Until recently, the function of magic within medieval literature was seen as little more than a convenient plot device; however, with recent scholarship suggesting that, because magical thought affected nearly every aspect of life in the Middle Ages, magic can be used as a means to explore the thoughts and attitudes of those writing during the time period. Examining the use of magic within two Breton lays, Marie de France's *Yönec* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, shows that magic is used to bestow agency upon characters that would not have much power or influence in reality. Comparing the magic within each tale shows that social tensions, particularly related to gender and social class, cause magic to manifest differently for each author, particularly in their portrayal of married women.

SMITH IV, WILLIAM SIEGFRIED, M.A. "Keep It Secree, I Yow Preye": Esoteric Alchemy in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale.* (2020)
Directed by Dr. Amy Vines. 23 pp.

Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is often overlooked by scholars despite its many unique elements. The priest depicted in the pars secunda is potentially the only clerical figure presented in the *Canterbury Tales* that fails due to a desire to perform his job competently. Examining the appeal that alchemy would hold for a parish priest demonstrates not only the depth of Chaucer's alchemical knowledge, but his ability to use the esoteric alchemical tradition as a rhetorical tool to expose the vulnerabilities created by the Church bureaucracy.

"SWICHE ILLUSIOUNS AND MESCHAUNCES": MAGIC AS A CATALYTIC

AGENT IN THE BRETON LAY

AND

"KEEP IT SECREE, I YOW PREYE": ESOTERIC ALCHEMY IN THE

CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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INTRODUCTION

The magical and esoteric thought of the Middle Ages is surprisingly well-represented in contemporary culture. From popular young adult properties like the *Harry Potter* franchise, to lesser-known cult horror films, such as *Midsommar* and *A Dark Song*, magical thought from the Middle Ages seems to be gaining popularity among artists and their audiences. While there have been a number of important works published in the past decades, the world of medieval scholarship seems less enthusiastic about embracing its period's obsession with magic and esoteric thought. Building on historical scholarship, particularly that of Richard Kieckhefer, literary scholars are beginning to connect the magic presented in medieval literature to historical documents, a process which provides new insight to the thoughts and anxieties of the time period. Each of my papers examines a way that magical and esoteric thought can be used to better understand the motivations of medieval authors and the characters they create. The first examines magic as a catalytic agent within the Breton lay. Both Marie de France and Chaucer use magic as a means to bestow influence and agency to characters that would not ordinarily have it, which allows for each author to recreate the social dynamics within their respective worlds. The second examines how esoteric thought specific to the Late Middle Ages provides context for reexamining an often-overlooked character in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. Understanding the appeal of esoteric alchemy for a member of the clergy exposes the entanglement of esoteric thought and religious belief that began in the Middle Ages

"SWICHE ILLUSIOUNS AND MESCHAUNCES": MAGIC AS A CATALYTIC AGENT IN THE BRETON LAY

Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* is unique among the rest of the *Canterbury Tales* for numerous reasons, but perhaps the most interesting of these differences is its explicit claim of being a Breton lay. Although the *Wife of Bath's Tale* satisfies all the characteristics of the Breton lay, she does not place the same intentional emphasis on the genre of her tale. The Franklin begins his tale by saying, "Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes / of diverse aventures maden layes" (709-710), which foregrounds the genre, implying that he believes the association between his tale and its literary precedents to be important. Given this emphasis and the Franklin's claim that the tale is "in [his] remembraunce" (714), it is curious that his story has no analogues amongst the known Breton lays. Working from Robert R. Edwards's claim that the Franklin invokes the Breton lay as a rhetorical strategy used "to create the literary atmosphere of a romantic Breton past" (213), it becomes apparent that the genre's magical context has a special appeal for both the Franklin and Chaucer. Exploring how Chaucer incorporates magic, one of the most telling aspects of a Breton lay, demonstrates its power as a literary tool that allowed for authors to address and explore social anxieties within their works by investing characters that would otherwise lack agency with the power to influence their futures. Although using magic for this purpose is consistent with the works of the genre's creator, Marie de France, Chaucer's understanding and presentation of magic differs

greatly from Marie's. Exploring each author's use of magic within their respective Breton

lays exposes nuanced understandings of magic influenced by gender and social class.

Magic is a notoriously difficult word to define, especially within the context of

the Middle Ages. Richard Kieckhefer's explanation from *Magic in the Middle Ages*

seems to provide the foundation for most scholarly work focused on the topic:

> In short, magic is a crossing-point where religion converges with science, popular
> beliefs intersect with those of the educated classes, and the conventions of fiction
> meet the realities of daily life. If we stand at this crossroads we may proceed
> outward in any various directions, to explore the theology, the social realities, the
> literature, or the politics of medieval Europe … Because magic was condemned
> by both the Church and state, its history leads into the thickets of legal
> development. Indeed, magic is worth studying largely because it serves as a
> starting point for excursions into so many areas of medieval culture. (2)

He has since revisited the idea in his chapter from the *Routledge History of Medieval*

Magic entitled "Rethinking How to Define Magic,", which concerns itself more with

attempting to determine the boundary lines and qualifications for which actions should be

considered magical. His earlier work is quick to demonstrate the appeal that magic held

for medieval authors in its connections to nearly every aspect of their culture. Given these

numerous connections, it is no surprise that there were many, often conflicting,

perspectives regarding the true nature of magic. The most prominent division in these

perspectives separated educated intellectuals from the common layperson. The average

uneducated person in the Middle Ages would have understood magic as a natural part of

their universe, but among the intellectuals of Marie's age, magic was believed to rely on

demonic power. This thought began with Augustine and his belief that, with the

permission of God, demons were able to perform acts of magic; however, these demons were not allowed to make any changes to the physical world. Because of this limitation, acts of demonic magic could only be illusions, regardless of how real they may appear to be (Goulding 313). Although magic was never able to entirely shake these demonic connections, a "grudging recognition" that magic could have natural origins began to take place in the twelfth century (Kieckhefer 16). The translation of magical texts from Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew into Latin alongside the establishment of universities served as a catalyst for ecclesiastical authorities to begin reconsidering their notions of magic (Page and Rider 2). Although the original Breton lays written by Marie do not rely on the systematic understanding of magic that was developing in scholastic settings, the decreasing hostility of intellectuals towards magic was undoubtedly a blessing for the genre.

It is during this time of transition when Marie de France defined the Breton lay as a literary tradition. Although there is continuing debate among scholars on whether the Breton lay should be considered its own genre or, because of its structural similarities, a sub-genre of romance, a majority see the Breton lay as a form unique enough to be set apart within the medieval romance genre (Furnish 94). Because the Breton lay is distinguished by its content and not its form, Chaucer must have found some aspect of the tradition started by Marie to be appealing for his Franklin. Much like the genre argument, the characteristics of what exactly makes a Breton lay are rarely presented consistently from scholar to scholar with one major exception: the Breton lay must include elements of the supernatural. The prevalence of the supernatural within the Breton lay is derived

from Celtic tradition, which is why the genre is so often associated with the appearance of fairies; however, this is not the only way in which the supernatural can manifest itself. A Breton lay is not required to include a trip to a supernatural realm, an intrusion from an otherworldly visitor, or any physical aspect related to either. Instead, the Breton lay must include an element that is closely related of the Celtic supernatural, such as magic (Furnish 90). Until recently, the role of magic as more than a plot device has gone relatively unexplored. Michelle Sweeney, in her work *Magic in Medieval Romance*, argues that magic "explore[s] issues of interest and concern to their audiences. Some of the most popular issues to be found consistently under debate in the romances are ideas of love, the nature of free will, how communities are structured, and claims of loyalty" (11). These themes, particularly the tension between agency and loyalty for married women, are explored through magic in Marie de France's *Yönec* and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*. While both use magic as a means to grant agency, the effects of this agency manifests differently in each work.

