. e., sulphur) that impeded a metal's development:

Health is restored to the body [metal] by Art, but the real agent is Nature, Art only supplying the necessary conditions under which Nature is to


work.119

As we can see, the alchemist identified Nature's work with perfection and renewal. Consequently, as ministers of Nature, the alchemists often thought of themselves as physicians who sought to heal the world's infirmities while they were also physically and spiritually renewed:

For art imitates nature and, in some respect, it corrects and surpasses her in the same manner the infirm is changed by the physician's industry.120

For the alchemists, this renewal manifested itself in both the perfection of base metals into gold and in the alleviation of all bodily diseases and ailments. Arnald of Villanova explains:

Nullus negligat finalem, praecipuam totius
Philosophiae matrem ab editis effodere, quae
hominem ornat moribus, & ditat beneficiis,
auxiliatur pauperi, & etiam corpus incolume servat
& praebet etiam sanitatem.121


121 Arnald of Villanova, Rosarium philosophorum, p.
As a pseudoalchemist who does not recognize the role Nature assumes in alchemical theory, the Yeoman is reprimanded by Nature, and made infirm by his experimentation. Suffering both blindness and ill health, the Yeoman exists as an ironic inversion of the true adept who is cured of all infirmity by the Philosopher's Stone.\textsuperscript{122} According to Petrus Bonus, good eyesight was essential for the alchemist to perform each step of the experiment correctly:

The experience of sight is essential, more especially at the end of the decoction, when all superfluous matter has been removed, the artist will behold an awful and amazing splendour, the occultation of Sol [gold] in Luna [silver], the marriage of East and West, the union of heaven and earth, and the conjunction, as the ancients tell us, of the spiritual with the corporeal.\textsuperscript{123}

Likewise, Bonus adds:

Hence it is all but impossible, as we may learn from Geber in his Sum of Perfection, for a blind

662.

\textsuperscript{122} Similarly, in Canto XXIX of the Inferno, Dante characterizes the counterfeitors (pseudoalchemists) as lepers to illustrate how these men inverted the true alchemical process. Instead of acquiring the perfect health of the true adept, Dante's alchemists, like the Yeoman, suffer the degeneration of their bodies.

\textsuperscript{123} Petrus Bonus, \textit{The New Pearl of Great Price}, p. 133.
man, or one whose sense of touch is defective, or for a man without hands, to be successful in our magistry. 124

Although the Yeoman's blindness may be one of the current reasons behind his inability to perform the alchemical magistry properly, we must ask ourselves whether, from the very beginning of his experimentation, blindness was a factor in his failure to attain the Philosopher's Stone. For the Yeoman informs the pilgrims that his blindness only occurred after he had engaged in alchemical practice for awhile. However, in reexamining the Yeoman's words, "And of my swynk [work] yet blered is myn eye," we can see that, since "blered" not only means blind, but also fooled, the Yeoman may have been blind—figuratively blind—from the very beginning of his experimentation. 125

Using images of sight as metaphors for knowledge, true alchemists consistently stressed that only the most clear-sighted (ingenious) men could successfully accomplish the magistry:

The difficulty of our [alchemists'] task is enhanced by the circumstance that we have to speak of our Art to the ignorant and the scornful, and

125 Paul Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," PMLA 71 (1956), 231.
are thus in the position of a painter who should attempt to explain nice shades and differences of colour to the colour-blind . . . 126

Furthermore, since alchemists needed to familiarize themselves with ancient and contemporary authorities, who wrote allegorically, they also understood sight in relation to a faculty for interpretation:

There must be a profound natural faculty for interpreting the significance of these symbols and analogies of the philosophers, which in one place have one meaning and in another a different. For, as Morien tells us, all books on alchemy are written figuratively. 127

Confused by the alchemists' figurative language, the Yeoman despairs at the complete inaccessibility of the alchemical texts he has examined:

In lernyng of this elvysshe nyce loore,
Al is veyn, and parde, muchel moore.
To lerne a lewed man this subtiltee--
Fy, spek nat therof, for it wol nat bee.

(11. 842-47)

Dependent upon the Canon, a failure himself, for instruc-

tion, unable to interpret alchemical texts, and, consequently, ignorant of alchemical theory, the Yeoman has engaged in his experimentation while being figuratively blind to both the correct procedure and spiritual significance of alchemy. Ironically, by using incorrect procedure, the Yeoman has literally transformed his figurative blindness into physical blindness.

Considering that in the "General Prologue" Chaucer describes the pilgrims' physical traits partly as a means of externalizing either their virtues or vices, the Yeoman's blindness may likewise be a sign that he suffers from spiritual corruption. True alchemists ardently believed that no man could successfully transmute base metal into gold unless he lived an ascetic life of faith, piety and humility. In fact, alchemists believed that the true adepts were chosen by God, and that alchemical texts were written figuratively lest the secret of transmutation fall into the wrong hands:

... but the Sages have expressed their knowledge in mysterious terms in order that it might be known to no person except such as were chosen by God himself ... It has been set forth by the Sages in the most perplexing and misleading manner, in order to baffle foolish and idly curious persons, who look rather at the sound than at the meaning of what is said.128
An unremorseful con-artist and thief, the Yeoman has hardly lived the life of an ascetic. Yet, the avarice, wrath, and pride that he exhibits throughout the prologue and first part of his tale are signs of his spiritual corruption, not the sources of the corruption itself. In *On Nature and Grace*, Augustine's comparison of free will without grace to an eye that is blind reminds us that the true source of the Yeoman's corruption is a lack of faith in God. For, obsessed with the Philosopher's Stone's potential to transmute all base metal into gold, the Yeoman has erected alchemy as his idol, and allowed the pursuit of this science to lead him into deadly sin. Alchemists themselves warned the novice against exhausting his own wealth or compromising his morals for the sake of financing the experiment:

> If what you seek is found in the dung, take it.
> But if you do not find it, do not reach for your purse, for anything bought at great price is found to be false in the craft of this operation.


129 Significantly, the Yeoman is remorseful only insofar as he has wasted his time and health on an elusive science. Nowhere does he exhibit shame for misleading other people and stealing their gold.

Having abandoned God's commandments to finance his work, the Yeoman's following words, especially "by my savacioun," resonate with irony since his inability to succeed in his experimentation not only indicates that he and other pseudo-alchemists, literate or not, have failed at "multiplicacioun," but also that they have failed to gain salvation.

And konne he letterure or knoone he noon,
As in effect he shal fynde it al oon.
For bothe two, by my savacioun,
Concluden in multiplicacioun
Ylike wele, whan they han al ydo--
This is to seyn, they faillen bothe two.

(11. 846-51)

Since Albertus Magnus also lists "becoming deceitful" as a reason for an alchemist's failure, once again it becomes clear that, just as he is the source of his estrangement from God, the Canon's Yeoman is the source of his failure in alchemy.131

In addition to his blindness, which signifies mental, physical, and spiritual deprivation, the Yeoman bears many other traits, which, according to most alchemical texts, belong to the fraudulent alchemist.132 In De alchemia, Alber-

131 Albertus Magnus, Libellus de alchemia, p. 6.

132 Joseph Grennen has also discussed the relationship between the Yeoman's behavior and alchemical precepts or topoi common to medieval alchemy. However, Grennen
Albertus Magnus discusses four common precepts the alchemist must follow in order to succeed in the magistry. Significantly, the Yeoman breaks each of these. For example, according to Albertus' first precept, "the worker in this art should be silent and secret . . . he should offer nothing further in the way of explanation." Secrecy was a common theme among the alchemists, and, as Thomas Norton explains, crucial for the well-being of all men:

> For this magistry must always remain a secret science and the reason that compels us to be so careful is obvious. If any wicked man should learn to practise this art, the event would be fraught with great danger to Christendom.

The alchemist also needed to be silent about his work for his own safety, for common men could mistake him for a magician, an unsympathetic ecclesiastical superior could reprimand or punish him for spending his time unprofitably,

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maintains that, by making the Yeoman his representative alchemist, Chaucer ridicules these "sanctified notions" through the Yeoman's repetitive and mounting cliches of thought and expression. See "Chaucer and the Commonplaces of Alchemy," *Classica Mediaeval* 26 (1965), 306-33.

133 Tenney L. Davis, "The Advice of Albertus Magnus to the Ambitious Alchemist," *Journal of Chemical Education* 6 (1929), 977-78.

or a sovereign could imprison him and force him to make gold. However, the Yeoman reveals a willingness and compulsion to speak about alchemy even before he repudiates the Canon and is actually invited by the Host to tell a tale. In fact, the Yeoman's opening address to the pilgrims consists primarily of a series of thinly veiled allusions to the fact that he and the Canon are alchemists. As Trevor Whittock has pointed out, the Yeoman purposely identifies himself and the Canon as alchemists so that he can establish the pilgrim's confidence and "gull" them. By identifying himself as an alchemist and telling everything he knows about alchemy, the Yeoman reveals his complete disregard for the integrity of his science and immediately raises questions about his professionalism.

According to Albertus' second precept, the alchemist should have a house away from the sight of men so that he may experiment in secret and not draw attention to himself. As we have already seen, the Yeoman makes a point to draw attention to the fact he and the Canon are alchemists. Ironically, he does admit that he and the Canon dwell in secret, "Lurkynge in hernes and in lanes blynde, /Where as


thise robbours and thise theves by kynde/ Holden hir pryvee, 
fereful residence," (ll. 658-60). Yet, the Yeoman's words 
imp'y that he and the Canon, like thieves, dwell in secret 
places to hide themselves from the law, rather than live 
where they might disguise their identity as alchemists. 
Once again, the Yeoman inadvertently presents himself as a 
charlatan.

In his third precept, Albertus observes that the al-
chemist must take care against haste and be careful to 
perform each of his operations at the proper time. Like-
wise, Petrus Bonus warns:

Be patient and do not attempt to extract the 
Tincture in a hurry; haste burns up, instead of 
maturing and digesting, our substance. Bear in 
mind that the chief error in this Art is haste, 
which ends in the combustion of everything.137

Although the Yeoman never discusses the relationship between 
time and each stage of the experiment, his description of 
the explosions in his laboratory recalls Petrus' warning 
that haste results in the combustion of everything:

. . . Ful ofte it happeth so
The pot tobreketh, and farewel, al is go.
Thise metals been of so greet violence

Oure walles mowe nat make hem resistence.

(11. 906-909)

Moreover, the Yeoman's rush of language and angry exclama-
tions suggest a volatile temper that probably did not lend it-
self well to the patience required of an adept, for the magis-
tery could last anywhere from three, seven, to twelve years.138 Accordingly, the Yeoman's frustration that he had dwelled with the Canon for seven years without successfully performing the magistry intimates he does not have the pa-
tience to engage in an endeavor that legitimately could take almost twice as long to complete. Albertus' fourth precept that the alchemist should be sedulous and persever in his work also draws attention to how ill-suited the Yeoman is to alchemy, since he initially gives up the art in a fit of temper rather than from the sober realization of his own incapacities.

The Yeoman may have some experience in the practice of alchemy, but, as Petrus Bonus explained, practice without theory is meaningless: "Let theory suggest practice and correct practice by theory."139 Considering that throughout the Canterbury Tales Chaucer's use of scientific lore in-


including medicine, physiognomy, metascopy and astrology was in strict accord with the best scientific thought of the time, it is unlikely that the Yeoman's ignorance of alchemical theory represents Chaucer's own lack of knowledge regarding this science, especially since the Yeoman's narrative contains mistakes and misconceptions about alchemy that alchemists themselves commonly warned about. Furthermore, as noted earlier, we should recall that the Canon's Yeoman never once mentions the science of alchemy by name. This omission from his narrative is perhaps the most significant of all since the complete absence of the signifier "alchemy" in the tale suggests that Chaucer did not wish his readers to confuse the Canon's Yeoman's science with true alchemy, so he did not allow the Yeoman to designate his science as such.

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Chapter Three
The Canon's Yeoman as Tale-Teller:
The Artisan as Artist

And seith: bewar that in youre hate
ther go no lewed worde oute of youre
mouthe, for it is thinge that is dis-
honeste and shal engendre peyne.

--Hermes, The Dicts and Sayings of the
Philosophers, Helmingham Hall
Ms., 11. 11-13

As we have seen, the Canon's Yeoman's narrative
recounts and condemns the ways and means of false alche-
mists, not the endeavors of the true Hermetic brotherhood.
Yet the tale does more than make readers aware of how false
alchemists practice their art. For, Chaucer implicitly
builds the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" around the theme of peni-
tence, the subject of the "Parson's Tale," by constructing
the Yeoman's prologue as a mock confessio in which Harry
Bailly acts as an ironic version of the Father-Confessor
while the Yeoman, blaming the Canon for all the misfortunes
he has endured, struggles to become a penitent sinner. To
develop the tale's penitential theme in relation to alchemy,
Chaucer intimates that the Yeoman's conversion from an impenitent sinner to a penitent "new man" in Christ depends upon the Yeoman's recognition that he has sinned against both God and man because he has failed to understand the spiritual, or salvific, meaning of alchemy. Embittered by the poverty and illness he has suffered, the Yeoman initially shows no contrition for his sins of avarice and intellectual pride; rather he uses the Canon, who first introduced him to alchemy, as his scapegoat. However, by analyzing the Yeoman's confession in his prologue and prima pars in terms of his relationship with the Canon, we can see that the hopelessness and anger the Yeoman exhibits throughout the beginning of his tale figure forth his hidden fears about the scope of his own evil, not the scope of his hatred for the Canon. Unconsciously perceiving the Canon as an embodiment of his own sins, the Yeoman actually drives him away as a means of escaping from his own sinfulness.

In order to analyze the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" as a confessio, we must first examine how Chaucer explores the psychology of the impenitent sinner through the figure of the Canon's Yeoman. Unlike the other pilgrims who tell a tale, except for the Nun's Priest and Second Nun, the Canon's Yeoman lacks a narrative portrait like those developed for the Canterbury pilgrims in the General Prologue. Chaucer-the-Pilgrim, for example, comments upon
the Canon's mount, stature, and dress, but does not make any observations about the Yeoman. However, as the Host questions the Yeoman, the Yeoman creates his own narrative portrait. By so doing, the Yeoman draws attention to how language not only mirrors an individual's particular life experiences, but also discloses a man's spiritual condition despite himself.

In his prologue, the Canon's Yeoman describes himself as a wretched man stricken with ill health and poverty. He begins to talk specifically about himself when the Host exclaims, "Why artow so discoloured of thy face?" (CYT 1. 665). Somewhat abashed, the Yeoman explains,

"I am so used in the fyr to blowe
That it hath chaunged my color, I trowe.
I am nat wont in no mirour to prie,
But swynke soore and lerne multiplie. (CYT 11. 665-69)

141 In the "General Prologue," Chaucer-the-Pilgrim explains how he will fashion each pilgrim's portrait:

Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne,
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne. (GP 11. 37-42)

Bernard Huppe has pointed out that the portraits also include references to the pilgrims' use of language, and that their speech reveals their spiritual condition. See A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1967).
Most critics of the tale cite this exchange as the dramatic moment in which the Yeoman, shocked by Harry Bailly's question, becomes fully impressed with the horror of his condition, and consequently decides to expose the folly of alchemy and renounce his master.\footnote{This interpretation originates with Kittredge's observation that the Yeoman's "dull discontent rages into passionate denunciation" when Harry Bailly makes him aware that his face is discolored. See George L. Kittredge, "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale," \textit{Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature}, 30 (1910), 55. Although subsequent critics have noted that fear of damnation, loss of material good, and failure to transmute base metal into gold are factors behind the Yeoman's denunciation, they still understand his recognition of physical deformity as the primary motive behind his confession. Representative studies include, Helen Storm Corsa, \textit{Chaucer: Poet of Mirth and Morality} (Toronto: Forum House Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 222-29; Bruce L. Grenberg, "'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale': Boethian Wisdom and the Alchemists," \textit{Chaucer Review}, 1 (1966-67), 37-54; and Lawrence B. Ryan, "The Canon's Yeoman's Desperate Confession," \textit{Chaucer Review} 8 (1974), 297-310.} Later, as the Yeoman begins \textit{prima pars}, he refers once again to his appearance:

\begin{quote}
Ther I was wont to be right fressh and gay
Of clothynge and of oother good array,
Now may I were an hose upon myn heed;
And wher my colour was bothe fressh and reed,
Now is it wan and of a leden hewe--
Whoso it useth, soore shal he rewe
And of my swynk yet blered is myn eye.
\end{quote}

(CYT 11. 724-30)
Although the Yeoman refers twice to his changed color, it is doubtful that his denunciation of alchemy is primarily motivated by the Host's reference to his face. The Yeoman's admission, "I am nat wont in no mirour to prie" does not necessarily mean that he was unaware of his discolored complexion until the Host pointed it out to him. In fact, since the Yeoman later describes his complexion as pale and leaden, although the Host has not specified how the Yeoman's face is discolored, it is clear that the Yeoman has some initial grasp of how he looks. His narrative reveals he is bitter about his poverty rather than stunned by the revelation that his face is discolored.

Earlier in the prologue, when the Host asks the Yeoman, "Why is thy lord so sluttissh, I the preye," (CYT l. 636) and "Where dwelle ye, if it to telle be?" (CYT l. 656), he forces the Yeoman to admit openly that he and the Canon are poor and live in a squalid residence "Where as thise robbours and thise theves by kynde/ Holden hir pryvee, fereful residence" (CYT l. 659-60). The Host's lack of courtesy in dwelling upon the Canon's and Yeoman's poverty recalls the Man of Law's "poverty prologue" in which he notes,

Herke what is the sentence of the wise:
Bet is to dyen than have indigence;
Thy selve neighebor wol thee despise.
If thou be poure, farwel thy reverence.
Yet of the wise man take this sentence:
Alle the dayes of poure men been wikke.
Bewar, therfore, er thou come to that prikke!

(MLT, 11. 114-19)

Both the Canon and Yeoman illustrate the meaning of these words. Although they use courteous speech to gain the trust and respect of the pilgrims, their shoddy appearance only earns them the Host's derision. To make matters worse, the Yeoman reveals that this derision is well-founded, since, literally impoverished by their failure to transmute base metal into gold, he and the Canon dupe people into giving them gold for continued experimentation:

To muchel folk we doon illusioun,
And borwe gold, be it a pound or two,
Or ten, or twelve, or manye sommes mo,
And make hem wenen at the leeste weye
That of a pound we koude make tweye.

(CYT, 11. 673-77)

It has even been suggested that the Canon and Yeoman hastily overtake the Canterbury pilgrims in an attempt to get gold from them by stimulating their curiosity about alchemy and winning their confidence.143 Yet, failures in the alchemical art, the Canon and Yeoman lose all their gold in

143 Kittredge, p. 89.
the alchemical fire, and spend wicked days both in terms of their living conditions and in terms of their deceit. Since the Canon impoverishes others as well as himself in his vain attempts to make gold, his salutation to the pilgrims, "God save this joly compaignye!/Faste have I priked for youre sake" (CYT, ll. 583–84), ironically resonates with the Man of Law's warning, "Bewar, therefore, er thou come to that prikke!"

Although the Yeoman confesses that he and the Canon have swindled people, he expresses no contrition for his sins. Instead, he only expresses sorrow that he has failed to achieve the Philosopher's Stone. When the Yeoman explains that blowing the alchemical fire has caused his leaden hue, he despair that his desire to transmute base metal into gold has been frustrated:

We blondren evere and pouren in the fir,
And for al that we faille of oure desir,
For evere we lakken oure conclusioun. (CYT ll. 670–72)

Yet, these words also disclose that the Yeoman is deeply immersed in deadly sin, and has great need to become contrite. For, they suggest that the Yeoman is not only guilty of fraud, but also of idleness, wrath, pride, and envy. Since "blondren evere," and "pouren in the fir" mean to blunder and stare as well as to mix and pour, we sense that
the Yeoman does not really understand how to practice alchemy. By pursuing a science that eludes him, the Yeoman actually indulges in the deadly sin of idleness, or accidia, which not only signifies sluggishness or indolence, but also any useless or futile action(s). In addition, the image of the furnace suggests that the Yeoman also suffers from the deadly sins of wrath, pride and envy, for the Parson uses furnace imagery to describe these sins:

This ire is a ful greet plesaunce to the deevil, for it is the deevil's fourneys that is eschawfed with the fir of helle. For certes, right so as fir is moore mighty to destroyen ethely tynges than any oother element, right so ire is mighty to destroyen alle spiritueel thynges. . . . In this forseyde deevil's fourneys ther forgen three shrewes: pryde that ay bloweth and endreesseth the fir by chidyngnge and wikked wordes. Thanne state envye and holdeth the hoote iren upon the herte of man with a peire of longe toonges of long


145 The Yeoman's pursuit of alchemy may also be understood as the sin of presumption, a branch of pride, which the Parson describes as:

. . . when a man undertaketh an emprise that hym oughte not do, or elles that he may not do, and this is called surquidrie. (ParsT, l. 403)
rancour. And thanne stant the synne of contume-
lie, of strif and cheeste, and batereth and for-
geth by vileyns reprevynges. (Parst, 11. 546-55)
Thus, the Yeoman's references to blowing the alchemical fire
foreshadow how he will rage against alchemical practice,
take unwarranted pride in alchemical language, and show envy
of prosperous men.

Forced to admit that he is poor, ill, and a swindler,
the Canon's Yeoman voices his deepest fears about alchemy,

But that science is so fer us biforn,
We mowen nat, although we hadden sworn,
It overtake, it slit awey so faste.
It wole us maken beggers atte laste."
(CYT, 11. 680-83)
and angrily drives the Canon away from the pilgrims. When
the Canon flees "for verray sorwe and shame" (CYT, 1. 702)
after hearing the Yeoman confess to their failure as alche-
mists, the Yeoman curses the Canon with words that belie his
hatred for him:

Syn he is goon, the foule feend hym
quelle!
For nevere heerafter wol I with hymn meete
For peny ne for pound, I yow biheete.
He that me broghte first unto that game,
Er that he dye, sorwe have he and shame.
Filled with hate and, therefore, deadly sin, the Yeoman engages in words and actions that reveal his spiritual poverty. Like most impenitent sinners, however, the Yeoman initially fails to recognize his spiritual poverty or lack of charity (caritas) which constitutes the true source of his sorrow and pain. By presenting the Yeoman as a man obsessed with his worldly misfortunes and blind to his spiritual collapse into sin, Chaucer recalls I John 15-16,

If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world,

and defines the impenitent sinner as the man blinded by worldly matters. In addition, by characterizing the Yeoman as a sinner preoccupied with his literal poverty and blind to his spiritual poverty, Chaucer defines the penitential journey as a movement in which the sinner turns his atten-

146 Traditionally, the medieval Church accepted Augustine's assertion that "Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns anything except cupiditas." Augustine further explained, "I call 'charity' the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God; but 'cupidity' is a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God." See Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, p. 88.
tion from the plight of earthly cares and woes to the meaning of sin. In order to understand how the Yeoman comes to terms with his own sinfulness, we must examine how his relationships with the Host and Canon shape his penitential experience.

The Yeoman's poverty and ill health seem to be the source of his rage, yet the question remains why he had not left the Canon long before they met the Canterbury pilgrims. The only answer the Yeoman provides is "And yet for al my smert and al my grief,/ For al my sorwe, labour, and meschief,/ I koude nevere leve it [alchemy] in no wise" (CYT 11. 712-14). An analysis of the Yeoman's relationship with the Host reveals that poverty and ill health are significant but remote causes of the Yeoman's decision to quit the Canon. For, the primary catalyst or immediate cause of his denunciation is the Host's hostile attitude toward the Canon. We can attribute the Host's immediate contempt for the Canon to two major factors. When the Host first saw the Canon, he may have been reminded of the Pardoner, whom he had scathingly attacked earlier in the journey, since Canons, like Pardoners, had been attacked for engaging in

147 This movement may be compared to the Augustinian concept of piercing through the literal sign, or "letter" (here material poverty) to discover the hidden meaning, or "sentence" (here spiritual poverty) beneath.
the unauthorized sale of pardons. In addition, considering that the Canon is a picture of poverty, the Host undoubtedly concluded that he was a charlatan as soon as the Yeoman asserted that his master could pave the road to Canterbury with gold. Skeptical about the Yeoman's claims and wishing to spare the pilgrims from any swindling, the Host determines to expose the Canon for the imposter he is by forcing a confession from the talkative Yeoman.

Although the Host does not purposefully assume the role of a Father-Confessor, his questioning of the Yeoman nevertheless resembles the way a priest would examine the penitent to elicit a confession of sin. Consequently, the Host's and Yeoman's dialogue evokes the image of the confessional and introduces the theme of penitence. As we have seen, however, the Yeoman's confession to the Host is only a mock-confession since he shows no real understanding of or contrition for his sin. Instead, the Yeoman ultimately uses the Canon as his scapegoat, and blames him as well as alche-

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148 In 1387, for example, there was an open scandal concerning the Augustinian order of Canons at Roncesvalles who were engaged in the unauthorized sale of pardons. See Muriel Bowden, A Commentary On the General Prologue (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1962), p. 286.

149 For example, Mary Braswell examines the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" as an ironic treatment of penitential literature such as Robert of Flamborough's Liber Poenitentialis and the Ancrere Wisse in The Medieval Sinner (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1983), pp. 107-12.
my for the misfortunes he has endured. By methodically attacking the attributes of the Canon to expose him as a charlatan, the Host inadvertently helps the Yeoman to make the Canon a scapegoat. For example, when the Host asks the Yeoman, "Why is thy lord so sluttissh, I the preye," he encourages the Yeoman to confess to the Canon's shortcomings rather than to his own:

He is to wys, in feith, as I bileeve.
That that is overdoon, it wol nat preeve
Aright, as clerkes seyn; it is a vice.
Wherfore in that I holde hym lewed and nyce.
For whan a man hath over-greet a wit,
Ful oft hym happeth to mysusen it.
So dooth my lord, and that me greveth soore.
God it amende! I kan sey yow namoore.

(CYT, 11. 644-51)

Paradoxically, however, the Yeoman's mock confession ultimately becomes a true confession since his language reveals that he unconsciously begins to identify himself with the Canon and, therefore, confronts his own sinfulness through the figure of his master. By analyzing the Yeoman's confession in his prologue and prima pars in terms of his relationship with the Canon, we can see that the hopelessness and anger he exhibits throughout the beginning of his tale figures forth his own conflicting feelings about the scope of the Canon's and, consequently, his own evil.
Although the Yeoman initially admits to his hopelessness that the Canon will ever succeed at transmutation,

God help me so, for he schal never thee [prosper]"

But I wol nat avowe that I seye,

And therfore keep it secre, I yow preye--

(CYT 11. 641-43)

he expresses no overt hatred for his master. Instead, he describes the Canon as merely "lewed and nyce," words which imply ignorance and foolishness.150 Accordingly, each of the Yeoman's initial comments actually satirize the Canon's incompetency, or signify that the Canon is misguided rather than willfully evil.151 The Yeoman even seems a bit ambivalent about exposing the Canon as a failure when he asks the Host to keep this fact a secret. However, recognizing the Canon as a probable swindler and common criminal, the

150 Although "lewed" or "leued" can also mean wicked, dishonest, unchaste or lascivious according to the Middle English Dictionary, it is clear that in this instance the Canon's Yeoman uses the word to signify lack of intelligence or understanding, since the Canon's wit, not desire or will, is the subject of the passage. At the same time, however, these residual or repressed meanings of "lewed" create a substructure of signification in the text which foreshadows the Yeoman's later obsession with evil personified in the Canon of pars secunda.

151 Studies which have also noted how the Yeoman consistently speaks about the Canon in ironic terms to reveal him as a failure include, Jackson Campbell, "The 'Canon's Yeoman's Tale' as Imperfect Paradigm," Chaucer Review, 17 (1982), 171-82; John Gardner, "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale: An Interpretation," Philological Quarterly, 46 (1967), 1-17; and Corsa, p. 224.
Host skilfully redefines the Canon's character when he observes:

Syn of the konnyng of thy lord thow woost,
Telle how he dooth, I pray thee hertely,
Syn that he is so crafty and so sly.
Where dwelle ye, if it to telle be?

(CYT, 11. 653-56)

Earlier, trying to stimulate the Host's curiosity, the Yeoman had exclaimed, "Ye wolde wondre how wel and crafty/He koude werke. . . ." (CYT 1. 603) and "Hoost, of his craft somwhat I wol yow shewe" (CYT 1. 619). However, whereas the Yeoman spoke about the Canon's skill as a craftsman (admittedly with irony), the Host speaks about the Canon's skill as a trickster, using words which familiarly characterize Satan.152 No longer "lewed and nyce," but "crafty and so

152 For example, in the "Second Nun's Tale," the Second Nun describes Satan in terms of his slyness:
Wel oughten we to doon al oure entente
Lest that the feend thurgh ydelsen us hente.
For he that with his thousand cordes slye Continuelli us waiteth to biclappe, (SNT, 11. 6-9)

Similiarly, the Parson warns about Satan's craftiness:
Thanne comth accusynge, as whan man seketh occasioun to anoyen his neighebor, which that is lyk to the craft of the devel that waiteth bothe night and day to accusen us all.
(ParsT, 11. 510-5)
sly," the Canon assumes a diabolical dimension made especially stronger since the Yeoman next admits that he and the Canon lurk in corners and blind lanes like thieves who dare not show their presence. Yet, even when the Yeoman admits that he and the Canon are charlatans, literally thieves who take money from unwary benefactors, he voices no despair or anger that the Canon has led him into a life of sin. Instead, generalizing upon the way alchemists act toward other people, the Yeoman later implies that his hatred for the Canon originates in his realization that since the Canon introduced him to alchemy, he was a victim of the Canon's malice, rather than of his ignorance. 153

And whan he thurgh his madnesse and folye
Hath lost his owene good thurgh jupartye,
Thanne he exciteth oother folk therto
To lesen hir good as he hymself hath do.
For unto shrewes joye it is and ese
To have hir felawes in peyne and disese.

(CYT 11. 742-47)

Clearly the Host's words have stimulated the Yeoman to transform the Canon from a mere fool to a wily rascal who delights in ruining the lives of others. "Crafty and sly,"

153 This distinction between sins of malice and sins of ignorance was important in medieval thought since only sins of malice were the product of a will deliberately prepared to choose evil. See Braswell, p. 33.
the Canon assumes a malicious nature which foreshadows the
Black Canon of *pars secunda:*

> Swiche feendly thoghte in his herte impresse
> How Christes peple he may to meschief brygne.

*(CYT 11. 1071-72)*

The question remains, however, whether the Canon is a
diabolical figure deserving of the Yeoman's condemnation, or
whether he is a victim of the transformative power of the
Host's and Yeoman's language to recreate him as a figure for
Satan. 154 In the beginning of the tale, as Chaucer-the-

154 Esoteric alchemists drew special attention to the
relationship between language and conversion, which they
understood as man's literal transformation from a base to
holy (perfect) creature. The alchemical power of language
consisted in its ability to dramatize or even instigate this
conversion through a series of resignifications where
concrete words were substituted with abstract words to
embody the transition from a lower to higher reality. Since
the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" recounts the malpractices of
false alchemy, Chaucer inverts this linguistic movement to
show how language can also dramatize the conversion from a
base to even baser reality—in this case, the Canon's
conversion from a fool to a devil. This linguistic
conversion is significant in terms of the penitential
structure of the tale since medieval thinkers recognized
basically two kinds of sins: those committed through
ignorance and those committed through malice. According to
Augustine, for example, intention determined whether a sin
was venial or deadly. Yet, he also recognized that venial
sin usually became deadly sin because, inadvertently or not,
the man ignorant of divine truth extolled the nature of the
flesh above the nature of the soul (*De civitate Dei*, XIV,
5). Although the Canon takes money from people, since he
truly believes he can make more gold for both them and
himself, he has not yet actually transformed into a
malicious devil. He sins against his benefactors by being
ignorant of the futility of his work, not through malice.
The Host's and Yeoman's language, however, reflect the
Canon's potential transformation should his sins remain
Pilgrim speculates about the Canon's identity, we can sense how elusive a figure the Canon is:

And in myn herte to wondren I began
What that he was til that I understood
How that his cloke was sowed to his hood,
For which, whan I hadde longe avysed me,
I demed hym some chanoun for to be.