The *Franklin's Tale* faithfully adheres to the tradition of using the Breton lay's magical qualities to address larger societal issues. Although magic was indeed appealing for its ability to provide a form of entertaining escapism (Saunders 1-2), magic was invaluable as a rhetorical tool when used to address potentially sensitive issues. As Sweeney explains,

> Magic used as a literary tool enables an imaginative link between the world of the audience and the text under discussion … This imaginative link functions by allowing the author to create a desensitized space in which the discussion of difficult or provocative topics is achieved without alienating the audience. Used

as a literary device, magic also enables the romance author to encourage associations between the text and a series of complex ideas stemming from the place of magic in medieval society. (19-20)

This imaginative link was utilized by Marie at the genre's inception and, undoubtedly, held appeal for Chaucer as well. Although the Franklin prefaces his tale by confessing that he is a "burel man" (716) that "lerned nevere rethorik" (719), the remarks seem to be included as an attempt to cover up the true intention. Much like the Canon's Yeoman, who in his own tale confesses to being a "lewed man" (787) before listing a catalogue of alchemical knowledge, the Franklin shows a great proficiency in his explanation of magic during the telling of his own Breton lay. Despite Chaucer's faithful use of magic as a tool for expressing social anxieties, the types of magic being used by Marie and Chaucer are different, each reflecting the author's own place within their world.

For Marie, the use of the Breton lay's setting was crucial given her position in early stages of the de-escalation of the Church's hostility towards magic. Making use the distant pre-Christian past that makes other romances seem to be of "very piddling time-depth" (Williams 126), the Celtic legends that inspired the Breton lays provided a temporal space that allowed Marie to avoid placing magic directly against the Christian society of her day. In addition to this temporal distance, Marie's Breton lays avoided the dangerous implications that accompany the use of magic by strategically omitting any explanation of the magic's source (Kieckhefer 112). Avoiding associations with demonic black magic was an essential endeavor for romance authors and likely led to an "unwritten and perhaps unacknowledged code … which limited the use of black magic in order to retain, in general, the Church's tolerance of the literature and, in particular, other

forms of acceptable magic which appeared in the literature" (Sweeney 46-47). The early

Breton lays often circumvented the lingering belief that all magic was based in demonic

power by de-emphasizing the magic's origin. In these stories, characters with

extraordinary abilities are usually relegated to minor characters who interact with the

protagonist (Sweeney 26). The magic that was incorporated intentionally blurred the lines

between an outright magical act and a marvel, something existing within the natural

world that was inexplicable (Sweeney 32). This ambiguity not only helped distance the

author from connotations of demonic magic, but helped to create suspense regarding

potential motives characters would have for engaging with magic in the text (Sweeney

31). By encouraging the audience to question the character's motives, romances,

especially Breton lays, were able to

> focus on the achievement of a balance between private needs and public
> obligations. By incorporating a strong magical presence in the romance, an author
> creates a medium that explores both the relevant political and social issues of the
> day, and timeless questions of faith, love, loyalty, fate, and destiny. (Sweeney 46)

While both Marie and Chaucer address these "timeless questions," each author's

portrayal of magic caused their stories to approach them in different ways.

Marie's *Lais*, much like Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian romances, focus on the

balance between one's loyalties and obligations. Typically, the protagonist is placed in a

position in which their loyalty to a lover conflicts with previously established loyalties to

a court, king, or a husband. The protagonist's goal becomes finding some means of

balancing their obligations through being tested, often through magical means (Sweeney

47). Additionally, magic freed the plot from being bound by the need for a rational chain of cause and effect (Sweeney 23), which allowed for the exploration of larger societal issues at a comfortable distance from the current reality. While the *Lais* may not provide any reliable information as a source for historical events, they are "invaluable as guides to attitudes and values" of courtly culture (Kieckhefer 105). Marie's *Lais*, particularly *Yönec*, are especially interesting in that she uses magic to present an aspirational picture where existing social boundaries are often able to be overcome through magic. In her works, magic is presented as a means to test a character's morality, with the narrative being structured in a manner that places characters in positions that require the use of the magical properties provided to them (Sweeney 86). These situations are meaningful because the character engaging with magic is given the agency to make decisions and control their own actions. In *Yönec,* magic is the only means by which the young wife can attain the agency to act in a meaningful way. Without the intervention of Muldumarec, which can only occur after she asks God to fulfill her wishes (101-104), the young wife would have no means of escaping the tower or her husband's abuse. Muldumarec's appearance forces the wife to make a choice between her previously established loyalty to her wedding vows and newly presented magical *ami*.

The magic involved in Muldumarec's appearance is significant in framing, not only the wife's decisions, but the entire text. At the time Marie was writing, Muldumarec's appearance would likely have been seen an act of demonic magic. The Celtic influence in the Breton lay would imply that Muldumarec is associated with the Túatha Dé, former Celtic gods eventually incorporated into Christian mythology as "half-

fallen angels," invisible, immortal human beings that had somehow been able to avoid original sin, or pagan magicians with a powerful knowledge of the occult (Williams 126-127). Any one of these understandings casts Muldumarec as a demon himself or, at the least, being reliant upon demonic power for the creation of his magic. Because of this, it is incredibly important that Marie seek to distance her character from any assumptions of demonic magic made by her audience. In his first words, Muldumarec establishes his connection with the marvelous but unknown natural properties that provide a morally acceptable alternative to demonic magic:

> "Oh, lady, do not fear me so!
> The hawk's a noble bird, Although
> its secrets are obscure to you,
> cherish, trust what you know is true,
> and take me for your lover!" (121-125)

In keeping with the unwritten code, Marie intentionally makes this connection between Muldumarec and natural magic, which carries with it important implications for the wife's choice to engage with his magic. Muldumarec makes it clear that he could not have arrived without her consent, showing that it was her prayer which caused his arrival, saying "[He] could not come to [her] in love —- / out of his palace could not move / had [she] not summoned [him]" (131-133). The wife's ability to control the direction of the story is important because, at this point, if she decides to commit adultery with Muldumarec, she could still be condemned because the audience has no clear proof that his appearance is not an act of demonic deception, although Muldumarec's claims seem to indicate he is not a demon. It is only after the wife has placed the condition that

Muldumerac must "beleiev[e] in God above" (138) that she has put herself in a position

to pass the morality test that has been placed before her. Muldumarec's appearance is one

way in which "magic can offer a means of controlling individual action or influencing

future events, [which creates] a potent medium for exploring the nature of such issues in

both the tale and the larger world" (Sweeney 29). Because of the wife's ability to direct

her own future, which would have otherwise been impossible without the inclusion of

magic, she is able to demonstrate unequivocally that Muldumerac is not a demon and

instead, reframes the situation in such a way that the act of adultery becomes a morally

and theologically defensible action. After Muldumerac has taken Communion (187-192),

the wife's choice to use his magic is "sanctified by God" (Sweeney 92), which places it

in stark contrast to her marriage to a husband that was "plunged … in Hell's river of fire"

(88) and prevents his wife from attending Mass (75-76).