(CYT 11. 568-73)

Obviously Chaucer-the-Pilgrim would know a canon when he saw one, but this man perplexes him to the extent that only after some reflection can he identify him as one. The Host also draws our attention to the identity of the Canon when he asks the Yeoman, "Is he a clerk or noon? Telle what he is" (CYT 1. 616). Chaucer-the-Pilgrim's words, "At Boghtoun-under-Blee us gan atake/A man that clothed was in clothes blake,/ And undernethe he hadde a whyt surplys," (CYT 11. 556-58), imply that the Canon is wearing the prescribed dress for an Augustinian Canon Regular travelling beyond the cloister. The other orders of canons wore either white or red capes.\footnote{Marie Hamilton, "The Clerical Status of Chaucer's Alchemist," Speculum 16 (1941), p. 104.} Considering that the Austin canons were the most numerous of all the regular orders in England, it seems even more surprising that Chaucer-the-Pilgrim does
not immediately recognize him. However, the Host's observation that the Canon's outer garments are all dirty and torn (CYT 11. 635-36) suggests that the Canon is most likely an apostate who has been absent from his order for quite some time; thus, he may be practically unrecognizable. The Canon's apostasy is easily explained since in 1379 the English Chapter of Canon's Regular ordered that all Austin canons caught practicing alchemy were subject to excommunication, imprisonment, or death. As an alchemist, especially an unsuccessful alchemist who had deluded people into giving him gold for his experimentation, the Canon had good reason to flee his monastery.156

Instead of dwelling upon the Canon's slovenly state or the implications of his dress, Chaucer-the-Pilgrim takes great pleasure in his sweating:

But it was joye for to seen hym swete!
His forheed dropped as a stillatorie
Were ful of plantayne and of paritorie.

(CYT 11. 579-81)

Although these lines figure forth the heat the Canon must feel after his hard ride, they should not be read as allu-

156 Sherwood Taylor explains, "the apparent addiction of canons to alchemy was connected with the fact that their ecclesiastical duties were light and their means considerable." See The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry (New York: Henry Schuman, 1949).
sions to the fires of hell enveloping the Canon's apostasy. Nor can we assume that the Canon and his yeoman seek the Canterbury pilgrims for protection and disguise since they are madly fleeing from a wrathful victim just "fleeced." 157 Having spurred after the pilgrims for five miles from Ospringe and sweating like an alchemical distillatory, the Canon arrives as a literal embodiment of his laboratory. As Joseph Grennen has pointed out, Chaucer metaphorically implies from the very beginning of the tale that the Canon is just as much the subject of alchemical experimentation as the base metals lead and copper. 158 Similarly, by ascribing the character of sulphur to men who search for the Philosopher's Stone, the Canon's Yeoman implies that alchemists, like the metals they use, are the subject of their experimentation: 159

157 Baldwin, p. 242.


159 By identifying the alchemists with sulphur, the Canon's Yeoman makes the alchemists particularly ironic subjects of their experimentation since medieval alchemists believed that sulphur was the ingredient that corrupted metals or prohibited them from naturally becoming gold. See, for example, Petrus Bonus, The New Pearl of Great Price, trans. Arthur Edward Waite (London: 1894), p. 309. The Yeoman implies that these alchemists are not only the chief impediment to their goldmaking, but that they desperately need some agent of perfection like the Philosopher's Stone to purge them of their infirmities.
And everemoore where that evere they goon
Men may hem knowe by smel of brymstoon.

(CYT 11. 884-85)

Like the Yeoman, the Canon has been impoverished by his
goldmaking rather than made wealthier. As the subject of
his own experimentation, he has been transformed into an
inversion of the Philosopher's Stone. For instead of en-
nobling others the way the Philosopher's Stone was supposed
to ennoble base metal into gold, the Canon beggars men, re-
ducing them to the basest level of existence. The Yeoman
cleverly alludes to how the Canon affects people when he
tells the Host:

If ye hym knewe, it wolde be for your prov.
Ye wolde nat forgoon his aqueryntaunce
For muchel good, I dar leye in balaunce
Al that I have in my possesioun.

(CYT 11. 609-12)

Playing on the words "prow" and "aqueryntaunce," the Yeoman
describes the Canon as a profitable agent in the Host's
life. Yet, since the Yeoman possesses nothing, his words,
"For muchel good, I dar leye in balaunce/ Al that I have in
my possesioun," collapse the entire passage into bitter
sarcasm. The Canon may have the best intentions towards his
benefactors, and confidently believe he will ultimately dis-
cover the secret of transmutation, but as the Yeoman ob-
serves, "He that semeth the wiseste, by Jhesus,/ Is moost
fool whan it cometh to the preef," (CYT 11. 967-68).

The Yeoman's ironic conversation with the Host
foreshadows his ultimate condemnation of the Canon. Many
readers applaud the Yeoman's condemnation of his master,
convinced that the Yeoman's Canon is indeed malicious and
guilty of the same selfserving tricks played by the evil
Black Canon of pars secunda. However, the Yeoman stresses
that the Canon of pars secunda is definitely not his mas-
ter160:

This chanoun was my lord ye wolden weene?
Sire hoost, in feith, and by the hevenes queene,
It was another chanoun and nat hee,
That kan an hundred foold moore subtiltee.

(CYT 11. 1088-91)

Nevertheless, the Yeoman's Canon and the Canon of pars
secunda are often interpreted as a single figure for the

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160 Representative studies include, R. G. Baldwin, "The
Yeoman's Canons: A Conjecture," Journal of English and
Germanic Philology 61 (1962), 232-43. Baldwin argues that
the Yeoman denies the canon's are the same so he will not be
implicated by association in the Canon's dishonesty, and
that identifying the two canons as the same person resolves
the question of why the Yeoman hates his master so
intensely. Furthermore, Helen Corsa asserts that the
Yeoman's confusion of third person pronouns in prima pars
and pars secunda as well as his emotional involvement
suggests the two canons are the same person. See Chaucer:
Poet of Mirth and Morality (Toronto: Forum House
devil whom the Yeoman drives away to escape temporal and eternal punishment. Yet, if the Yeoman's assertion about the separate identities of the two Canons is accepted at face value, there is no textual evidence, other than the Host's reference to him as being "crafty and so sly," that the Yeoman's Canon is infernal. In *prima pars*, the Yeoman even seems to grow tender toward his master, presenting him as being as much of a victim of his own folly as the Yeoman himself. Instead of identifying the Yeoman's Canon as the same Canon in *pars secunda*, we should accept the Yeoman's claim that they are not the same person.


162 Although the Canon's Yeoman uses infernal imagery when he describes alchemists, and by implication, the Canon, in lines 886-89:

> For al the world they stynken as a goot;  
> Hir savour is so rammyssh and so hoot  
> That though a man a mile from hem be,  
> The savour wolde infecte hym, trusteth me,  

he does not necessarily equate them with devils. Instead, since this passage refers to Matthew 25:32 where Christ describes the Last Judgement as the separation of God's people--the sheep from the damned--the goats, the Yeoman articulates the alchemists' alienation from the Christian community and future punishment.

163 John Reidy compares the Yeoman's Canon to the Pardoner since both characters take holy institutions and attempt to generate capital from them. Yet, while exposing the greed of such people, Chaucer also shows them as pathetic, if not tragic, figures. See John Reidy, "Chaucer's Canon and the Unity of the Canterbury Tales," *PMLA* 80 (1965), 31-37.
and examine how each Canon differs from the other. For, such an examination reveals that the Canon of pars secunda is actually an archetypal figure who depicts the superlatively evil nature the Yeoman and his Canon could assume should they remain impenitent sinners.

Unlike the Canon of pars secunda, the Yeoman's Canon truly believes in the possibility of transmutation. Instead of relieving his poverty with the gold he obtains from unwary benefactors, he expends it all on his alchemical experiments. His commitment to alchemy is made particularly bittersweet in prima pars when the Yeoman describes how the Canon attempts to console his apprentices after their experiment has disastrously failed:

Of thse perils I wol be war eftsoone,
I am right siker that the pot was crazed.
Be as be may, be ye nothyng amased;
As usage is, lat swepe the floor as swithe.
Plukke up youre hertes and beeth glad and blithe.

(CYT 11. 934-39)

Not only does the Canon seek to calm his apprentices' anger and lift their spirits, but he also takes the blame for their mishap:

"Pees," quod my lord, "the nexte tyme I wol fonde
To bryngen oure craft al in another plite,
And but I do, sires, let me han the wite.  
There was defaute in somewhat, wel I woot."

(CYT 11. 951-55)

After the experiment fails with the breaking of the pot, and the other apprentices blame the Yeoman, saying that the fire was not blown correctly,

Somme seyde nay, it was on the blowying—
Thanne was I fered, for that was myn office.
"Straw," quod the thridde, "ye been lewed and nyce!
It was nat tempred as it oghte be," (CYT 11. 922-26)

the Canon absolves the Yeoman of any guilt he may have had for causing the experiment to fail by taking the blame himself. Contrary to being an infernal figure, here the Canon almost acts as a Christ-figure, taking upon himself the Yeoman's guilt.

Not only does the Yeoman describe the Canon as a Christ-figure here, but he also intimates that he identifies with the Canon. For, the third apprentice's words to the Yeoman, "Ye been lewed and nyce," together with the Yeoman's own admission, "I am a lewed man" (CYT 1. 787) reflexively refer to the Yeoman's words about the Canon, "I holde hym lewed and nyce," and illustrate how the Yeoman describes the Canon with the same words that signify himself.164  Like-
wise, in lines 665-81 when the Yeoman initially describes his failure to transmute base metals into gold, he shifts from first person "I" to third person "We," despite no change in antecedent, thereby merging his own experiences with alchemy and feelings of failure with those of the Canon. Thus, the ambivalence which the Yeoman expresses about the Canon, whether he is simply a fool or superlatively evil, reflects his own ambivalence about himself. Likewise, by driving away the Canon, the Yeoman attempts to drive away his own sins.

Like the "Pardoner's Tale," which also explores the psychology of sin, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" focuses on the two medieval classes of sins, vice and crime. Although avarice was usually regarded as the principal vice among alchemists, the Yeoman defines the Canon's vice as intellectual pride, "He is to wys, in feith, as I bileeve/. . . . Aright, as clerkes seyn; it is a vice," (CYT 11. 644 &

164 Analyzing the "General Prologue," Bernard Huppe has demonstrated how Chaucer often repeats words and phrases in varying contexts to achieve thematic characterization. See A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Albany: State University of New York, 1967).

165 In De doctrina Christiana, Augustine classified vice (*flagitium*) and crime (*facinus*) as follows:
That which uncontrolled cupidity does to corrupt the soul and its body is called a "vice;" what it does in such a way that someone else is harmed is called a "crime."
46). Later the Yeoman implies that he also suffers from this sin, "Oure elvysshe craft we semen wonder wise, Oure termes been so clergial and so queynte," (CYT 11. 751-52). In addition, despite his apology, "I am a lewed man," the Yeoman exhibits intellectual pride throughout his narrative by consistently rehearsing all alchemical facts which come to his mind even after he assures the pilgrims that he has finished with his exposition. It is this intellectual pride which blinds the Canon and the Yeoman to the hopelessness of their alchemical experimentation, and leads them to commit crimes against others. As victims of pride, the Canon and Yeoman also illustrate the Parson's words that pride is the primary source of all sin,

> Of the roote of thise severe synnes thanne is pride the general root of alle harmes, for of this roote spryngen certein braunches, as ire, envye, accidie or slewthe, avarice or coveitise (to commune understondynge), glotomye, and lecherye.

(ParsT, 1. 388)

As Augustine also explained, "When vices have emptied the soul and led it to a kind of extreme hunger, it leaps into crimes by means of which impediments to the vices may be removed or the vices themselves sustained."166 As long as

166 Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, p. 89.
the Canon and the Yeoman can delude people into giving them gold, they can sustain their intellectual pride by indulging in their experimentation. However, the Host's challenge to the Yeoman, "Why is they lord so sluttish, I the preye,/. . . . If that his dede accorde with they speche?" (CYT 11. 636 & 37) forces the Yeoman to admit that his assertions about the Canon's power to make gold are lies. The Host's words, "If that his dede accorde with they speche," recall both Chaucer-the-Pilgrim's and the Manciple's observation that words must signify truly--"The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede," (GP 11. 742)--"The word moost cosyn be to the werk-yng." (MancT 1. 210).167 Unable to delude the Host, the Yeoman resolves to reconcile his lies with reality.

Seeking to clarify the meaning of his experiences with the Canon, the Yeoman promises to abandon his lies and reveal the truth about alchemy:

Now wolde God my wit myghte suffise
To tellen al that longeth to that art.
And nathelees yow wol I tellen part.
Syn that my lord is goon, I wol nat spare;
Swich thyng as that I knowe, I wol declare.
(CYT 11. 715-19)

167 The Canterbury Tales begins and ends with references that establish a literary aesthetic based upon the relationship between language and objective truth, or language and experience.
Yet, as we have seen, throughout his rambling discussion of alchemical terms, substances and procedures in prima pars, he actually says very little about alchemical theory. Instead, the Yeoman describes the characteristics of fraudulent alchemists, such as the Canon and himself, who pretend to a science that they have no real understanding of: "To lerne a lewed man this subtiltee--/Fy, spek nat therof, for it wol nat bee," (CYT 11. 844-45). Consequently, instead of depicting how the Yeoman comes to terms with the falseness of alchemy, prima pars and pars secunda actually reveal how he comes to terms with the falseness (evil) of his life.

The falseness of the Yeoman's life evolves from his inaccurate view of alchemy as mere goldmaking pursued for the accumulation of wealth. However, the Yeoman's reference to Arnald of Villanova's Rosarium philosophorum at the end of pars secunda indicates that he has some knowledge of true or spiritual alchemy. Similarly, his admission:

For unto Crist it [Philosopher's stone] is so lief and deere
That he wol nat that it discovered bee
But where it liketh to his deitee (CYT 11. 1467-69)
suggests that he is aware that, for many, alchemy was a sacred art. For example, in the Pretiosa margarita novella,
Petrus Bonus of Ferrara asserts "for men either discover it (alchemy) because they are holy, or it makes them holy."168 Ascetic faith, piety and humility were familiarly listed as requisites for the adept who engaged in an interior as well as an exterior magisterium:

Our art not only frees the body, but also the soul from the snares of servitude and bondage; it ennobles the rich, and comforts and relieves the poor.169

In addition, the true alchemist conceived of gold as the life of the soul, and in seeking to perfect base metals, sought to perfect himself.170

Failure in alchemy, on the other hand, was attributed to the alchemist's ignorance of alchemy's true meaning, and sinful motives, such as the illiberal love of gold, in pursuing the art.171 Obsessed with continuing their experimentation, whether through intellectual pride or avarice, both the Canon and Yeoman fail to understand the salvific nature of alchemy, and are thus idolaters according to the Augus-


169 Bonus, p. 139.


171 Bonus, p. 19.
tinian view that an idolater "is a slave to a sign, who uses or worships a significant thing without knowing what it signifies." 172 Although the Yeoman is ignorant that alchemy signifies salvation rather than mere gold production, his admission that alchemy is a gift from Christ suggests he understands to some degree that the alchemist should live a virtuous, Christian life. Unconsciously tormented by the opposition between how he should be as an alchemist and how he is, the Canon's Yeoman suffers from what Carl Jung's psychoanalytic studies of alchemy describe as the dissociation of the personality brought about by the conflict of incompatible tendencies. 173 Struggling with the Christian tension of opposites, or the reality of evil and its incompatibility with good, the Yeoman is engaged in the moral psychodrama which shaped alchemy from its very origins: the reconciliation of all oppositions, whether between good and evil, soul and body, male and female, or truth and illusion, which created disharmony in the physical world.