Before Muldumarec's death, he gives the wife two items that commonly carry

magical properties: a ring (415) and a sword (421). These items, along with others, such

as potions, have been used by authors across many countries and languages, implying a

general understanding of the workings of magical objects (Sweeney 18). In using these

easily understood objects, Marie ensured that her audience would understand their effects

without needing a great deal of explanation, allowing her to keep the origin and nature of

the objects more mysterious. These unknown origins were provocative, directly

increasing the audience's suspense and anxiety about the item's use while also hinting at

the potential for the existence of a character's dark side (Sweeney 18-19). However, this

ambivalence means nothing without the character's ability to influence their own future,

and, without the presence of magic, the wife would never gain the sort of agency that allows for this. The magical ring becomes a catalyst for the wife to exercise her "will and rational decision-making powers," through which Marie is able to make a suggestion that in many other contexts would be incredibly contentious: "even God uses magic and adultery to teach the needy how to assert their will and to punish the unjust" (Sweeney 79). Because the wife has been able to take revenge upon her husband for imprisoning her and murdering her *ami*, Marie has created a story that communicates ideas otherwise impossible without the presence of magic. In giving the wife her justice, she creates a situation in which the outcome that should be is not bound by the views of the society in which it was written (Sweeney 93).

While Marie sets the precedent for Breton lays by incorporating a sense of ambiguity into the origins of the magic appearing in her texts, Chaucer makes use of later developments in the medieval understanding of magic, specifically the tradition of clerical magic. Unlike Marie, Chaucer is explicit about the source of the magic within his tale, going to great lengths in describing his "magyk natureel" (1125). Although this strategy seems to be the antithesis of Marie's ambiguity, both strategies are meant to achieve the same goal: distancing the magic within the story from demonic connotations. For Chaucer, this is incredibly important since the illusory magic present in the tale was understood to be the domain of demons. Chaucer demonstrates to his audience that the magic in *The Franklin's Tale*, although an illusion, makes use of the occult powers that already exist within the natural world. Due in part to the centuries of development in magical thought between Marie's *Lais* and Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*, Chaucer himself

possessed an impressive amount of magical knowledge and learning that is not typically

associated with previous romance authors (Saunders, *Routledge* 358). Although this

degree of specific occult knowledge separates him from Marie, it is not unique among the

Canterbury Tales. Because of Chaucer's thoroughly detailed depiction of alchemy in the

Canon's Yeoman's Tale, many renaissance readers actually believed that Chaucer himself

was a master-alchemist (Gabrovsky 12).

Because of this technical knowledge, some scholars, such as Alexander N.

Gabrovsky, see the magician less as a magical illusionist, but, instead, as an alchemist.

From Chaucer's description of the contents within the books consulted by the magician,

Gabrovsky sees many similarities to alchemical texts, which, based on the *Canon's*

Yeoman's Tale, Chaucer was familiar with. The lunar charts that are "Touchynge the

eighte and twenty mansiouns / That longen to the moone" (1129-1130) are similar to

works like the *Liber secretorum alchimie* attributed to Constantine of Pisa. Through the

constant consultation of these lunar charts, "The Orléans philosophre carefully tracks the

movement and phases of the moon in order to successfully transmute the black rocks"

(Gabrovsky 92). This association would serve to further associate the magic of the

Franklin's Tale with the natural world due to medieval view of that alchemical

transmutation was natural, not magical. Gabrovsky cites Jacqueline Tasioulas to explain

the importance of celestial bodies to the sublunar world, a crucial element of alchemical

transmutation:

> "The planets influence the physical world, and anything that consists of matter
> will feel these effects. Plants, animals, and the human body are all subject to the

movement of the stars by virtue of the fact that they are physical things in a
physical world." (qtd. in Gabrovsky 5)

Through understanding how to effectively manipulate this celestial influence, a magician

would not need to consort with demons, but instead work within the existing properties of

the physical world. The eventual acceptance and technical development of this sort of

"magyk natureel" serves as a means to reframe the medieval understanding of magic. At

this point in the fourteenth-century, Chaucer's audience would understand that only acts

that directly defy an Aristotelian understanding of physics could be defined as magical or

miraculous (Gabrovsky 11). With this in mind, it is understandable that, following

Gabrovsky's reading, the rocks did not disappear, but instead were altered by natural

means, making the magician of the *Franklin's Tale* seem to be more of a scientist than a

user of magic; however this proto-scientific understanding of the magic in the *Franklin's*

Tale is severely undercut by the illusions encountered by Aurelius's brother upon

entering the magician's home. After witnessing hunters in a forest, knights at a joust, and

enjoying a dance with a woman,

> … this maister that this magyk wroughte
> Saugh it was tyme, he clapte his handes two,
> And farewel! Al oure revel was ago.
> And yet remoeved they nevere out of the hous,
> Whil they saugh al this sighte merveillous (1202-1206)

These illusions witnessed by the brother cannot be attributed to alchemical transmutation

and seem instead to be much more in line with demonic magic, which calls into question

whether or not the magician is truly using "magyk natureel." Even with these seemingly

demonic-powered illusions, Chaucer's use of "merveillous" as a descriptor for the experience creates a degree of ambiguity more in line with the tradition set forth by Marie. Although *magic* and *marvel* can often be used interchangeably in romances (Sweeney 31), anything explicitly described as a *marvel* would be associated with the natural world, leaving open the possibility that these illusions are not demonic. While most living in the Middle Ages would not concern themselves much with the difference between such classifications, distinguishing between the two would have been important to the "theologically and philosophically sophisticated elite (Kieckhefer 9), who made up the practitioners of clerical or learned magic. One thirteenth-century magic text entitled *De mirabilibus mundi*, explains that one cannot immediately judge an action that defies logic as demonic because "One should not deny any marvelous thing because he lacks a reason for it, but should try it out for the causes of marvelous things are hidden, and follow such diverse causes preceding them that human understanding cannot apprehend them" (qtd. in Page 21). Because the audience is unable to situate the magician comfortably in any one magical tradition, Chaucer, like Marie, is able to use magic as the catalyst for the audience to question the character's morality.

The tale's most important act of magic, the disappearance of the rocks, creates a moral dilemma for each of the main characters. Chaucer's use of one central event affecting multiple characters, instead of many smaller events focused on the protagonist, forces the reader to understand each character's actions in relation to one another (Sweeney 148). Considering that none of the characters feels compelled to verify the disappearance of the rocks, the magical act, seems to exist solely as a catalyst for a test of

morality. Examining the social context of Chacuer's decision to present clerical magic in the *Franklin's Tale* seems to foreshadow the fate of certain characters, particularly Dorigen and Aurelius. Whereas the ambiguous magic presented in *Yönec* served as a means for the wife to gain agency and influence, empowering the female character, the clerical magic of the *Franklin's Tale* "acts as the means by which Dorigen loses control over her body … [and] its presence in the tale seems to neutralise Dorigen's femaleness in that Arveragus demands that she honour her word" (Sweeney 27). The use of clerical magic to control and limit Dorigen's influence, particularly in relation to the influence of celestial bodies on the sublunar world, is consistent with how Chaucer's audience would have understood the interplay between gender and magic. Sophie Page explains this relationship as it appears in the thirteenth-century *Le Fait des Romains*: "male practitioners of magic tended to be associated with complex rituals, invocations of spirits and knowledge of the workings of celestial bodies, whilst women were believed to work more closely with natural objects in the sublunary world" (16). Because of the connection between women and the natural world, it is easy to assume that women would also be susceptible to celestial influence in much the same way the natural world is.

Because of this, Dorigen's story seems to be a direct reversal of the wife in *Yönec*. The wife's access to magic provides her with the influence that is taken from Dorigen. Without magic, Dorigen is relegated to the only two "tried and true avenues to power [for a woman in a romance]: God and men" (Sweeney 158), both of which are working in opposition to her. Acknowledging that the tale is supposed to be set in the pre-Christian world of the Breton lay, there is still a great deal of intermingling between paganism and

Christianity. Although Chaucer plays down the various invocations to pagan gods, Dorigen's questions of theodicy feature prominently. In her appeals to "Eterne God" (865), Dorigen asks how "swich a parfit wys God and a stable / … [has] wroght this werk unresonable" (871-872). With this, Dorigen loses the first avenue available to her; because God has created her problem, all she can do is plead her case and wait. The second avenue, men, seem to be working in conjunction to exacerbate her problem.

Given how unusual it is for a Breton lay to explicitly label the source of magic within its story, the clerical magic at use deserves additional consideration. The social factors that led to clerical magic's association with men is present in the tale from its inception. Chaucer explains the exclusive setting that Aurelius's brother first learns of clerical magic:

> That whiles he was at Orliens in Fraunce —
> As Yonge clerkes that been lykerous
> To reden artes that been curious
> Seken in every halke and every herne
> Particuler sciences for to lerne (1118-1122)

From this, it is clear that Chaucer understands the how closely the development of clerical magic is to the opportunity to pursue an education. This is also emphasized when he meets the "yong clerk romynge by hymself" (1173), and the clerk greets him "in Latyn thriftily" (1174). In order to even be exposed to clerical magic, one needed to be given opportunities and skills that, at the time, were the sole domain of men. Catherine Rider explains that examples of manuscripts detailing clerical magic

> … demonstrate how socially restricted an activity learned magic must have been. Reading a magical text or carrying out one of the operations described in them required literacy in Latin, access to books and sometimes knowledge of the liturgy. These skills and opportunities were gendered and men were far more likely to possess them than women. Moreover, only certain men had these skills: clergy and others with some education. (348)

Because of the exclusivity of the required knowledge, it is little surprise that the desired outcomes for acts of clerical magic demonstrate themes that would appeal to Aurelius.

While most of these clerical rituals are interested in social aspects that one would expect a scholar or member of the clergy to show interest in, such as gaining knowledge and specific intellectual skills, others sought to bring wealth and social status via the acquisition of possessions, such as a horse. Still others were designed to gain the "love or sexual favors of women," which may hint at the anxieties of celibacy imposed in universities and clerical environments (Rider 348). The existence of such rituals shows that clerical magic had a standing tradition of being used as a tool to remove women's influence over their lives; something which Aurelius's brother would undoubtedly find useful in his attempts to have Aurelius "warisshed hastily" (1138).

Despite the differences between the ways in which magic manifests in the writings of Marie and Chaucer, both authors show consistency in the effects of their chosen traditions of magic. The ambiguous magic of Marie's Breton lays serves as a means for granting agency and influence to a character that would lack it in a realistic setting. While Chaucer's magic grants influence to a character that would otherwise lack it, his explicit use of the clerical tradition of magic grants agency to men at the cost of women. This consistent presentation of magic as a means of acquiring control and

influence provides a motive for the Franklin to choose to tell a Breton lay. Because magic

plays an essential role, the Breton lay provides the perfect opportunity for the Franklin to

address his own social anxieties in a relatively safe manner. While the Franklin would

have existed in the middle of the medieval social hierarchy, he would not have been a

part of the nobility. He possessed freedom, but little influence and opportunity to improve

his station in life. Magic presented a promise of knowledge and power, offering "ways to

bypass the socially acceptable means — hard work, high status, expertise, or prayer — of

achieving any number of desired ends" (Page 5). While magic certainly serves to make

the Franklin's tale more interesting for the other pilgrims, it also allows him to tell a tale

in which the existing social structure is upended in a way that avoids being offensive or

off putting. With Chaucer's initial description of the Franklin in the *General Prologue* as

being "Seint Julian … in his contree" (340), the Franklin would find great appeal in being

able to express such a controversial sentiment without losing the hospitality that Chaucer

attaches to him, allowing the Franklin tells his tale exploring "the shades of grey between

what is real or right, and what *seems* to be real and right" (Sweeney 146).

Although Aurelius fails his ultimate goal, through the use of magic, he is able to

gain power and influence far beyond what is rightfully his: a goal seemingly shared by

the Franklin. As a member of a social class that was destined to perish alongside

feudalism, the Franklin seems to be expressing desire to move beyond the limits dictated

by his social status. The inappropriateness of this desire is reflected is Aurelius's

willingness to engage in magic that he does not understand. A willingness to move into

this potentially dangerous territory exposes what Michelle Sweeney believes to be

Aurelius's greatest weakness: "the nature of the twisted passion which drives him to pay

for a magical way to force Dorigen to comply with his desires" (165). Through his

presentation of the Franklin as a narrator, Chaucer seems to imply that, much like

Aurelius, the Franklin has engaged with clerical magic in an attempt to fulfill his own

desires. Being "Epicurus owene sone" (336), the Franklin's desires would undoubtedly

have served as the prime motivation for his actions. Within the world the Franklin has

created, magic "is required to expand what seems unnatural into something *naturally*

possible" (Sweeney 157). In the narrative, this is achieved by focusing on the of clerical

magic to manipulate the physical world. Following J.D. North's suggestions, the

Franklin's impressive knowledge of the magician's materials indicates that he is

withholding information that is "not astrological but in some sense magical" (qtd. in

Sweeney 157). This suspicion, coupled with the dramatic descriptions denouncing the

same magic he seems to know so well as "swiche illusiouns and swich meschaunces / as

hethen folk useden in thilke dayes" (1293-1294) and the declaration that the "hooly

chirches feith in oure bileve / ne suffreth noon illusioun us to greve" (1133-1134), paints

a portrait of the Franklin as one who has a deep connection with magic despite knowing

this would cast him in a negative light for his audience. Regardless of the attempts to

cover it up, Chaucer makes it clear that the Franklin has more than a passing interest in

magic, which, given his place in society, would imply an anxiety about his inability to

influence his own future. Because of this, the Franklin would have naturally been drawn

towards clerical magic for its ability to recreate the social structure in the manner he

believes it should be. For Sweeney, "Chaucer uses magic to enable a demonstration of

what would happen if a social structure based on noble action, as endorsed by the Franklin, were adopted (167).