Unable to acknowledge and thus expiate his sins through the Host's parody of penance, the Yeoman projects his in-

172 Saint Augustine, De doctrina Christiana, p. 87.

173 In Psychology and Alchemy, Carl Jung explains how the symbolism of alchemy may be understood in relation to the "individuation" process, where "just as the dream compensates the conflicts of the conscious mind, so alchemy endeavors to fill in the gaps left by the Christian tension of opposites," p. 23.
tense inner conflicts upon the figure of the Canon. By using the Canon as a metaphor for himself, the Yeoman attempts to come to terms with his own evil. In order to confront the falseness of his life, however, the Yeoman must also confront how he has falsely understood alchemy. According to true or spiritual alchemists, each thing, whether word or object, bears in itself its opposite. As a result, since the Yeoman is the slave of a sign he understands "carnally" as mere goldmaking, he can only be set free from his "idolatry" by discovering the opposite or spiritual meaning of alchemy. To discover the spiritual meaning of alchemy, however, the Yeoman must grasp the ramifications of its carnal meaning (goldmaking) void of its spiritual signification (salvation), purge his mind of the sheerly carnal signification, and understand alchemy as a physical act with transcendent purposes: the reconciliation of physical with spiritual nature. By ending his tale with references to spiritual alchemy, the Yeoman indicates that, somehow through the telling of pars secunda, he has been converted from a raving goldmaker with a false view of alchemy to a sober philosopher affirming the truth of spiritual alchemy. In order to understand how the Yeoman experiences this conversion, we must examine pars secunda itself, and discover how Chaucer constructs the tale to imply that discourse itself is a kind of alchemy which mediates between man and God, physical and
spirtual reality, to communicate truth and enable the individual to change from the "old man" into the new.
Chapter Four

The Canon's Yeoman As New Man:

The False Alchemist Becomes True in *Pars Secunda*

Aurum betokeneth heer, owre Bodi than
The wych was brought to God and Man.
And Tus alleso owre Soul of lyfe,
Wyth Myraham owre Mercurye that ys hys Wyfe.
Here be the thre namys fayre and good
And alle thaye ben but one in mode.
Lyke as the Trinite ys but on,
Ryght so conclude the Phylosopheers Stone.

---Anonymous, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*

The Yeoman's narrative in his prologue and *prima pars* clearly reveals that he is ignorant of alchemical theory and has been living a lifestyle contrary to the precepts of true alchemists. Blind to these realities, however, the Yeoman blames the science of alchemy itself for his failure to achieve the Philosopher's Stone, and intimates that no one can discover the secret of transmutation. Yet, at the end of his tale, the Yeoman affirms that the Philosopher's Stone exists, and describes it as a gift which Christ reveals to those who please him. To understand why the Yeoman begins his tale condemning alchemical practice only to end his tale
advocating its divine sanction, we must remember that alchemy as well as alchemical language in general possesses a double meaning, either in bono, expressing morality, or in malo, expressing immorality, depending on whether the science is understood spiritually as a salvific act leading to knowledge of God or understood literally as goldmaking resulting in material wealth and power. 174 Throughout his prologue and prima pars, the Yeoman reveals not only his complete ignorance of alchemy's theoretical principles and his bondage to sin and estrangement from God, but also his in malo conception of alchemy as mere goldmaking. However, Chaucer depicts the Yeoman's moral regeneration evident at the end of pars secunda as a linguistic regeneration in which the Yeoman finally articulates the spiritual meaning of alchemy (in bono) by telling a tale that purges the Yeoman's mind of alchemy's literal (in malo) signification. 175

174 In De doctrina Christiana, Augustine discusses the principle of contrary signification by explaining that the same sign may be used to signify contrary things. Thus in Matthew 10:16, the word "serpent" has a good sense, or means "wisdom," whereas in 2 Corinthians 11:3, "serpent" has an evil sense, or means "temptor." See Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, p. 100. Likewise, Jaroslav Pelikan explains that "Synagogue" could be either an honorific title signifying pre-Christian believers, or could carry a pejorative connotation, as when Isidore prophesied that in the age of Antichrist, "the Synagogue will rage against the Church even more terribly than it persecuted the Christians at the time of the coming of the Savior." See Jaroslav Pelikan, The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300) (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), III, p. 37.

175 In the Doctrina christiana, Augustine explained
that language consists of two kinds of signs, *signum proprium*, or signs which signify literally, and *signum translatum*, or signs which signify figuratively. Whereas literal signs signify a particular object, figurative signs occur "when the thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else," (p. 60). Thus, the sign "ox" literally designates an animal while it can figuratively signify an evangelist, (p. 43). According to Augustine, literal and figurative signs in the Holy Scripture are distinguishable since "whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative," (p.88). These figurative signs, or metaphorical signification, express realities "that are themselves intrinsically obscure and difficult to understand," (79) such as the Trinity or other mysteries of the Faith. Since figurative language expresses spiritual realities, Augustine warned that figurative expressions must not be taken literally, "What the Apostle says pertains to this problem, 'For the letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth,' (2 Cor. 3:6). That is, when that which is said figuratively is taken as though it were literal, it is understood carnally... There is a miserable servitude of the spirit in this habit of taking signs for things, so that one is not able to raise the eye of the mind above things that are corporal and created to drink in eternal light," (p. 84) Although Augustine was hesitant to use allegorical exegesis to uncover the meaning of obscure passages in pagan texts, he noted that such exegesis was warranted wherever a text was written in relation to Divine Inspiration, (p. xiv). See, Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., (Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1958). True alchemists, believing they were inspired by God, likewise wrote and interpreted their texts utilizing both literal and figurative signs. Petrus Bonus explains,

In the same way as ordinary men in common parlance express their meaning proverbially and metaphorically clothing a plain thought in figurative language, so our Sages find it necessary to describe the secret of secrets, and mystery of mysteries, in figurative terms, so that it may remain a profound arcanum to the wicked, the arrogant, the profane, and all to whom God Himself will not permit it to be revealed.

Whereas the alchemists used literal signs to designate materials and processes in the alchemical experiment, they used figurative signs to express the salvific nature of
In the *Confessiones*, Augustine links conversion to a linguistic rejuvenation where a "false rhetoric is rejected in favor of a rhetoric put to the service of God and men." To explore how the Yeoman accomplishes his linguistic regeneration, Chaucer embodies the stages of alchemical transmutation, *separatio*, *divisio*, *putrefactio*, *mortificatio*, and *solutio*, in the Yeoman's narrative; therefore, implying that discourse itself is a kind of alchemy that manipulates the imagination to effect change much like the alchemist manipulates the *prima materia* to transform base metal into gold. Thus, as the Yeoman moves from a literal to spiritual understanding of alchemy, he also transforms from a virtually inarticulate artisan, or worker of metals, in *prima pars* to a sophisticated artist, or weaver of myth, in *pars secunda*.

their quest. Just as Augustine warned Biblical exegetes not to understand figurative expressions literally, alchemists warned each other not to understand alchemy according to a literal interpretation,

> How, then, shall we, by considering their words only superficially, and according to their literal interpretation, fathom the profound knowledge required for the practical operations of this Magistry?

See Petrus Bonus, *The New Pearl of Great Price*, trans. Arthur E. Waite, (New York: Arno Press, 1974), pp. 151 and 112. As we have seen, the Canon's Yeoman begins his tale espousing only a literal understanding of alchemy as goldmaking. However, as the Yeoman tells his tale and analyzes his art, he discovers the spiritual meaning of alchemy underneath its literal signification.

As Joseph Grennen has pointed out, the structure of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" duplicates the typical structure of an alchemical treatise, which begins with a "melange of directions and ingredients, and ends with an allegory purporting to describe transmutation."177 In other words, the typical alchemical treatise begins with literal signs that designate the materials and processes used to transmute base metal into gold, and ends with figurative signs that metaphorically express the spiritual ennoblement achieved at the end of the experiment. Likewise, the Yeoman's prologue and prima pars present a literal description of alchemical reagents, utensils, and processes, while pars secunda ends with two figurative passages that not only symbolically disclose the formula for transmutation, but also express the salvific nature of alchemy as the reconciliation of all opposites. However, the similarities between the tale and the typical alchemical treatise go beyond surface structure, for the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" implicitly recreates the entire alchemical opus through the dynamics of the Yeoman's narrative. To resolve the opposition between physical (carinal) and spiritual nature,178 the true alchemist, believing that


178 Each stage of the alchemical experiment is directed toward the complete conjunction of opposites where the elements are changed one into the other, water into earth, and air into fire. According to Petrus Bonus, the alchemist
inanimate objects possessed a soul, sought to perfect base metals such as lead or copper through a chemical process of separatio, divisio, putrefactio, mortificatio, and solutio. Basically, these operations consisted of separating the metal's soul from its body, perfecting its body, and finally reuniting the metal's spirit with its body. By engaging in this redemption of matter, the alchemist expected to experience a complementary conversion, or mystical regeneration.

Since the true alchemist expected to achieve mystical regeneration through his experimentation, many historians now agree that the alchemist, more so than the Philosopher's Stone, was the true subject of alchemy. 179 Consequently,

must purify the body before the body can be reconciled with the soul: "The spirit cannot enter the body until it is purified; but when purification has taken place, we may expect the permanent conjunction of the corporeal and spiritual principles." Once this permanent conjunction is achieved, "earthly things are united to heavenly things by God's will," and the Philosopher's Stone is achieved. Consequently, Morienus describes the composition of the Stone as "an alternation of natures, a wondrous mingling of heat with cold, of fire and water, and wetness with dryness, of air with earth, in exact proportions." See Petrus Bonus, The New Pearl of Great Price, trans. Arthur E. Waite (New York: Arno Press, 1974), pp. 145-46, and Morienus, A Testament of Alchemy, trans. Lee Stavenhagen (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1974), p. 33.

179 This concept of the alchemist as the subject of the alchemical endeavor finds expression in many alchemical texts. For example, in the Testament of Alchemy, Morienus explains that the matter of the Philosopher's Stone is within the alchemist:

King Khalid said: "Tell me where the sources of this thing [Philosopher's Stone] are, whence it may be gathered as there is need of it."
many recent studies of alchemy adopt a psychoanalytic view of the science, and describe it in relation to the alchemist's inner experience.\textsuperscript{180} For example, Mircea Eliade ex-

\begin{quote}
Then he [Morienus] raised his head and spoke: "Truly, this matter is that created by God which is firmly captive within you yourself, inseparable from you, wherever you be, and any creature of God deprived of it will die.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{180} Traditionally, alchemy was studied primarily as an experimental science that was predominantly artisanal in nature. Consequently, most early and comprehensive studies of alchemy, such as Hermann F. Kopp, \textit{Geschichte der Chemie} (Braunschweig, 1843-1847) 4; Edmund O. Von Lippmann, \textit{Entstehung und Ausbreitung der Alchemie} (Berlin: J. Springer, 1919-1931) 2; and Pierre Berthelot, \textit{Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs} (Paris: 1888), 3, and \textit{Introduction a l'étude de la chimie des anciens et du moyen age} (Paris: 1889), interpret alchemy within scientific terms, and disregard alchemical allegory suggesting an occult bias as meaningless jargon. However, early non-traditional approaches to alchemy such as Margaret Atwood's \textit{Suggestive Inquiry}, Eliphas Levi's \textit{Dogme et Rituel}, and General E. A. Hitchcock's \textit{Remarks on Alchemy and the Alchemists}, nevertheless, define alchemy as a spiritual art whose allegory acts as a veil to hide its mystical intent, or concern with spiritual regeneration. Today, most influential historians of alchemy, such as Sherwood Taylor, John Read, Titus Burckhardt, Arthur Hopkins, Serge Hutin, and H. J. Sheppard, concede that alchemy must be understood as both an experimental science and as a spiritual art, in which the literal transmutation of base metal into gold was pursued to provide the alchemist with access to the full meaning of revelation. Herbert Silberer (1881-1923) published \textit{Probleme der Mystik und ihrer Symbolik}, the first psychoanalytic interpretation of alchemy. Inquiring into a parable from \textit{Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer}, an eighteenth century alchemical text, Silberer concluded that alchemical symbolism, like dream symbolism, acts as a voice for the inner life of the individual. Likewise, Carl Jung, in \textit{Psychology and Alchemy, Mysterium Coniunctionis}, and \textit{Alchemical Studies}, interprets alchemy psychoanalytically, relating the concepts of alchemy to the individuation.
In Western alchemy the "prima materia" should not be understood merely as a primordial condition of the substance, but also as an inner experience of the alchemist... The alchemist, then, goes through the opus forging himself a new personality.  

Similarly, Rainier Zimmerman relates the opus to self-realization:

... in alchemy there is a competition of antagonistic powers and tendencies within chaos (prima materia). The important point is the process in which man seeks psychic wholeness. Struck by the numerous connections between individual dream symbolism and medieval alchemy, Jung concludes:

The real nature of matter was unknown to the alchemist: he knew it only in hints. In seeking to explore it he projected the unconscious into the darkness of matter in order to illuminate it. In order to explain the mystery of matter he projected yet another mystery--his own unknown psychic background.


search for the procedure which can retransform chaos into a new harmony of powers . . . In psychology there is a competition of incompatible tendencies which lead to a progressive dissociation of the personality. The psychoanalytic technique is that of religio (going back to the origin) in order to localize the prima materia, and to try than by some suitable therapy to re-unify the opposing elements.182

Considering that alchemy prospered for almost one thousand years despite little evidence, except for personal testimonials, that the Philosopher's Stone had ever been achieved, historians have even speculated that alchemists did not become disillusioned with their science since they were playing with words as much as they were playing with substances, and achieved renewal, or self-realization, by transferring their unconscious psyches onto the chemical processes, and resolving their repressed anxieties and frustrations through alchemical language.183

Significantly, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is told by an alchemist who literally plays with words to resolve his


anxieties about sin and damnation. As we have seen, the Yeoman is unable to confront his own guilt, so he projects his inner conflicts upon the Canon. Likewise, historians speculate that the alchemist projected his unconscious psychic contents into the *prima materia* to "liberate those meaningful aspects of the personality that were unconsciously concretized through projection in the material world." 184 Using his narrative to externalize his obsession with sin and guilt, the Yeoman linguistically engages in the stages of alchemical transmutation. Using the Canon as a metaphor for himself in *prima pars*, the Yeoman separates (*separatio*) from the Canon and detaches himself from his experiences to objectively grasp how his literal conception and practice of alchemy has been synonymous with intellectual pride and avarice. Since his intellectual pride and avarice have moved him to commit the crime of fraud against others, the Yeoman's narrative divides (*divisio*) at *pars secunda* to explore how intellectual pride and avarice grow into malice, which, in the *Inferno*, Dante designated as the superlative state of evil or corruption. 185

184 Kugler, p. 107.

185 In *Inferno* Canto XXIX, the tenth and final bolgia of Malebolge, Dante describes the punishments of fraudulent alchemists guilty of the sin of counterfeiting. Like the alchemists in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," Dante's alchemists are frauds who do not make gold, but merely counterfeit the alchemical experiment. As John D. Sinclair has pointed out in his notes on Canto XXIX,
In pars secunda, the Canon's transformation into a satanic figure presents this corruption within mythic dimensions that recall the fall of man, which, in turn, recalls its opposite myth, the redemption of man. Significantly, within Christian mythology, the smith or worker of metals was often associated with the devil and popularly shown as the devil splitting flames. The Black Canon stooping over his furnace in lines 1231-39 is archetypal of this image. By confronting Satan's reality through the figure of the Black Canon, however, the Yeoman is purged (puerfectio) of his slavery to goldmaking and redirected to Christ. Paradoxically, Christ was also called the "master of the fire," since he rejuvenates man through the purging fires of His love. The Yeoman's subsequent allegorical

"... it has to be remembered that Aquinas sharply distinguished between two kinds of alchemy; on the one hand, the serious search for a method of transforming lower metals into gold and silver, an early stage of chemistry, and, on the other, a rascally quackery which throre on men's ignorance and greed. It is, of course, the latter that is punished here."


187 In the Purgatorio, for example, Dante must pass through a wall of flames to enter the Garden of Eden:

And now we had come to the last circuit and had turned to the right and were intent on another
exposition of esoteric alchemical principles found in the Rosarium philosophorum indicates he has mortified (mortificatio) his literal (carnal) understanding of alchemy and apprehended its spiritual significance. Finally, he distinguishes his inner conflicts (solutio) through his resolve to forsake goldmaking and follow Christ's will:

For whoso maketh God his adversarie,
As for to werken anythyng in contrarie
Of his wil, certes never shal he thryve,

(CYT 11. 1476-79)

Despite the fact that Chaucer presents the Yeoman as a man in the middle of an intellectual, emotional, and moral crisis, no one has ever attempted a psychoanalytic study of the tale to determine how the theme of alchemical trans-

care. There the bank shoots forth flames and the edge of the terrace sends a blast upwards . . . . I saw spirits walking through the flames, so that I kept looking at them and at my steps . . . . With such treatment and with such fare must the last wound [lust] of all be healed.