Although the *Franklin's Tale* initially appears to be mistakenly labeled as a Breton lay by its teller, comparing it to original Breton lays, such as Marie de France's *Yönec*, shows a foundational similarity in the role of magic within the narratives. Despite creating a plot with no analogue in the known Breton lay tradition, Chaucer's understanding of the genre's most important element allows him to follow Marie's example in exploring social anxieties, particularly those related to class and gender. While in both *Yönec* and the *Franklin's Tale*, magic is used as a means of providing characters with agency and influence that they could not acquire in the real world, the effects of this power manifest differently in each text. Marie grants agency to a woman in an oppressive marriage through an ambiguous form of magic. After ensuring that the magic is not demonic, the wife is able to acquire a degree of freedom that would have otherwise been impossible and enact justice on her oppressor. Chaucer's Franklin, on the other hand, uses the tradition of clerical magic to remove agency and influence from Dorigen, granting this power to Aurelius. The Franklin takes advantage of clerical magic's gendered aspects to tell a story about two men who are able to wield power beyond their natural station through its use: Aurelius is able to control Dorigen, while the magician holds influence over both Aurelius and Dorigen. The Franklin as a member of a dying social class that grants him freedom without a great degree of influence would find appeal in these characters' ability to influence those of higher stations, and, additionally, Chaucer seems to hint that Franklin has himself experimented with this form of clerical

magic. Both authors use the magical tradition of the Breton lay to present society as it

should be, but because of the imaginative link that magic creates between the of the text

and the world of the audience, these potentially unsettling ideas are able to be expressed

at a comfortable distance from reality

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"KEEP IT SECREE, I YOW PREYE": ESOTERIC ALCHEMY IN THE *CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE*

Not much seems to have changed since Lee Patterson pointed out the "dearth of criticism" (26) surrounding the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* in the early '90s. The tale seems to only appear in scholarship related to alchemical literature, and, even then, it is little more than a passing reference or footnote. Although critics are justified in seeing the Canon's Yeoman's use of alchemical knowledge as the primary appeal of the text, there are many elements of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* that have gone entirely overlooked, such as the priest that is deceived in the tale's pars secunda. Unlike most clerical characters depicted in the *Canterbury Tales*, this priest is himself a victim of the Church's corruption, and it is through exploring his role as a victim of alchemical deception that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* offers a unique perspective on Chaucer's criticism of the medieval Church. The more prominent religious figures in the text, like the Pardoner, the Summoner, and the various members of the Church presented within their respective tales, are easily vilified because they are either too ignorant or malicious to be forgiven for their actions. This priest offers a third option when reading Chaucer's critique of the Church by presenting a member of the clergy whose failings hint at an underlying desire to better perform the responsibilities of his post. This possibility of good intention is best seen through the way in which the scene of the deception manipulates three of alchemy's major appeals**:** language, application, and, most importantly, theology. Each aspect is effective, not only because it corresponds with

actions he should already be performing as a part of his priestly duties, but because it directly targets the vulnerabilities and insecurities present in the underprepared, overburdened priests of Chaucer's time. Focusing on these aspects in respect to the priest also provides greater context for the Canon's Yeoman's concluding remarks, which some scholars feel is inconsistent with the rest of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale.*

Before examining the appeals of alchemy, it is first important to consider the presentation of the priest within the narrative of the pars secunda. Patterson's reading of this tale is a telling example of how easily the priest is written off as a simple, one-dimensional character. For him, the characters within the second narrative are merely constructs of the Canon's Yeoman's "doomed commitment to intelligibility and explicitness [and] to sorting the world into clear categories … the canon is a monstrous figure of unmitigated evil … while the priest is simply a dim-witted dupe" (37). Reading the second part of the tale in such a simplified way neglects many of the elements that make it so unique. Although I agree that the priest's gullibility is an incredibly important aspect of his character, neither gullibility nor stupidity can be considered a motive for his enthusiastic engagement with the canon's deception. In fact, based on the Canon's Yeoman's initial characterization of the priest as "pleasant" and "servysable" (1014)**,** it seems that the most offensive aspect of this priest is his lack of personality. More telling is the Canon's Yeoman's apostrophic break just after the deceptive canon has offered to teach the priest how to "werken in philosophie" (1058):

> Noght wiste the preest with whom that he delte,
> Ne of his harm comynge, he no thyng felte.
> O sely preest! O sely Innocent!
> With coveitise anon thou shalt be blent!
> O graceless, ful blynd is thy conceite,
> No thyng ne artow war of the deceite,
> Which that this fox yshapen hath to thee! (1074-1080)

In addition to the explicit descriptions of the priest as "sely" and "innocent," the Canon's Yeoman makes a point of emphasizing just how unaware of the deception the priest is at this moment. While it is clear the priest will inevitably succumb to greed, this moment of corruption does not explicitly take place within the tale, meaning that, at the moment the priest decides to engage in the alchemical acts, he does so without corrupt intent. These good intentions, while seemingly out of place in a text that also contains clerical characters such as the Pardoner and Summoner, is an accurate representation of the typical medieval priest. As Catherine Cox explains, "[the priesthood's shortcomings are] not to say, *of course*, that priests in general had moral failings; the majority of priests took their vocation seriously and performed their duties well, or at least adequately" (61). Although this description places the priest in a uniquely moral position, it still falls short of fully developing a clear motive for the priest, leaving him as little more than an ignorant, malleable mass whose sole purpose for existence seems to be emphasizing the moral depravity of the obviously malicious canon.

Given the significant amount of detailed forethought that goes into the canon's plan for deceiving the priest, it seems unlikely that he would be choosing his target at random. Chaucer clearly establishes that, because of the priest's friendliness towards the

"wyf," who, in turn, does not allow the priest to pay for anything, he had his own spending silvers (1015-1018); however, there would have been many of other potential victims in Chaucer's world with money to extort. Christine Chism points out, canons of the time, much like monks and friars, were well known for their lack of morality, engaging frequently in simony and displaying an uncanny ability to evade canonical law (344). This savvy manipulation of their office demonstrates an ability to leverage their knowledge of the vulnerabilities within the Church's bureaucracy. Using this knowledge, the canon must have known that priests, even the well-meaning ones, would have been uniquely susceptible to alchemy because of their position. Upon examining priests in their historical context, it becomes clear that they are the perfect candidates for Chaucer to utilize in demonstrating how members of the Church could fail their duties without being the morally reprehensible characters depicted in other tales.

Cox provides an insightful portrait of priests as Chaucer would have understood them. Priests occupied a position in the middle of the Church hierarchy, ranking below the pope and bishops, but above the deacons and subdeacons. As this positioning of the priest suggests, they "mediated between the people and God" (55). Because of this interaction with the world outside the Church, priests were members of the secular clergy who were charged with serving the laity, which made up the majority of the Church's followers. This direct engagement with the outside world put priests into a unique position in which the applicability of their knowledge was integral to their effectiveness in performing their duties. Each priest would serve the worshipers within their designated parish, potentially making them the only members of the major order of clergy that would

be personally known to many within the laity (56). Given that England was composed of approximately 9,500 parishes containing anywhere from fifty to a few hundred members each (Ackerman qtd. in Cox 56)**,** the Church found itself in desperate need of priests. In desperation, the Church was not always able to provide ideal candidates to watch over their flock.

In order to fill the demand for the hundreds of positions required**,** many priests were not properly qualified or educated, which, as demonstrated in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale,* creates an easy target for the deception. In the early thirteenth-century**,** the Church established a set of expectations for any man that sought entry into the priesthood, which, in theory, should have ensured that all priests coming in contact with the laity were able to perform their duties effectively. In order for a man to be considered**,** he had to be of legitimate birth, unmarried, and at least twenty-five years old. In addition to these qualifications, candidates also had to be "educated sufficiently," exhibit "strong and decent moral character," and

> have secured a *titulus*, that is, either a position of employment with the Church or some other respectable and reliable means of financial support**,** be it private wealth or employment in professions deemed suitably respectable, such as teaching. (Cox 58)

If every priest met these expectations**,** they would have been properly equipped to navigate the secular world; however, many were put into their position with vulnerabilities that inevitably led to failure. Because the text makes clear that his is not a

moral or financial failure, the most likely catalyst for the priest's downfall can be found in his lack of formal education.

Unpacking the vaguely defined expectation that the priest be "educated sufficiently" exposes a vulnerability uniquely susceptible to the appeal of alchemy. Although William Abel Pantin describes training for the priesthood as "very haphazard" (29) when compared to modern standards, this lack of systematic training did not prevent priests from being required to meet a set of minimum expectations. Any candidate that completed a basic four year grammar school education would have been exposed to enough Latin through the reading of classical texts and portions of the Bible to demonstrate the expected command of the language that each priest had to demonstrate before assuming their responsibilities (Cox 58). Although this curriculum exposed the candidate to Scripture, a standard education would not include the study of theology, canon law, or church rituals, which meant that a priest would still need additional education to perform their job effectively. Any candidate that was unable to receive this education in a university setting had to gain knowledge through some sort of self-education, such as "reading the important texts, listening to sermons, and conversing with others having relevant clerical interests" (59). Given that most successful candidates who were educated in a university setting became drawn into academic and administrative work (Pantin 29), it is likely that the priest of the pars secunda was self-educated. Setting priests out to self-educate greatly compromised the Church's oversight of the content their future priests were consuming.

Although priests that were not able to receive their education in a university were forced to take responsibility for their own education, they were not left entirely without resources; however, these resources predisposed the candidate to the appeals of alchemy. Two trends with roots in the thirteenth-century made the task of effectively self-educating possible: ecclesiastical reforms creating a program of religious instruction for the laity and the development of technical literature dealing with canon law, moral theology, and preaching (Pantin 189-190). With the revival of town life, a new, more educated laity began to take shape. The educated layman, whose importance is "impossible to exaggerate … in late medieval ecclesiatical history" (Pantin 189), required a more highly developed form of instruction and a higher degree of theological competency from the clergy, which made the creation of the technical literature utilized by priests incredibly important. Manuals for priests, such as the constitutions of Alexander of Stavensby and William of Pagula's *Oculus sacerdotis*, focused heavily on the priest's duty to take confession and preach to the laity on the seven deadly sins (Pantin 192, 199-200). In light of the *Omnis utriusque sexus* decreed by the Lateran Council of 1215, which made annual confession to the parish priest and annual communion at Easter obligatory for all followers of the Church (Pantin 192), these texts rightfully focus on the decree's emphasis of sin, confession, and atonement. It is important for the priest to focus on these topics because, as John de Burgo explains in the preface to his *Pupilla oculi*, a work largely based on the *Oculus sacerdotis*, as the world continues to age, knowledge becomes lost, and, because human life continues to get shorter, the opportunity for acquiring knowledge has been lessened (qtd. in Pantin 213). The priest serves as the most

effective means for the laity to receive the knowledge that will lead to their ultimate salvation. Placing an emphasis on sin and atonement within the grim outlook espoused by the *Pupilla oculi* creates the same anxieties explored in the alchemical tradition of the Middle Ages. Given the increasing level of education within the laity and the popularity of alchemical texts at the time, it is reasonable to assume that when pursuing an education, these priests would form a general understanding of the alchemical tradition, even though they were ill-equipped to engage with the temptations it afforded.

For an undereducated but well-meaning priest, alchemy's appeal would have been threefold: the use of alchemical language, the application of knowledge, and the connections to Christian theology. Each of these aspects is deceitfully manipulated to create a scene in which the priest believes not only that an act of transmutation is possible, but that the pursuit of alchemical secrets is proper for someone of his clerical position. At this point, it is important to note the role that the canon plays as an alchemical con-artist, otherwise known as a "puffer." Since alchemy has the distinct disadvantage of being scientifically impossible, the puffer must enter the deception knowing that he must compensate for his inability to deliver on the initial promise. In order to do this, the puffer of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* uses the linguistic appeal of alchemical text, which would entice the priest's desire to educate himself, the applied aspect of alchemy, which makes the acquisition of knowledge appear authentic, and alchemy's newly forged connections with Christian theology, which show the act as not only a natural extension and validation of his own Christian faith, but also its salvation.

Alchemical texts, through their use of notoriously dense language, present both a unique challenge and appeal to a priest pursuing his own education. The primary difficulty of these texts comes from their "treading the line between including the select few who could decipher their coded language and excluding the ignorant" (Chism 350). This attempted balance can be seen in the *Libellus de Alchimia [Little Book of Alchemy]*, written in the fourteenth century by an author claiming to be Albertus Magnus, the influential German philosopher, theologian, and saint. In an example of the paradoxical style created through the tension of simultaneously attempting to reveal and conceal the secrets of alchemy, the pseudo-Magnus claims in their introduction that the text was written for friends "in such a way that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand." After continuing in this impenetrable style, the author makes a clear promise with enough appeal to make struggling with alchemical language seem worthwhile: "For to you I shall reveal the secret, but from others I shall conceal the secret of secrets because of the envy of this noble knowledge … Beware, then of revealing to anyone our secrets in this work" (qtd. in Chism 351). This promise of secret knowledge is a powerful motivator, especially when the priest is given the unique opportunity to learn it directly from one who claims to possess it.

Although the language of alchemical literature was notoriously indecipherable, much of the content it did communicate mirrored the increasing systemization of theological knowledge brought about by the technical resources being used by priests. Much of the scholarship focused on the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* centers on Chaucer's proficiency with technical alchemical knowledge. As demonstrated in the prima pars,

lists of ingredients and classifications are essential to alchemical knowledge. Although

the Canon's Yeoman claims that he is a "lewed man" (787), he can nonetheless list nearly

thirty lines of instruments and ingredients. After this listing, the Yeoman speaks of the

"foure spirites and the bodies sevene" (820), which begin to present information in the

same manner as manuals for priests. The *Oculus sacerdotis* claims it is a priest's

responsibility to deliver four sermons per year on the fourteen articles of faith, the seven

sacraments, the seven works of mercy, the seven virtues, the ten commandments of the

law, the two commandments of the gospel, and the seven sins (qtd. in Pantin 199-200).

Organizing knowledge into these groups largely mirrors the way a priest's theological

knowledge was presented, especially given the prevalence of the number seven.

Although the secret of alchemy is hidden within the impenetrable language of alchemical

literature, the structure of alchemical knowledge holds an appeal through its striking

resemblance to the technical literature being consulted by priests.