E gia venuto all' ultima tortura
s'era per noi, e volto alla 'nan destra,
ed eravamo attenti ad altra cura.
Quivi la ripa fiamma in furor balestra,
e la cornice spira fiato in suso
che la reflette e via da lei sequestra;
. . . . e vidi spirti per la fiamma andando;
per ch' io guardava a loro e a' miei passi
. . . . con tal cura conviene e con t'ai pasti
che la piaga da sezzo si ricucia.

mutation relates to the Yeoman's manipulation of language. Instead, impressed with the tale's realism, critics have preferred to explore how contemporary accounts of alchemical practice together with the Yeoman's past experiences with alchemy shape his narrative. If, however, we accept that the purpose of realistic fiction is to "minimize the subjective distortions and distractions of language in order to depict truth objectively," we must ask whether the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" may be properly called realistic, and whether plot and character are the central issues of the tale. As Robert Jordon has noted, Chaucer's consciousness of language may actually unite him

188 The only study of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" which approaches a psychological interpretation of the tale is Trevor Whittock's in A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 262-79. Here, Whittock observes that prima pars mirrors the internal process of the Yeoman's mental and emotional development, while pars secunda deals with temptation and evil, or how alchemy is a symptom of vanity and venial sin.

189 Discussing the pilgrims as viable images of the contemporary human condition, Charles Muscatine put forth the widely accepted view that the Yeoman's characterization is extremely naturalistic and his tale functions as an "unspiritual mass of 'realism'" to present alchemy as a cursed, soulless striving with matter, or as blind materialism. At the same time, Muscatine understands the tale's realism as ultimately symbolic of the "chaos of matter, refuse and excrement" in the universe of technology. See Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 217-19.

with postmodernism and disassociate him from realism, thereby making language, perception, and the role of the writer the central issues in his writing rather than plot and character. For, as we have seen, the Yeoman suffers poverty, ill health, and estrangement from God because, unable to interpret the figurative meaning of alchemical texts, he has engaged in a false alchemy, and pursued it for sheerly carnal ends. However, Augustine explained that a "carnal" (literal) understanding of signs could be overcome by careful scrutiny:

But by following certain traces he may come to the hidden sense without any error, or at least he will not fall into the absurdity of wicked meanings.

Consequently, as the Canon's Yeoman psychologically par-

191 Jordan, p. 102.

192 Augustine noted that things in themselves do not make a man sin; rather, a man's motive or intention in using a thing determines whether he sins or not:

For in all things of this kind we are to be commended or reprimanded, not because of the nature of the things which we use, but because of the motive in using them and the way in which they are desired.

See Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, p. 91. Thus, the Yeoman's pursuit of alchemy is sinful because he practices the science out of avarice and self-conceit.

ticipates in the alchemical stages *separatio*, *divisio*, *putrefactio*, *mortificatio*, and *solutio* through his narrative, he likewise engages in a series of narrative resignifications in which the sign "gold" loses its literal meaning and accrues in figurative meaning until it signifies Christ. This narrative movement from the concrete to the abstract embodies the principle of Alchemical Typology, in which earthly realities are expressed in abstract terms to signify the spiritualization of matter as it is literally transformed and perfected in the alchemical process.

The Canon's Yeoman first mentions gold at the beginning of his narrative when he asserts:

> But al his [Canon's] craft ye may nat wite at me,
> And somwhat helpe I yet to his wirkyng--
> That al this ground on which we been ridyng
> Til that we come to Caunterbury toun,
> He koude al clene turnen up so doun,
> And pave it al of silver and of gold!

(CYT 11. 620-26)

Hoping to beguile the pilgrims into lending the Canon and himself some gold, the Yeoman makes a fantastic claim, in which he reveals not only his literal understanding of alchemy as the skill to make mineral gold, but also his obsession with creating great quantities of gold. For the Yeoman does not merely content himself with the promise that the
Canon can make one pound of gold into two\textsuperscript{194}; he imagines the entire road of Canterbury turned to gold. Although the Yeoman's words possess ironic significance, considering that the Yeoman knows the Canon is a failure, they, nevertheless, also figure forth how the Yeoman seriously perceives alchemical knowledge ("subtilitee" (l. 620) and "craft") as the servant of gold. Yet, the Yeoman inadvertently reveals the danger of his perspective when he describes the Canterbury road as being turned "up so doun," a phrase which appears in both the "Knight's Tale" and "Parson's Tale" to signify the confusion brought about by sin.\textsuperscript{195} Thus, the Yeoman's words

\begin{quote}
194 Later in his prologue, the Yeoman reveals that he usually aroused a prospective benefactor's interest by claiming that the Canon could change one pound of gold into two:

To muchel folk we doon illusioun,
And borwe gold, be it a pound or two,
Or ten, or twelve, or manye sommes mo,
And make hem wenen at the leeste weye
That of a pound we koude make tweye. (CYT 11. 673-77)

By telling the Canterbury pilgrims that the Canon can actually transform the entire Canterbury road to gold, the Yeoman inadvertently reveals his obsession with gold, and indulges in a degree of wish-fulfillment.

195 The Canterbury Tales, begin and end with references to a world turned "up so doun." For example, in the "Knight's Tale," Arcite's transformation from weal to woe is described in terms of a "loveris maladye," in which "turned was al up so doun," (KntT 11. 1373-77). At the close of the Canterbury Tales, the Parson illuminates the meaning of this phrase when he explains that sin, which causes man to rebel against God, disrupts the natural order of creation:

But soothly whan man synneth, al this ordre or ordinaunce is turned upsodoun. (ParsT 11. 260-65)
\end{quote}
actually intimate that instead of perfecting nature, the Canon's "subtilitiee" and "craft," born of avarice and pride, only create a false vision which disrupts the natural harmony of creation. With his eyes literally focused upon a road he imagines as earthly treasure, the Yeoman himself is "up so doun" and reminiscent of the beast in "Balade de Bon Conseil," whom Chaucer scolds for diverting his gaze from God to the world:

Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of this stall!

Know this country, look up, thank God of all; 

(11. 18-19)

The theme of confusion, or a world turned "up so doun," continues throughout the Yeoman's narrative, until it becomes the basis for pars secunda:

Therof no for; I wol procede as now,
And telle forth my tale of the chanoun
That broghte this preest to confusioun.

(CYT 11. 1019-21)

Although the Yeoman initially fantasizes about turning the Canterbury road to gold, the Host soon forces him to face how poverty, illness, and misbegotten dreams of gold-making have wrought confusion in his life. Humiliated by his poverty and illness, the Yeoman soon relinquishes his dreams of power and wealth, and turns his attention to the
meaning that gold has had in his life. Upon reflection, the Yeoman ceases to equate gold with prosperity since, ironically, his accumulation of gold has only caused him to fall deeper and deeper into debt:

And yet I am endetted so therby
Of gold that I have borwed, trewely,
That whil I lyve I shal it quite nevere.

(CYT 11. 734-36)

Whereas the Yeoman begins his prologue understanding gold as a sign of prosperity, he, paradoxically, ends his prologue identifying it with enormous debt, or poverty. Having lost all of his gold in the alchemical fire, the Yeoman bitterly faces the transience of all earthly things, and quits the Canon, who can not give him the secret to perpetual wealth. By separating (separatio) from the Canon, the Yeoman enables himself to abandon his fantasies about alchemy (turning the Canterbury road to gold), and explore the meaning alchemy has really had in his life.

In prima pars, as the Yeoman begins to grasp how his conception and practice of alchemy has been based upon intellectual pride and avarice, he ceases to use the term gold solely as a means of signifying material possession or lack of possession. Instead, he begins to explore the figurative meanings of gold. For example, describing the relationship between the planets and the alchemical experiment, the Yeo-
man explains, "The bodyes sevne eek, lo, hem heere anoon: Sol gold is, and Luna silver we threpe, (CYT 11. 825-26). Although the Yeoman does not explain here the significance of "Sol" as a symbol for gold, his recollection of the alchemical symbol used to signify gold intimates that he is moving in the right direction to reach a spiritual understanding of alchemy. For the alchemists used the sign "Sol" in order to signify that their gold was not merely mineral gold, but revealed wisdom.196 Significantly, when the Yeoman finishes prima pars, he despairs over the lack of wisdom his fellow alchemists have shown:

And in oure madnesse everemoore we rave.
And whan we been togidres everichoon,
Every man semeth a Salomon.
But al thyng which that shyneth as the gold
Nis nat good, what so men clappe or crye.

(CYT 11. 960-65)

After reflecting on his failure as an alchemist as well as the "madnesse" (CYT 1. 959) of his fellow alchemists, the

196 H. J. Sheppard has noted that medieval alchemists accepted yellow as a signifier for divinity, and cited Song of Songs 5:11 as an example:

My beloved is fair and ruddy,
a paragon among ten thousand.
His head is gold, finest gold;
his locks are like palm-fronds.

Yeoman apprehends that gold means more than just mineral gold, and uses this term metaphorically to conclude that appearances can be misleading. Having attained this degree of insight, the Yeoman divides (divisio) his narrative into pars secunda, and explores the danger of deceiving appearances by telling a tale about an evil Canon who pretends to lead men to prosperity, but actually leads them down the road to hell.

As the Yeoman shifts from a literal to figurative use of the signifier "gold," his narrative also changes from personal narrative to universal myth. Having recognized the danger of avarice, "But al thyng which that shyneth as the gold / Nis nat good," the Yeoman next tells a tale that implicitly recounts why he first fell into deadly sin through the alchemical art.197 The Yeoman's account of the greedy priest gulled by a swindling alchemist, however, must not be understood as a thinly disguised account of his own gulling, since the Yeoman assures the pilgrims that his master and the Canon of pars secunda are not the same person:

This chanoun was my lord ye wolden weene?
Sire hoost, in feith, and by the hevenes queene,
It was another chanoun and nat hee,

That kan an hundred foold moore subtiltee.

(CYT 11. 1088-1091)

Considering that the Yeoman had earlier cursed his master for introducing him to alchemy in the first place, He that me broghte first unto that game, Er that he dye, sorwe have he and shame.

(CYT 11. 708-09)

it is doubtful that he would direct the pilgrims not to identify the evil Canon of pars secunda with his master unless they were not the same person.\textsuperscript{198} More fiend than human, the Canon of pars secunda actually embodies the Yeoman's fears about the false alchemist's superlatively evil nature. Thus, instead of reading pars secunda as a literal, though disguised, account of the Yeoman's life, we must understand the tale as a poetic representation of the Yeoman's thoughts and emotions previous to his fall into deadly sin. In the process of translating his own thoughts and emotions into fiction, the Yeoman actually universalizes his experiences, and ends up telling a tale which describes how every Christian's collapse into sin is a recreation of the Fall described in Genesis 3. By fictionally recreating

\textsuperscript{198} The Yeoman's master also differs significantly from the Canon in pars secunda, since he truly believes in transmutation and sincerely endeavors to create the Philosopher's Stone. For a discussion of the two Canons, see Chapter Four, pp. 20-24.
his fall into deadly sin, the Yeoman extends his metaphorical use of the signifier gold from a sign for deceiving appearances to a sign for the carnality that dams a man to hell. By confronting the reality of Satan behind all carnal desires, such as the desire for gold, the Yeoman thereby purges (purgatorio) himself of his slavery to goldmaking.

From the very beginning of pars secunda, the Yeoman uses infernal images to describe the Canon. Not only does the Yeoman associate the Canon with "infinite falsnesse" (l. 976), a "Judas" (l. 1003), the "roote of all trecherie" (l. 1069), "feendly thoghtes" (l. 1070), "false dissymulynge" (l. 1073), and "cursednesse" (l. 1101), but he also carefully points out how the Canon beguiles men through his language:

In al this world of falshede nis his peer,
For in his termes so he woie hym wynde,
And speke his wordes in so sly a kynde,
Whanne he commune shaï with any wight,
That he wol make hym ðoten anon-right,
But it a feend be as hymselfen is.

(CYT 11. 979-84)

The Yeoman's words recall how the serpent tempted Eve by using crafty words to entice her to eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Just as the serpent beguiled Eve by making her believe that the fruit forbidden her would actually give her great power, the Canon beguiles men by making them believe he possesses the key to all power, the secret of making gold.

Having borrowed a gold "marc" from the priest, the Canon promises to reward him:

Somwhat to quyte with youre kyndenesse
I wol yow shewe, if that yow list to leere,
I wol yow teche pleynly the manere
How I kan werken in philosophie.

(CYT 11. 1055-58)

Intrigued by the Canon's promise, the priest eagerly arranges for a meeting, an act which causes the Yeoman to exclaim:

O sely preest, O sely innocent!
With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent!
Nothyng ne artow war of the deceite
Which that this fox shapen hath to thee.

(CYT 11. 1076-80)

200 Similarly, John Gardner has described the priest, whom the Canon tempts, as a figure of Adam. See "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale: An Interpretation," Philological Quarterly 46 (1967), 1-17.
In his prologue, the Yeoman defines blindness solely as a physical handicap from which he suffers. Just as with the signifier "gold," however, as the Yeoman analyzes and fictionalizes the meaning alchemy has had in his life, he comes to apprehend that blindness bears a figurative as well as a literal meaning. Consequently, he defines the fall into deadly sin as a blindness of the mind brought about by carnal desire.201

Not only does the Yeoman's condemnation of the priest's "blindness" poetically signify that the Yeoman has come to understand blindness as a spiritual condition as well as a physical handicap, but the Yeoman's description of the priest's experiences in the Canon's laboratory also reflects that the Yeoman has apprehended the spiritual ramifications of pseudoalchemical experimentation. For, as the Yeoman describes the priest blowing the alchemical fire (the job he

201 Likewise in 2 Peter 1:5–9, it is written:
With all this in view, you should try your hardest to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with fortitude, fortitude with piety, piety with brotherly kindness, and brotherly kindness with love. These are gifts which, if you possess and foster them, will keep you from being either useless or barren in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The man who lacks them is short-sighted and blind; he has forgotten how he was cleansed from his former sins.
had undertaken in the experiment), he depicts the Canon as a figure for Satan, waiting to claim the unwary sinner's soul:}

Loo, how this theef [Canon] koude his [priest] service beede!

Ful sooth it is that swich profred servyse
Stynketh, as witnassen thise olde wyse,
And that ful soone I wol it verifie
In this chanoun, roote of al trecherie,
That everemoore delit hath and gladnesse--
Swiche feendly thoghtes in his herte impresse--
How Cristes peple he may to meschief brynge.

(CYT 11. 1065–73)

To bring the priest into mischief, the Canon pretends to change quicksilver into silver by drilling a hole in a piece of charcoal made of beechwood, filling the hole with silver, and stopping the hole with a piece of wax. After roasting in the alchemical fire, the piece of charcoal burns until the silver is exposed. Beguiled by the Canon's clever trick, the priest rejoices and pays the Canon forty pounds to receive the recipe for transmutation. Decrying the priest's foolishness, however, the Yeoman implies that the priest's purchase of the Canon's recipe is an act of adultery against God, since the priest, a member of the Church, or the Bride of Christ, has turned his love from Christ to goldmaking:
This sotted preest, who was gladder than he?
Was nevere brid gladder agayn the day,
Ne nyghtyngale in the sesoun of May.
Nas nevere man that luste bet to synge,
Ne lady lustier in carolyng.
Or for to speke of love and wommanhede,
Ne knyght in armes to doon an hardy dede,
To stonden in grace of his lady deere,
Than hadde this preest this soory craft to leere,
(CYT 11. 1341-49)

To conclude the tale, the Yeoman even suggests that by
purchasing the Canon's recipe, the priest has actually sold
his soul and become the devil's disciple, who will lead
others down the path to sin:

Lo, thus byjaped and bigiled was he.
Thus maketh he his introduccioun
To brynge folk to hir destruccioun.
(CYT 11. 1385-87)

Ironically, the priest does not know that he has been swin-
dled, so the Yeoman envisions him about to embark on the
vain pursuit of goldmaking, while, like the Yeoman's own
Canon, toiling himself and others into oblivion.