Alchemy's focus on the application of its knowledge is incredibly important

since, for alchemy, "the truth can be known, but it cannot be said" (Patterson 35). This

idea creates a distinct division between the theory and application in the alchemical

tradition. While there can be no true definition of what alchemy encompasses, scholars

commonly split alchemical concepts into two classifications: esoteric alchemy and

exoteric alchemy. Justifiably, esoteric, or theoretical, alchemy typically receives the most

scholarly attention, while exoteric, or applied, alchemy provides aspiring alchemists with

the actions and processes through which they can discover the secret of alchemy. *The

Mirrour of Alchimy*, commonly attributed to Roger Bacon, explains the "Corporal

Science" of alchemy as the "perfecting [and transmutation] of metals or imperfect bodies" (qtd. in Linden *Alchemy Reader* 5), which connects alchemy to artisanal trades associated with metallurgy and smithing. It is because of this connection between well-known trades and exoteric alchemy that the alchemical tradition is able to retain some degree of accessibility in spite of the complexity of its written tradition. While students in a university setting would have been provided with a common basis of understanding medieval physics through the surprisingly homogeneous, universal presence of Aristotle within the scholastic curriculum (Gabrovsky 12), self-educated students would need the embodied experiences of exoteric alchemy as an introduction to the more theoretical and complex aspects of the discipline. Because exoteric alchemical knowledge placed a higher value on the "authenticity of one's own experience of nature [than] the authenticity of tradition," practicing alchemy "emancipate[d] natural science from the authority of tradition" (Bauer 77), thereby making its knowledge accessible to those outside of the university. Additionally, because alchemy never relied on a consistent, systemized tradition to convey its knowledge over time, many found their interest in the subject simply through a reported success or the legends of famous historical figures believed to be alchemists. Although these attributions were likely erroneous or fabricated, the attachment of a classical philosopher or religious figure to the alchemical tradition was sufficient to generate and retain interest (Linden *Darke Hierogliphicks* 39-40).

In crafting the scene of his deception, the puffer wisely avoids overindulging on esoteric knowledge, instead favoring the exoteric. By focusing on the application of alchemical knowledge, he is able to create a master-apprentice dynamic with the priest,

which naturally allows the puffer to demonstrate his process and results as authentic through the priest's own embodied experience as the primary actor of the experiment. As the canon ends the prelude to the first alchemical act, he takes out his crucible and says to his victim, "This instrument … which hat thou seest, / Taak in thyn hand, and put thyself therinne / Of this quyksilver an ounce, and bigynne" (1119-1121). By encouraging the priest to become a part of the process, the canon is moving alchemy into an entirely physical, and therefore more easily knowable realm, while still fulfilling the magical expectations set forth in alchemical texts through his demonstration of transmutation. The puffer masterfully uses the priest's participation as a way to develop his own authority and trustworthiness by telling the priest, "For in tokenyng I thee love, … thyne own hands two / Shul werche al thyng which that shal heer be do" (1153-1155). On a more pragmatic level, allowing the priest to enact the process serves to divert the attention away from the puffer while the next deceptive mechanism of the process is being prepared.

This development of the canon's character as a trustworthy authority is an incredibly important element for the scene of the con. By using his own position within the Church, the canon is able to play to the relatively new integration of Christian theology into esoteric alchemy. During the fourteenth century, the traditional use of allegory in alchemical texts invited readers to use the same exegetical practices that were often applied to Scripture. Such readings resulted in a focus on the practitioner's morality, which negated previously established concerns about the temptation of greed and created a new, more faith-friendly understanding that, because God or Christ is the

keeper of the alchemical secret, this holy knowledge could only be bestowed upon those

who possess both moral purity and spiritual piety (Patterson 49). These Christian

allegories often evolved from elements of exoteric alchemy experienced by the alchemist

during an attempt to transmute metal. As explained by an author claiming to be Arnald of

Villanova in the *Tractus parabolicus*, the treatment of mercury, referred to in the

Canon's Yeoman's Tale as "quyksilver," mirrors the life of Christ, particularly his death.

Since Christ had to be crucified in order to redeem humanity, the materials used in an act

of transmutation must also be tormented and destroyed before they can be "redeemed"

(Nummedal 314). This focus on Christ's suffering and death in the exoteric process fits in

perfectly with broader theological trends that had been in development since the eleventh

century. Through the influence of mystical thought, Christian devotion became intensely

focused at a personal level on the passion and person of Christ, a tradition which has

since been called Christo-centric or affective piety (Pantin 190). These forms of piety

became one aspect of the larger move towards an anti-intellectualist trend focusing on the

deliberate use of scripture instead of logic-based arguments (Pantin 133).

Although the alchemical tradition began to reflect theological trends such as

affective piety, Christianity's integration into the esoteric thought of alchemy is widely

seen to begin with a major figure of scholasticism, Roger Bacon. At the urging of the

future Pope Clement IV, Bacon wrote arguments encouraging the study of alchemy,

among other disciplines, in order to strengthen Christianity (Principe 60). Because of

Bacon, alchemy began its transformation from a "artisanal practice that jealously guarded

its guild secrets" into "an experimental 'science' informed by (pseudo-) Aristotelian

metaphysics and Christian revelation" (Bauer 96). Although the study of alchemy does not derive from a Christian tradition, following St. Augustine's idea that Israelites utilized "Egyptian Gold" before leaving Egypt, alchemists saw the appropriation of their enemies' occult traditions as a way to support the church in an age of increased Christian anxiety and conflict (Bauer 78). In this time of perceived crisis, alchemists saw the utilization of these worldly materials as means to strengthen not only the Church as an institution through the transmutation of base metals into gold, but Christian warriors through the production of a quintessence which could be utilized in strengthening the physical bodies that would protect the Church from its enemies (Bauer 82). Although these exoteric ends for the integration of alchemy into Christianity are typically overshadowed by the esoteric thought that motivated them, it is important to understand that Christian alchemists, regardless of how dense and metaphoric their writings, were still engaging in the exoteric tradition. This continued focus on exoteric alchemy means that even a self-educated priest would be able to understand how alchemical works could directly benefit the Church without needing to understand the nuances of its theoretical philosophy.

Despite the priest of the pars secunda likely being self-educated, his portrayal indicates that his interest extends beyond the exoteric ends of Christian alchemy. The priest already possesses wealth well in excess of what he needs. Because he never has to pay for meals he has enough "spendyng silver" (1018) to make him a target, and, in addition to that, enough gold that he can lend the canon an unspecified amount without expressing any reservations about parting with the coin (1024-1025). Alchemy's

integration with Christian theology created a new esoteric tradition that offered those

pursuing alchemical secrets more than just silver and gold. In addition to these resources,

Christian alchemists saw elements of scripture, such as the creation of the world and the

final judgement, as alchemical processes. This esoteric approach to alchemy has been

described by Eric John Holmyard as a "devotional system where the mundane

transmutation of metals [becomes] merely symbolic for the transformation of the sinful

man into a perfect being through prayer and submission to the will of God" (qtd. in

DeVun 116). Living in London (1012), the priest would have been able to take advantage

of the frequent public sermons given by the city's universities, allowing him to engage

with the more theoretical scholastic concepts without being a student (Gabrovsky 14).