Recognizing the innate evil behind the love of gold,
the Yeoman warns the pilgrims to "flee the fires heete" (CYT ·
1. 1408), and "Withdraweth the fir lest it to faste brenne"
(CYT 1. 1423). Upon reflection, he even realizes that the
cryptic nature of alchemical language, which he had formerly
railed against, exists to preserve the secret of trans-
mutation from the avaricious, who would abuse its power:

Philosphres spoken so mystily
In this craft that men kan nat come therby.

(CYT 11. 1394-95)

Having been purged of his addiction to goldmaking, the
Yeoman mortifies (mortificatio) his literal understanding of
alchemy by recalling what philosophers had to say about
their science:

Lo, thus seith Arnold of the Newe Toun,
As his 'Rosarie' maketh mencion;
He seith right thus, withouten any lye:
"Ther may no man mercurie mortifie
But it be with his brother knowlechyng."
How be that he which that first seyde this thyng
Of philosophres fader was, Hermes.
He seith how that the dragon, doutelees,
Ne dyeth nat but if that he be slayn
With his brother; and that is for to say,
By the dragon, Mercurie, and noon oother
He understood, and brymstoone by his brother,
That out of Sol and Luna were ydrawe.

(CYT 11. 1428-40)
Significantly, the Yeoman remembers a passage that not only figuratively represents the elements of transmutation, but, more importantly, identifies the Philosopher's Stone as Christ. No longer blinded by the love of gold, the Yeoman is able to articulate the principles of spiritual alchemy, and resolve his guilt and anger (solutio) through the saving image of Christ.

Arnald of Villanova, whom the Yeoman identifies as "Arnold of the Newe Toun," had both prestige and stature as an alchemist and physician. Although the Yeoman cites Arnald's "Rosarie" as the source for his ensuing quotation and paraphrase (CYT 11. 1430-40), Edgar Duncan has shown that the quote actually comes from Arnald's De lapide philosophorum. According to Duncan, Chaucer identified the lines as being from the Rosarium philosophorum instead of De lapide philosophorum since the Rosarium was Arnald's best known work and not "couched in such mystifying language."

If, however, we understand the Yeoman's reference to the Rosarium in relation to the penitential framework of the tale, it is more likely that Chaucer referred to the Rosarium instead of De lapide philosophorum to play upon the word "rosary," used to signify liturgical prayers such as the "Hail Mary" uttered during the penitential act. Even

Arnald's name, "Arnold of the Newe Toun," evokes the image of Augustine's City of God, or New Jerusalem, and identifies Arnald as a Christian as well as an alchemist.

Upon examination, Arnald's words about alchemy unquestionably relate the Philosopher's Stone to Christ, and, thus, legitimize the aims of true alchemists. On a literal level, Arnald's references to "mercurie" and his brother, or the dragon and his brother, signify the principles of Jabir's Sulphur-Mercury Theory of the Composition of Metals, in which metals, corrupted by sulphur, are purified through a series of sublimations. Consequently, in this passage, the slaying of the dragon refers to the reduction of the metals to a non-metallic condition, the *prima materia*, so that the metals can be divested of the corrupting sulphur (here described as "brymstoon," the dragon's brother), and perfected by "mercurie." Once the metals were thus purified, the alchemist achieved the Philosopher's Stone, which had such a quintessence of the spirit of perfection—gold—that it could transmute all base metal into gold, cast out disease, and conserve youth. 203 Petrus Bonus explains:

When the Stone is brought into loving contact with common metals, it purges away the external corrupting sulphur; thus, they become white, and

of the nature of pure quicksilver, and the form of gold being added to its substance, of course, they become gold.

As Arthur Hopkins has pointed out, in the Middle Ages, the perfecting power of the Philosopher's Stone soon became allied with the ecclesiastical spirit of perfection, which, "cast on our naked soul, would cleanse us from all sin."

In the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," alchemy and Christianity particularly converge through the image of Arnald's dragon. In alchemy, the dragon refers to the "Ouroboros," or the "en to pan" (the all is one), the ancient Egyptian symbol of a serpent swallowing its tale. Figuring forth the concept of eternity and unity in diversity, the Ouroboros was used in alchemy to signify the idea of growth and regeneration as well as the unity underlying both matter and spirit. Since the alchemists sought to resolve the opposition between physical and spiritual nature by perfecting matter, they utilized the Ouroboros to symbolize the reconciliation of all opposites achieved in the Philosopher's


Stone. Drawing upon 1. Peter 2:4–6, the medieval alchemists identified the Philosopher's Stone with Christ, whom Peter calls the "Living Stone":

So come to him, our living Stone—the stone rejected by men but choice and precious in the sight of God. Come, and let yourselves be built, as living stones, into a spiritual temple; become a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

According to Mircea Eliade, certain Rumanian Christmas Carols even speak of Christ as the one born from stone. Bruce Rosenberg has pointed out that Chaucer would have recognized the "Lapis-Christi" parallel if for no other reason than the fact that the crucible, or Middle English "croslet" (from the Latin crucis) signified both the Cross and an alchemical retort.

Like the alchemists, many Christian writers identified the serpent as a symbol for regeneration. For example, in De doctrina Christiana, Augustine explains:

It is also said that the serpent, having forced its way through narrow openings, sheds its skin and renews its vigor. How well this conforms to our imitation of the wisdom of the serpent when we

207 Eliade, pp. 43-44.
shed the "old man," as the Apostle says, and put on the "new;" and we shed it in narrow places, for the Lord directs us "Enter ye in at the narrow gate." 208

John Chrysostom, in his homily on Matthew (Patrologia Latina, vol. 57-58, col. 739), observes that Christ, the "Alpha and Omega," was the first to eat his own flesh and drink his own blood" at the institution of the Last Supper. 209 Although John does not overtly refer to the Ouroboros in this passage, his image of Christ eating his own flesh is reminiscent of the snake swallowing its own tail. In some instances, Christian writers even drew upon the alchemical tradition to describe man's search for perfection. For example, Saint Benedict (Patrologia Latina, vol. 66, col 245) evokes the image of the Philosopher's Stone when he describes the monastic life as a kind of "pur- gative crucible for the transmutation of the monk's souls from soft and base lead to hard and pure gold." 210

After reflecting on Arnald's cryptic words, the Yeoman concludes that alchemy is the "secrecy of secrets," and recalls the words of Plato in the Tabulum Chemicum.


For unto Crist it is so lief and deere
That he wol nat that it discovered bee
But where it liketh to his deitee
Men for t'enspire, and eek for to deffende
Whom that hym liketh--lo, this is the ende.

Reminded of his Saviour, the Yeoman promises to forsaake
goldmaking and follow Christ's will. His decision to
abandon goldmaking and follow Christ is reminiscent of
Petrus Bonus' explanation that:

If indeed they [false alchemists] could be brought
to see that this world is under Divine rule and
governaunce, that no mortal can approach God but
by God, that even the light cannot be perceived
without light, they might come to understand that,
without the special grace of God, this ineffable
gift [the Philosopher's Stone] is not bestowed on
any man.211

Having linguistically engaged in the stages of alchemical
transmutation, the Yeoman ends his tale able to apprehend
Christ's divine rule, and express himself as a penitent
sinner who has become self-aware, expressed sorrow for his
misdeeds, represented the motives behind his actions, and
promised to abandon his evil ways.212 Furthermore, the

212 Mary Braswell uses these characteristics as a means
Yeoman has dramatized how moral regeneration includes linguistic regeneration, since, as he slowly comes to terms with the falseness (evil) of his life and comes to understand alchemy as a gift from God, he abandons his ravings and "queynye" sophistical speech and becomes a sober philosopher articulating words of wisdom.213

As we have seen, the Yeoman's linguistic regeneration also entails his transition from being an unsuccessful worker of metals to a successful artist of tale-teller. By grappling with the true meaning of alchemy, the Yeoman assumes a place within the mythological tradition of the Smith or Homo Faber, who was identified with song as well as with the forging of metals.214 Mircea Eliade explains that the Arabic q-y-n, "to forge," is related to the Hebrew, Syriac, and Ethiopian terms denoting the act of singing. In addition, he notes how the connection between "poet" and the


213 In De doctrina Christiana, Augustine discusses signs, language, rhetoric, and allegory in relation to Biblical interpretation. He describes sophistical speech as "a discourse which is not captious, but which is more abundant than is consistent with gravity, being inflated with verbal ornament." Furthermore, he identifies sophisms as false conclusions of the reasoning process, which "imitate true conclusions, but mislead the slow and the ingenious who do not pay close attention." See Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, p. 67.

214 Eliade, p. 98.
Greek "poietes," meaning creator or maker, also semantically resembles the connection between "artisan" and "artist." An artist as well as an artisan, the Smith became the keeper of mythologies and genealogies, and assumed a role in the creation and diffusion of epic poetry.215 In alchemy, this relationship between the artisan and artist found expression in the term "kerotakis," which designates a reflux apparatus designed for treating metals with vapors. Sherwood Taylor explained that the ancients originally used the term "kerotakis" as the name for the artist's palette.216 Since alchemists conceived of themselves as assisting Nature to attain her perfection, they often conceived of themselves as artists who completed the work of God by making man more capable of understanding His mysteries.217 By telling two tales about his own Canon, or the uninformed bellows blower toiling himself into oblivion, and the Black Canon, or diabolical trickster delighting in ruining the lives of others, the Yeoman assumes his place within the tradition of Homo Faber to unfold the meaning of sin and reflect upon the nature of God's saving grace.

215 Eliade, p. 88.
216 Sherwood Taylor, p. 46.
217 Eliade, p. 96.
Chapter Five
The Second Nun's Legend of Saint Cecilia:  
Alchemical Allegory as Christian Myth

Gratia non tollet sed perficit naturam.
Saint Thomas Aquinas
Summa Theologia, I, 8, ad 2

Although the "Second Nun's Tale" does not immediately appear to have any relation to the science of alchemy, alchemical signs predominate throughout the tale. Not only are "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale linked by the prologue of the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," but also through the thematic opposition between Saint Cecilia's "bisynesse," or Christian service, and the "ydelnesse," or sinful gold-making activities of the false alchemists. Whereas Saint Cecilia is "the way to blynde" (SNT 1. 92) and engages in "sondry werkes brighte of excellence" (SNT 1. 112), the false alchemists are "blent " by multiplying (CYT 1. 1391), and "concluden everemoore amys" (CYT 1. 957). In recognition of this thematic opposition, most critics analyzing these two tales assert that Chaucer linked the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" to present alchemy as a heresy and perversion of the orthodox religious ideals represented by Saint Cecilia.218 As we have seen,
however, Chaucer distinguished between false alchemy and spiritual alchemy in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" by corresponding the Yeoman's conversion from the "old man" into the "new" with the Yeoman's recognition that he had fallen into sin by failing to apprehend the spiritual, or salvific, meaning of alchemy. Thus, Saint Cecilia's "bisynesse" contrasts with the morally reprehensible work of false alchemy, not the "Divine Work" of spiritual alchemy. To imply the concord between Christianity and spiritual alchemy in the "Second Nun's Tale," Chaucer modified the "Life of Saint Cecilia" in Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda Aurea so that the legend would assume a symbolic framework that actually embodies the principles of alchemical transmutation. According to medieval sign-theory, typological signs either transferred meaning from one thing to another across a span of time, or transferred meaning from one discourse to another.219 An analysis of the "Second Nun's Tale" in relation to alchemical philosophy, particularly Arnald of Villanova's Rosarium philosophorum, reveals that Chaucer typologically converged Christian discourse with alchemical discourse in the legend of Saint


Cecilia as a means of exploring how the Hermetic theme of salvation, or the reconciliations of spiritual and physical nature through the union of masculine, feminine, and divine, shared a place within Christian myth. For, medieval alchemists conceived of alchemical transmutation as an analogue to Christ's nativity, death, and resurrection.

The "Second Nun's Tale," like the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," explores the theme of salvation within the context of penance. Not only does the Second Nun confess to her own sinfulness, but she precedes her tale with a prayer to Mary that expresses the contrition she feels for her sins. Whereas the Canon's Yeoman begins his tale with little understanding of sin, the Second Nun bases her tale upon the recognition that only "faithful bisynesse" protects the Christian from the "ydelenesse" that occasions sin:

For he [Satan] that with his thousand cordes slye Continuely us waiteth to biclappe,
Whan he may man in ydelenesse espye,

220 As we have seen, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" bears many resemblances to confessional material. Samuel McCracken has observed that confessional tales in the Canterbury Tales, such as the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale," "Wife of Bath's Tale," "Merchant's Tale," and "Franklin's Tale," have a triple structure—a link with the previous tale, a confession, and a tale—that likewise associates them with confessional material. See Samuel McCracken, "Confessional Prologue and the Topography of the Canon's Yeoman," Modern Philology 68 (1971), 289-91. Thus, the penitential nature of the "Second Nun's Tale" is expressed structurally as well as thematically.
He can so lightly cacche hym in his trappe--
Til that a man be hent right by the lappe
He nys nat war the feend hath hym in honde.

(SNT 11. 8-13)

According to medieval confessional material, idleness, or sloth, opened man's soul to all the deadly sins, since it caused a weariness of good deeds that, leading the sinner into a preoccupation with vain things, ultimately caused wanhope, or despair of God's mercy. Instead of calling upon God for help when he had fallen into sin, the slothful man failed to repent, and, consequently, fell into anger, dejection, and self-hatred. The Second Nun is quick to remind the pilgrims, however, that every vice, such as idleness, can be overcome by its opposite virtue:

The ministre and the norice unto vices
Which that men clepe in English ydelsen

221 Sigfried Wenzel points out that devotional works often cited Matthew 12:43-45, the parable of the unclean spirit, as the basis for the idea that sloth opens man's soul to all the deadly sins:

When an unclean spirit comes out of a man it wanders over the deserts seeking a resting-place, and finds none. Then it says, "I will go back to the home I left." So it returns and finds the house unoccupied, swept clean, and tidy. Off it goes and collects seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they all come in and settle down; and in the end the man's plight is worse than before.

That porter of the gate is of delices,
To eschue and by hire contrarie hire
oppresse—
That is to seyn, by leveful bisyness—

(SNT 11. 1-5)

Augustine explained that just as the physician sometimes applied contraries, such as cold to hot or moist to dry, to heal a sick man, so Christ heals man's sins through contraries:

Because man fell through pride, He applied humility as a cure. We were trapped by the wisdom of the serpent; we are freed by the foolishness of God . . . Our malady arose through the corrupted spirit of a woman; from the incorrupted flesh of a woman proceeded our salvation. The principle of contraries is illustrated in the fact that the example of His virtues cures our vices.222

Exalting Christ as both man and God, beginning and end, medieval theologians understood their saviour as the Supreme Medicine that healed all the disharmonies of the physical world.

By mentioning the principle of contraries at the

beginning of her tale, the Second Nun introduces the first typological sign that converges Christian thought with alchemical thought. For, the principle of contraries, or the reconciliation of opposites, was an integral part of alchemical theory as well as medieval theology. Endeavoring to restore matter to the likeness of incorrupt nature, the alchemists hoped to create that substance or effect in which all opposites were united. Since they regarded the Philosopher's Stone as a gift from Christ, they conceived of their Stone as a conjunction of opposites in which "the dry was converted into the cold, and the cold into the humid, and the humid into the hot, and the hot into the dry."223 As the conjunction of opposites, the Stone was considered both a spiritual and corporeal compound, or the complete unity of opposites par excellence.

After warning the pilgrims about the danger of idleness, the Second Nun expresses her own deep awareness of the contrariness, or opposition, between her soul and body:

And of thy [Virgin Mary] light my soul in prison lighte,

That troubled is by the contagioun

Of my body, and also by the wighte

Of erthely lust and fals affeccioun;

Seeking to resolve the opposition between her physical and spiritual nature, the Nun prays to Mary, in whom she recognizes the harmony of body and soul:

Thow nobledest so ferforth oure nature
That no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde
His sone in blood and flessh to clothe and wynde. (SNT 11. 40-43)

The Second Nun's Invocacio ad Mariam derives from Saint Bernard's prayer to the Virgin in Dante's Paradiso, Canto 33, lines 1-40. Dante's multiple references to Marian scripture, dogma, and liturgy in the Divine Comedy particularly reflect the growing popularity of Mariology in the Middle Ages, especially in relation to the Virgin's role as Mediatrix and Dispensatrix of all graces. Although Chaucer, like Dante, utilized the theme of Mary's intercessory powers, Chaucer modified the imagery in Dante's Saint Bernard prayer to typologically introduce the role of Mary in esoteric alchemical thought.

In Saint Bernard's prayer, Dante synthesizes the conventional Marian liturgy and dogma of his day through Bernard's veneration of Mary as Mother, Saint, Virgin, and Queen.224

224 Throughout the Divine Comedy, Dante presents a complete summary of Marian scripture, liturgy, and dogma. For example: Divine Motherhood--Purgatorio III, 11. 39-44;
Vergine madre . . . in te s'aduna
quantunque in creature e di bontate . . .
Ancor ti prego, Regina, che puoi . . .

(Para. XXXIII, 11. 1, 9, 34)

(Virgin Mother . . . in thee is joined all
goodness that is in any creature . . . I pray thee
Queen . . .)

Mary's divine maternity, purity, sanctity and association
with the Supreme mediator in the work of man's redemption
combine to exalt her as Mediatrix between God and men.

Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore
per lo cui caldo nell'eterna pace
cosi e germinato questo fiore.
Qui se' a noi meridiana face
di caritate, e giuoso, intra i mortali,
se' di speranza fontana vivace.

X, 11. 41-44; XVIII, 1. 100; XX, 11. 19-24; Paradiso XIII,
1. 84; III, 1. 121; XXIII, 1. 88; XXXIII, 1. 85; XXXIII. The
Annunciation/Incarnation—Purgatorio X, 11. 41-44; Paradiso
XIII, 1. 84. The Visitation—Purgatorio XVIII, 1. 100. The
Nativity—Purgatorio XX, 11. 19-24. The Presentation—
Purgatorio XV, 11. 88-92. Virginity—Purgatorio XX, 1. 97;
XXV, 1. 128. Coronation—Paradiso XXXIII, 1. 129, XXIII, 1.
88, 11. 106-11 and 126-28, 1. 137, XXXI, 1. 100, 1. 118,
XXXIII, 1. 134. Assumption—Paradiso XXXIII, SSV, 1. 128.
Intercession—Inferno II, 11. 94-99; 1. 124, Purgatorio V,
1. 101, VII, 1. 82, VIII, 1. 37, XIII, 1. 29, XXIII, 11. 142-
44, Paradiso XV, 1. 133, XXXI, 11. 100-102, XXXIII, 11. 1-
40. Coredemptrix—Purgatorio XXXII, 1. 6. See John D.
Sinclair, ed., The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri (New
Donna, se' tanto grande e tanto vali,
che qual vuol grazia ed a te non ricorre,
sua disianza vuol volar sanz'ali.

(Para. XXXIII, 11. 8-16)

(In thy womb was rekindled the love by whose
warmth this flower has bloomed thus in the eternal
peace; here thou art for us the noon day torch of
charity, and below among mortals thou art a living
spring of hope. Thou Lady, art so great and so
prevailing that who so would have grace and does
not turn to thee, his desire would fly without
wings.)

As the instrument of the Incarnation, Mary emerges in
Bernard's prayer as the most efficient intercessor in
heaven, "the cornerstone of Christian salvation."225

who didst so ennable human nature that its Maker

did not disdain to be made its making . . . Thy

lovingkindness not only succours him that asks,

but many times it freely anticipates the asking)

(Para XXXIII, 11. 2-6, 17-19)

Through her, human nature may find its perfection:

Ancor ti priego, Regina, che puoi
cio che tu vuoli, che conservi sani,
dopo tanto veder, li affetti suoi.
Vinca tua guardia i movimenti umani:

(Para. XXXIII, 11. 34-39)

(This too I pray of thee, Queen, who canst
what thou wilt, that thou keep his affec-
tions pure after so great a vision. Let thy
guardianship control his human impulses.

In accordance with the historical Abbot of Clairvaux's
foremost contribution to Mariology, Dante's Saint Bernard
prayer focuses on the theme of Mary's mediation, the most
constant theme of her cult.226 Similiarly, Chaucer retains
the Virgin's role as Mediatrix in the Second Nun's Invocacio
ad Mariam, yet metaphorically depicts her in a manner which
typologically signifies principles of spiritual alchemy.
For example, both Dante and Chaucer refer to Mary as per-

226 See Carol Juniper, Mariology (Milwaukee: The Bruce
fecting, or ennobling, human nature:
. . . thou art she who didst so ennable human
nature that its Maker did not disdain to be made
its making. (Para. XXXIII, ll. 3-4)
Thow noblest so ferforth oure nature
That no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde
His sone in blood and flessh to clothe and wynde.
(SNT 11. 39042)

Yet, the Second Nun's prayer diverges from its source by
using the images of "blood" and "flesh" to stress how Mary's
womb served to overcome the opposition between physical and
spiritual nature through the Incarnation of God's Son. In
addition, the Second Nun's references to "blood" and "flesh"
evoke the image of the Eucharist, in which the Christian
partakes of Christ's blood and flesh as a means of achieving
bodily renewal and spiritual perfection. By referring to
the Eucharist in terms of Christ's flesh and blood, the
Second Nun implicitly introduces a typological sign signi-
fying spiritual alchemy. For, as we have seen, since Christ
first partook of himself at the institution of the Lord's
Supper—"This is my body given for you," "This is my blood
shed for you"—the image of the "Eucharist" associated
Christ with the Ouroboros, or the dragon to which the
Canon's Yeoman refers at the end of his tale.

In the alchemical experiment, the vessel in which the
alchemist created the Philosopher's Stone, was called the
"Bath of Mary," which was an egg or womb-shaped alembic.
Although "Mary" originally referred to the mythical inventor
of the Kerotakis process, medieval alchemists soon identi-
fied her with the Virgin Mary, and understood their retort
as a Christian symbol. Mircea Eliade explained:

The Bath of Mary is not only the 'matrix' of the
divine tincture, it is also the symbolical
representation of the womb in which Jesus was
born. The incarnation of the Lord in the adept
may therefore begin as soon as the alchemical
ingredients of the Bain Marie enter into a state
of fusion and reintegrate the primordial state of
matter. This return to primal matter is associ-
ated with the birth of Christ as well as with his
death.227

When the Second Nun describes Mary as "Thow welle of mercy,
synful soules cure" (SNT 1. 38), she alters Dante's line,
"Thou art a living spring of hope" (Para. XXXIII, 1. 12) in
a manner which strengthens the alchemical typology in her
prayer. For, the signifier "well" was commonly used in al-
chemical texts to denote the Bath of Mary. Significantly,

227 Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible, trans.
156.
most medieval alchemists ended their texts with lines praising Mary. For example, Arnald of Villanova usually ended his alchemical texts with the words, "Praise to the Trinity and glory to the Blessed Virgin Mary." Since medieval alchemists conceived of alchemical transmutation as an analogue to Christ's nativity, death, and resurrection, they often associated the creation of the Philosopher's Stone with Mary's conception of Christ, the true Philosopher's Stone, who purified all mankind from sin. In his Codicillis, Raymon Lull suggests the typological relationship between Christianity and alchemy when he implies that Mary ennobles man just as the Great Work seeks to perfect all matter; that Mary's womb, associated with "light" images, typifies the celestial fire which conjoins the elements; and that as Mary unites all creation, the Great Work seeks to bring physical and spiritual nature into harmony.228

Raymon Lull merits particular attention in relation to the Second Nun's Invocacio ad Mariam because he was known for his writings on Mary's spiritual maternity as well as for his texts on spiritual alchemy. A Spanish theologian and member of the Third Order of St. Francis, Lull was perhaps the first doctor to uphold the doctrine of Mary's Im-

maculate Conception. His Marian literature includes the
Disputio eremitarum Petri Lombardi (1298) and the Liber de Sancta
Maria. During the Middle Ages, Ramon Lull and Duns Scotus
were the only theologians to support the doctrine of the
Immaculate Conception. Consequently, in accord with tra-
ditional Mariology, Dante does not mention the Immaculate
Conception in the Divine Comedy. Chaucer, however,
subtly refers to Mary's Immaculate Conception when the
Second Nun praises the Virgin:

   Ay heryen; and thou, virgine wemmelees,
   Baar of thy body—and dweltest mayden
   pure—
   The creatour of every creature.

   (SNT 11. 47-49)

The key word in this passage is "baare," which signifies
"the bare skin" in Middle English. Here, the Second Nun
describes Mary as a "virgine wemmelees" (virgin spotless),
and emphasizes that her purity extends to and transcends the

229 The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception did not
become popular until the sixteenth century, and it was not
proclaimed as a dogma until 1854 during the papacy of Pius
IX.

230 The absence of the concept of the Immaculate
Conception from the Divine Comedy is not surprising, since
neither St. Bernard of Clairvaux nor Saint Thomas Aquinas
accepted this doctrine. See Juniper, p. 304.
"baare" skin of her body. By affirming the spotlessness of Mary's body and soul, Chaucer implies that he accepted Mary's preservation from all taint of Original Sin. According to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the "Virgin was therefore the most perfect created being after Jesus Christ."231

Another indication that Chaucer's affirmed Mary's Immaculate Conception is found in the Second Nun's description of Mary as the dear daughter of Anne (SNT 1. 70). The Second Nun's reference to Anne is significant, since it recalls to the pilgrims how Mary's conception was a special miracle of God, given the fact that Anne was barren.232 By referring to the supernatural nature of Mary's birth, the Second Nun provides some support for the probability of the Immaculate Conception.

Just as the Eucharist could typologically signify the Ouroborous (Philosopher's Stone) in alchemy, the Immaculate Conception could typologically signify the nature of sophic mercury,233 or the feminine principle in alchemy that freed the base metal from the corruption of sulphur. Thus, in the

231 Warner, p. 237.

232 The only scriptural passages about Anne are found in the second century apocryphal Book of James, which describes the conception of Mary.

233 Here, "sophic mercury" refers to quicksilver from which the corrupting sulphur has been purged.
alchemical magistry, sophic mercury, analogous to Mary's body, combined with sophic sulphur, analogous to the Holy Spirit, to create the Philosopher's Stone, analogous to Christ. When the Second Nun describes Christ as "That of the tryne compas lord and gyde is" (SNT 1. 45), she not only identifies the three-fold universe of earth, sea, and heaven, but she also typologically signifies the *tri prima* in alchemical theory. Basically, the *tri prima* consisted of mercury, sulphur, and salt, or the ingredients in the Philosopher's Stone. As Paracelsus explained:

> Know that all the seven metals are born from a threefold matter . . . Mercury is the spirit, Sulphur is the soul, and salt is the body. The soul, which indeed is Sulphur . . . unites those two contraries the body and spirit, and changes them into one essence.235

In relation to the "tryne compas," mercury was associated with the sea, sulphur with heaven, and salt with earth. Thus, the Second Nun's narrative implies that as Lord of the "tryne compas," Christ not only governs earth and heaven, but also the Philosopher's Stone.

234 Once mercury was divested of its corrupt sulphur, the sulphur was quintessentially purified to create "sophic sulphur," or the masculine principle of the experiment.

Following her invocation to the Virgin, the Second Nun begins her tale of Saint Cecilia by interpreting Saint Cecilia's name according to Frater Jacobus Januensis' *Legenda*. Although the Second Nun does not stray significantly from her source here, her words, nevertheless, embody the principle of Alchemical Typology, since her narrative presents Saint Cecilia in abstract terms which signify her spiritual perfection. For example, Cecilia is not just a Christian martyr whom we can locate in history, but "the weye to blynde" (SNT 1. 92), and "the hevene of peple" (SNT 1. 104). Perfected by "hoolynesse," "chaastnesse," "sapience," and "sondry werkes brighte of excellence," Saint Cecilia becomes heaven itself, "brennynge evere in charite ful brighte (l. 117).

Although the Second Nun implies that Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* is the source for her *Lyf of Seinte Cecile*, critics have questioned whether Chaucer used the *Legenda* as his principle source, since Chaucer omits most of St. Cecilia's legend from the "Second Nun's Tale". Chaucer's omission of Saint Cecilia's conversion of four hundred

pagans, for example, has particularly puzzled critics, con-
sidering that Saint Cecilia is originally introduced as "Ful
swift and bisy evere in good werkynge" (SNT l. 116). How-
ever, despite the omissions from the Legenda Aurea, the as-
pects of Saint Cecilia's legend which Chaucer includes in
the "Second Nun's Tale," are faithful enough to the Legenda
to identify it as Chaucer's source. If we analyze the Lyf
of Seinte Cecile in relation to alchemical motifs, we can
see that Chaucer only retained those aspects of Saint
Cecilia's legend that have alchemical analogues. This is
not to imply, however, that the "Second Nun's Tale" should
be read as an alchemical allegory. Instead, we should un-
derstand the tale as a poetic representation of the recon-
ciliation of physical and spiritual nature, the goal of both
Christianity and spiritual alchemy.

As we have seen, the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" ends with
a quotation and paraphrase from Arnald of Villanova, which
figures forth the principle of alchemical transmutation:

    Ther may no man mercurie mortifie
    But it be with his brother knowlecheyng . . .
    He seith how that the dragon, doutelees,
    Ne dyeth nat but if that he be slayen
    With his brother; and that is for to sayn,
    By the dragon; Mercurie, and noon other
    He understood, and brymstoon by his brother,
That out of Sol and Luna were ydrawe.

(CYT 11. 1431-32 and 1435-40)

As a cryptic formula for the Philosopher's Stone, these lines refer to the alchemical trinity of sulphur, mercury, and salt, or the ingredients composing the Stone. In alchemy, "Mercurie," the dragon, and the Philosopher's Stone were synonyms used to signify the medium of conjunction between opposites, such as cold and hot, moist and dry, and male and female. Since the conjunction of opposites was understood as a divine union, alchemists often depicted this conjunction as a mysterium coniuctionis, or chemical wedding.237 In the Yeoman's description of spiritual alchemy, he suggests the chemical wedding by signifying the opposites as sulphur (Sol), the masculine principle, and mercury (Luna), the feminine principle. As the third part of the alchemical tri prima, salt, signifying matter, is implied through the Yeoman's reference to the mortification of the body. In the Second Nun's Lyf of Seinte Cecile, the alchemical trinity is typologically represented by Saint Cecilia--mercury, Valerian--sulphur, Tiburce--salt.

237 Arnald discusses the chemical wedding as a conjunction between body and spirit:

Et conjunctio eorum scilicet spirituum sit, cum corpora subtilia per dissolutionem, contritionem, & affationem eorum cum spiritibus.

See the Rosarium philosophorum, Mangeti, p. 676.
Throughout the "Second Nun's Tale," Saint Cecilia is primarily described in terms of "light" metaphors. For example, she burns in charity full bright and shines with the great light of wisdom (SNT 11. 100 and 120). As an embodiment of light, Saint Cecilia also typologically signifies Mercury, or the Philosopher's Stone, which Arnald of Villanova praised as the "lux moderna," or light above all lights.238 According to Arnald, "Mercurius" illuminates the soul by moving the adept to turn away from the world of sense towards the image and truth of God.239 Likewise, Saint Cecilia renounces the material world, and seeks to preserve her body from "love in vileynye" (SNT 1. 156). Upon hearing of Cecilia's resolve to remain chaste in her marriage to Valerian, Saint Urban commends her chastity as a marriage to Christ:

"Almyghty Lord, O Jhesu Crist," quod he,

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238 For example, in the Rosarium philosophorum, Arnald explains:

Mercurius vivus in omnibus suis operationibus est manifeste perfectissimus & probatissimus: quoniam adustionis est salvativus, effusionis effectivus cum figitur: & est tinctura uberrimae perfectionis, fulgidi splendoris.

See Mangeti, p. 663.

239 Laudetur ergo omnium opifex Deus gloriosus & benedictus, causator optimus & altissimus, qui ex creavit preciosum, ut cum mineralibus maxime in natura teneat symbolum, & dedit illi substantiam, & substantiae proprietatem, quam contingit ullam minime ex rebus in natura possidere.

See Rosarium philosophorum, Mangeti, p. 664.
"Sowere of chaast conseil, hierde of us alle,
The fruyt of thilke seed of chastitee
That thou has sowe in Cecile, taak to thee!

(SNT 11. 191-94)

By praising Saint Cecilia's chastity as a marriage to Christ, Saint Urban implicitly refers to the mystic marriage of "Sponsus" (Christ) and "Sponsa" (Church), in which the conflict between worldliness and spirituality was resolved. Transposing the mystic marriage of "Sponsus" and "Sponsa" on the physical plane, medieval alchemists described the mystic marriage as the conjunction of Sol and Luna, or mercury and sulphur.240

As Christ's spouse, Cecilia partakes of Christ's incorruptible and eternal nature. For example, after Almachius sentences her to be burned to death, Cecilia remains unchanged by the fire:

For al the fyr and eek the bathes heete
she sat al coold and feeelede no wo;
It made hire nat a drope for to swete.

(SNT 11. 520-22)

Her ability to remain unchanged by the fire also typologically associates her with mercury, since it too remained

unchanged in the fire. Even Cecilia's name, which the Second Nun interprets as "hevenes lilie" (SNT l. 87) corresponds to mercury, which alchemists often symbolized by the lily. Although Saint Cecilia is analogous to Mercurius, she cannot, however, typify the Philosopher's Stone in its entirety, since it was conceived to be an androgynous substance. Consequently, Saint Cecilia typologically represents the feminine principle in spiritual alchemy, while Valerian, her husband, signifies the masculine principle, sulphur. Cecilia and Valerian's mystic marriage, consecrated by the angel who crowns them, therefore figures forth the chemical wedding or conjunction of opposites in spiritual alchemy.

The Lyf of Seinte Cecile begins with Cecilia's confession to Valerian:

I have an aungel which that loveth me,
That with greet love, whereso I wake or sleep,
Is redy ay my body for to keep.

(SNT l. 152-54)

In order to avoid being slain by the angel, Valerian must remain a chaste husband to Cecilia and be baptized into the Christian faith. Significantly, the alchemists frequently used the word baptize (from the Greek baptitso) to refer to the mordant bath in which a metal was dipped prior to being perfected through transmutation. Once Valerian is baptized,
he and Saint Cecilia are crowned by an angel in a manner which is strikingly analogous to the chemical wedding:

This angel hadde of roses and of lilie
Corones two, the whiche he bar in honde,
And first to Cecile, as I understonde,
He yeaf that oon, and after gan he take
That oother to Valerian hir make.

(SNT 11. 220-24)

In Arnald's *Rosarium philosophorum*, the chemical wedding, or union of opposites, is represented by the crowned woman, the crowned man, and the Holy Ghost between them:

The Rose and the Lily are products of three living things: the king, the queen, and the Holy Ghost. This triad coincides with the triple nature of Mercurius, who is masculine, feminine, and divine.241

According to John Read, throughout the corpus of alchemical literature, the rose and lily were respectively used to signify Sol and Luna, or sulphur and mercury.242

In spiritual alchemy, the adept referred to the smell of roses and lilies as a means of signifying that he had received the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom through knowledge of

the Philosopher's Stone--Christ. Likewise, after Cecilia and Valerian are crowned, the angel tells Valerian, "Sey what thee list, and thou shalt han they boon" (SNT 1. 234). Praying that his brother Tiburce may also receive grace to know the truth, the angel responds, "God liketh thy requeste, / And bothe with the palm of martirdom / Ye shullen come unto his blisful feste" (SNT 11. 239-241).

Consequently, when Tiburce senses the sweet savour of Cecilia's and Valerian's crowns of lilies and roses, he converts to Christianity and receives the Holy Spirit's gift of sapience. The theme of wisdom predominates in the "Second Nun's Tale," and culminates in the opposition between images of light and blindness at the end of the tale. For example, Chaucer improvised Saint Cecilia's final confrontation with Almachius by contrasting her "grete light of Sapience" with Almachius' blind worship of the image of Jupiter:

Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne [Almachius] outer eyen
That thou n' art blynd, for thyng that we seen alle

243 Similarly, Arnald discusses the Philosopher's Stone, here referred to as the "Elixir" in terms of wisdom:
& ut Elixir juxta Sapientum, allegoriam, compositum ex speciebus limpidis, condimentum, antidotum, medicina, purgamentum omnium corporum purgandorum, & transformatum is solificum & lunificum verum. See Rosarium philosophorum, Mangeti, p. 665.
That it is stoon a god thow wolt it calle.
I rede thee, lat thyne hand upon it falle
And taste it wel and stoon thou shalt fynde,
Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde.

(SNT 11. 498-504)

Here, the cold lifeless stone idol of Almachius contrasts vividly with Christ, the living Stone, or foundation of the Church.

The martyrdom of Cecilia, Valerian, and Tiburce by the sword also figures forth Arnold's words in the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale":

He seith how that the dragon, doutelees,
Ne dyeth nat but if that he be slayen
With his brother . . .

(CYT 11. 1435-37)

Cecilia's brother-in-law and Valerian's brother, Tiburce typologically represents salt, the principle of matter, which must be mortified in order for conjunction to take place. In spiritual alchemy, fire, or the medium of mortification, was emblematically denoted by various cutting or wounding implements, such as scissors, sword, lance,

244 For example, Petrus Bonus describes the first stage of the Magistery as the solution of the gross into the subtle, since "No body which has not first been purified can possibly retain its soul." The New Pearl of Great Price, p. 317 and 341.
scythe, arrow, or hammer. Jung has noted that alchemists particularly used the sword to symbolize the celestial fire, or the principle which reanimated the mortified body in the alchemical vessel. Thus the sword was a paradoxical symbol for both death and regeneration. Likewise, in the "Second Nun's Tale," the sword paradoxically bestows upon the martyrs both death and eternal life: "Hir soules wenten to the Kyng of Grace" (SNT 1. 399). Whereas St. Cecilia, Valerian, and Tiburce begin the tale typologically representing the principles mercury, sulphur, and salt in alchemical transmutation, they end the tale by actually becoming one with Christ, the Philosopher's Stone, through the mortification of their bodies.

Both the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" address the question of the opposition between physical and spiritual nature. The Second Nun's references to the contagion of her body and the weight of earthly lust particularly suggest the imperfection of base matter. Whereas the corruption of the Second Nun's body is figuratively expressed in her prologue, the corruption of the Canon's Yeoman's body is literally represented in his face, which has been discolored from gold-making. Caught within


246 Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis, p. 505.
this conflict between physical and spiritual nature, both the Second Nun and Canon's Yeoman express melancholy over their human condition. Spiritual alchemists called this psychic conflict between the soul and body the "Nigredo" and described it as a period of melancholy and chaos. Consequently, the Second Nun's sorrow over her "unworthy," "sensual" state, and the Yeoman's depiction of chaos in the Canon's laboratory combine to figure forth the spiritual and physical condition of the "Nigredo." Careful to avoid a Manichean view of flesh as evil, however, Augustine explained that the Christian did not hate his body, but the corruption of his body:

They hate not their bodies but the corruption and solidity of their bodies. They do not wish to have no bodies at all but rather incorruptible and most agile bodies, and they think that no body could be so constituted because then it would be spirit.248

As Christians, medieval alchemists likewise hated the corruption of their bodies. But, whereas the Church believed the body could only be perfected at the Resurrection of the


Dead, the alchemists believed that, through Christ's gift of the Philosopher's Stone, they could perfect matter and consequently restore all nature to its pristine state. Although the alchemists' belief in the perfectability of the body before death might seem heretical, it is important to note that the Church never accused alchemists of heresy in relation to this point. In fact, St. Nilus of Ankyra, for example, reveals how Christianity even adopted alchemical imagery to express the reconciliation of body and soul:

*Just as the furnace purifies corrupt gold [aurum improbus], sorrow which follows God purifies a contaminated heart.*

Conscious of man's struggle between good and evil, Chaucer linked the "Second Nun's Tale" with the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" to explore the opposition between physical and spiritual nature, and to remind his readers that through Christ, whether signified as the "Lamb of God" or the "Philosopher's

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249 Arnald justifies his alchemical work by citing the Holy Scripture:

*Dum vero sic perfectissime elevabitur, adimplebitur in operis Philosophici perfectione, quam jubet scriptura, dicens: Suaviter cum magno ingenio ascendit a terra in coelum. Item: Scitote quod cum corpori admiscetur sit unum cum eo, & vertit ipsum in spiritum.*

*See Rosarium philosophorum, Mangeti, p. 677.*

250 Brann, p. 130.
Stone," man could experience reconciliation with God and renewal of mind and body.
Conclusion

Alchemical Discourse in the Canterbury Tales:
Signs of Gnosis and Transmutation

In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word
was with God, and the Word was God.
(John I:1)

Throughout the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer literally
plays with language as he indulges in punning, irony, and
the seven rhetorical figures: conformatio, effictio,
notatio, demonstratio, imago, similtudo, and translatio.
Traditionally, his use of language has been understood in
terms of the literary tradition stemming from St. Augus-
tine's De Doctrina Christiana. Thus, for many critics, the
pilgrims' tales and dramatic interplay exist as vehicles for
doctrinal truths.251 Yet, as the pilgrims spin their tales
in "sense" and "sentence," they often reveal a conscious-
ness of language itself that seems to make it their central
issue rather than plot, character, or theme. For example,
Chaucer the pilgrim initially draws our attention to lan-

251 Two of the most influential studies in this
tradition are D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer:
Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1962) and Bernard F. Huppe, A Reading of
the Canterbury Tales (New York: State University of New
York, 1967).
guage in the "General Prologue" as he excuses himself for
rehearsing speech "rudeliche and large" by explaining, "Eek
Plato seith, whoso kan hym rede,/The wordes moote be cosyn
to the dede," (11. 741-42). Likewise, the Manciple ends the
tales proper with another reference to these words:

The wise Plato seith, as ye may rede,
The word moot nede accorde with the dede.
If men shal telle proprely a thyng,
The word moost cosyn be to the werkyng.

(McT, 11. 207-210)

Both Chaucer the pilgrim and the Manciple establish a
literary aesthetic based upon the relationship between
language and objective truth, or language and experience.
By drawing attention to this relationship, Chaucer addressed
the primary issue of Medieval sign-theory, which embodied
the medieval theory of knowledge.252

According to Augustine's Incarnational Typology,
Christ, as the Word made flesh, redeemed human speech so
that it would become a mirror in which men could know God in
this life by faith. Moreover, Augustine believed that words
signify truly, if partially, a really existing thing depend-
ing on their correspondence to the object(s) they seek to
describe.253 Citing I Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see

252 Colish, p. viii.
253 Colish, p. 35.
through a mirror darkly; but then face to face," Augustine conceded that our knowledge of God in this life remains only partial and shadowy, but also asserted that metaphorical signification could accurately express spiritual realities. Dante constructed the Divine Comedy upon this principle, expressing spiritual realities in very concrete, earthly terms. For example, he used a variety of evocative light images, such as rainbows, to signify God or the Trinity:

In the profound and clear ground of the lofty light appeared to me three circles of three colours and of the same extent, and the one seemed reflected by the other as rainbow by rainbow, and the third seemed fire breathed forth equally from the one and the other.254

Influenced by Augustine's theory of signs, Dante believed that poetic language could signify God truly though partially, and equated the poet with the prophet.255 As a result, it is through poetic language or discourse that Dan-

254 Nella profonda e chiara sussistenza
dell'alto lume parvermi tre giri
di tre colori e d'una contenenza;
e l'un dall'altro come iri da iri
parea reflesso, e 'l terzo parea foco
che quinci e quindì igualmente si spiri.

255 Colish, p. 338.
te the pilgrim learns what he needs to know to transcend the Pauline mirror and experience beatific vision or complete knowledge of God.

Like Dante, Chaucer was interested in the relationship between salvation and language. However, Chaucer constrained his pilgrimage to the limitations of this world and utilized human discourse to explore how language communicates knowledge of God and truth despite the double meanings of words in which profane speech can bear a moral message or religious speech an immoral message. For example, the "Miller's Tale" may be understood as either a dirty story or a lesson against dishonesty. On the other hand, the "Prioress' Tale" may be read as either a miracle tale or as a tale advocating antisemitic violence. Figuratively, the meanings of these tales, like many of the Canterbury Tales, transform either in bono, expressing morality, or in malo, expressing immorality, depending on how the audience perceives the message. In 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, St. Paul used the theme of transformation to warn against the words of false teachers:

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of light. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.

Likewise, Chaucer's Parson refers to this passage as he
explains that "the preest that haunteth deedly synne, he may be likened to the aungel of derknesse tranformed in the aungel of light—he semeth aungel of light but for sothe he is aungel of derkness," (PT, 11. 895 ff.). Harry Bailly's stipulation that the winning tale must contain the "best sentence and moost solaas" (GP, 1. 778) implicitly casts the pilgrims into the role of teachers, and invites close examination of the morality or immorality of their words. Since Chaucer's retraction at the end of the Canterbury Tales does not designate which of the tales "sownen into synne" (PT, 1. 1085 ff.), the reader is reminded that he must analyze each tale's meaning for himself.

Chaucer's pilgrims often converse with words that signify both the spiritual and the profane. For example, in the tales, "pryvetee" not only signifies the mystery of God, but also a woman's genitalia. Although context determines to a large extent which meaning of a word has precedence, the literal and figurative meanings of a word like "pryvetee" still exist in a metonymic opposition that mirrors the tension between physical and spiritual nature. Chaucer the pilgrim, as well as Harry Bailly and the Wife of Bath, dismiss the profane aspect of language by emphasizing that certain words such as those used in the tale-telling

are not meant to be taken seriously. As Chaucer the pilgrim notes, "men shal nat maken ernest of game," (GP, l. 3185). However, Chaucer's artful use of words with double-meanings in the Canterbury Tales, suggest that he indeed took words in earnest, and was interested in how language mediates between man and God to communicate truth, especially spiritual realities.

Both the "Second Nun's Tale" and the "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" draw special attention to the relationship between language and conversion, intimating that moral regeneration includes linguistic regeneration. Both tales utilize alchemical typology to dramatize linguistic regeneration in terms of a movement where the individual pierces through the literal signification of language to discover metaphorical significations that express a higher reality. Thus, the Second Nun teaches how St. Cecilia's Christian witnessing transforms herself and others into new beings perfected by Christ's love, while the Canon's Yeoman intimates that an in malo conception of life may be overcome once one discovers how all meaning resides in Christ, the Word. Furthermore, as a rhetorical strategy, alchemical typology mirrors the transformation of man from a base to holy creature. As a result, the Second Nun and Canon's Yeoman communicate the reality of God by expressing their experience of His grace. Both tales begin with references to the base-
ness of matter, and end with alchemical allusions to the perfection of matter. Since these alchemical allusions are presented in terms of Christian myth, Chaucer implies that both alchemy and Christianity seek salvation, which may be understood as the reconciliation of spiritual and physical nature. St. Paul defined salvation in these terms when he said,

And not only they [the whole creation], but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. (Rom. 8:23)

Chaucer's Parson recalls this reconciliation of spiritual and physical nature when he alludes to the transformation and perfection of the body at the end of his sermon,

"Thanne shal men understonde what is the fruyt of penaunce, and after the word of Jesu Crist it is the endeelues blisse of hevene,/. . . . ther as the body of man that whilom was foul and derk is moore cleer than the sonne, (l. 1078).

Whereas alchemists sought to reconcile physical and spiritual nature in this life by creating the Philosopher's Stone, Christians anticipated this reconciliation through the resurrection of the body after death. By using alchemical typology, Chaucer emphasized that spiritual realities
such as salvation have meaning for man in this life only insofar as he becomes a new man in Christ, just as the formula for the Philosopher's Stone has meaning only for the alchemists who have received God's grace:

For unto Crist it is so lief and deere
That he wol nat that it discovered bee
But where it liketh to his deitee
Men for t'ensprie, and eek for to deffende
Whom that hym liketh--lo, this is the ende.

(CYT, 11. 1467-72)
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