This, combined with the need for priests to have a thorough foundation in dogmatic and

moral instruction to effectively serve a laity that had developed a taste for the Christo-

centric devotional literature of the mystics, placed the priest in a position where he was

exposed to the theoretical knowledge addressed by Christian alchemists while lacking the

ability or support to grapple effectively with the ideas himself.

Christian alchemy would have offered the priest comfort by making the abstract

ideas concrete. Petrus Bonus of Ferrara asserted that a knowledge of alchemy could not

only help believers better understand Christian doctrine, but provide observable evidence

of its veracity. Bonus believed that the link between alchemical knowledge and

Christianity was so deep that he claimed in the *Margarita pretiosa novella* that "should

any unbeliever truly know this divine art, it would of necessity make him a believer in the

Trinity of God"(qtd. in Principe 68). Because of this relationship, Bonus believed that

many Biblical prophets possessed a deep understanding of alchemy. The ability for the

secrets of alchemy to purify the soul in addition to merely transmute metal led Biblical

figures such as Moses, Daniel, Solomon, and John into their own alchemical pursuits

(DeVun 116). Betty Jo Teeter Dobs makes further connections between Biblical scripture

and alchemical knowledge, showing that Christ can be identified with the philosophers'

stone based on an exegesis of two instances of *stone* being used in the Old Testament:

Psalm 117 refers to a stone that was initially refused by builders becoming a cornerstone

and Isiah describes the Lord as a "stone of stumbling" for nonbelievers. The New

Testament references both instances in a way where the stones become a metaphor for

Christ (qtd. in DeVun 113).

While Christian alchemists searched for ways in which to provide empirical proof

of their faith, they also used their process to grapple with anxieties about the future

predicted in their holy text. In addition to encouraging the study of alchemy, Roger

Bacon also expressed concern about the impending conflict with the Antichrist. Bacon

believed that the Church would need knowledge gained from all disciplines, including

alchemy, to withstand the foretold attack (Principe 64). Bacon's concerns were taken up

by two incredibly influential figures in Christian alchemy: Arnald of Villanova, referred

to as "Arnold of the Newe Toun" (1428) by the Canon's Yeoman, and John of

Rupescissa, whose manuscripts were copied and circulated widely (Principe 64). Because

all three figures had ties to Spiritual Francisans, despite Arnald not being a friar (Principe

66), their pursuits, although ultimately material, were not intended to benefit themselves,

but instead all of Christendom. Arnald, like Bacon, raised concerns over the coming of

the Antichrist in his writings, but, unlike Bacon, these writings brought him into conflict

with the scholastic beliefs held by the faculty of the University of Paris (Principe 66-67).

Although it is unlikely that Arnald wrote any of the alchemical works attributed to his

name, these writings create the foundation on which other explicitly Christian alchemists

continued to build. Works, such as the *Tractus Parabolicus*, elaborate on the

soteriological aspects of the philosophers' stone, describing an alchemy that provides

spiritual instead of material wealth.

The writings attributed to Arnald greatly influenced John of Rupescissa. Working

from the more theoretical alchemy of the pseudo-Arnald, Rupescissa applied both

esoteric and exoteric traditions in an eschatologically focused attempt to save

Christndom. Attempting to solve this theoretical problem through the application of

concrete materials, Rupsescissa believed that if he were able to unlock the secrets of the

alchemical quintessence, he could balance the humors of the human body, endowing

Christians with the health and longevity of a perfected post-resurrection body, thus

allowing them to effectively combat the Antichrist (DeVun 107). Like other alchemists

with ties to the Franciscan Spiritualists, Rupescissa did not clearly divide the material and

spiritual elements of Christian alchemy. Although he was focused on the physical

operations of transmutation, these operations were carried out for spiritual, not material

purposes. In the end, Rupescissa's aim was to defeat the Antichrist, weather the

apocalypse, and achieve the collective salvation of all Christians (DeVun 105). The

eschatological focus of Rupescissa's alchemy would speak to the same anxieties

addressed by medieval priests. In addition to the common themes of sin and atonement,

the sermons provided in the resources used by priests focused specifically on events such as the final judgement (Pantin 199-200). These themes combined with the priestly duty of hearing confession and a turbulent state of worldly affairs make it easy to see how a priest could become enticed by Rupescissa's concrete plans for achieving salvation.

A desire to save Christendom from annihilation was not the only appealing element of Christian alchemy. Since spiritual purity was required in order for an alchemical act to prove successful, any earnest member of the clergy, such as the priest, would naturally want to see himself as possessing the prerequisite spiritual qualifications to perform transmutation. Elaborating on the morals traditionally required of the Christian alchemist, Elias Ashmole states that any worthy alchemist must possess "fidelity, vertue, judgment, discretion, faithfulness, secresie, desires, inclinations, and conversations." Possessing these traits is the only way in which the "precious seed" of alchemical knowledge will be planted in "pure earth" (qtd. in Linden *Darke Hierogliphicks* 32). The priest undoubtedly sees this strength of character in the canon when he describes the puffer as someone "so trewe … of condicioun / That in no wise he breke wole his day; / to swich a man [he] kan never saye nay" (1039-1041). Additionally, as the canon claims that his alchemical successes are only shared "save [he] and a frere" (1355)**,** the secrets of alchemy seemed contained only to the members of the Church worthy of receiving them. It is also noteworthy that the other possessor of this alchemical secret holds the same position as Roger Bacon, the man seen to set the Christian alchemical tradition in motion.

These theological connections are developed and manipulated throughout the puffer's alchemical performance. After presenting his victim with the crucible and mercury**,** the canon frames the alchemical actions about to occur within a religious context, saying he will "In the name of Crist, to wexe a philosofre [of the priest]" (1122). This religious invocation is reciprocated by the priest once the act is complete. Immediately after being presented with what the priest believes to be silver created from his act of transmutation, the priest exalts his deceiver, saying "Goddes blessyng, and his moodres also, / And alle halwes, have ye, sire chanoun" (1243-1244). While the puffer's invocation of Christ may not be genuine, the painfully naive response of blessing by the priest demonstrates his acceptance of the alchemical actions as morally righteous. In addition to the joy of seeing the silver, this result would also confirm to the priest that he belonged in his position. William of Pagula begin the second part of his *Oculus sacerdotis* by addressing the members of the clergy who do not live up to their duties:

> "There are many priests and there are few priests. For there are many in name, but few in deed … there are many priests in name, because in this life and especially at this time, nothing is easier and lighter and more attractive to men than the office of bishop and priest, but in God's sight, nothing is more miserable, sad, and damnable, if that office is carried out with negligence and flattery … there are few priests in deed, because … nothing is more difficult as to effect, laborious as to the person, and dangerous as to the soul than the office of bishop or priest, but in God's sight, nothing is more blessed if the office is carried out in the way that Christ commands." (qtd. in Pantin 198-199)

At a time where the clergy was not always known for its moral purity, the successful completion of an act of transmutation would present this priest with empirical evidence of his own worth.

At the conclusion of his tale, the Canon's Yeoman reinforces the idea that alchemical knowledge can only be given by Christ to those specifically deemed worthy of receiving it, saying:

> For unto Crist [the secret of alchemy] 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. (1467-1471)

With the promise of secret knowledge delivered, the priest is presented with the desired outcome: evidence of his own moral purity. These lines make up part of the Canon's Yeoman's concluding fifty-six lines, a section that, due to its seemingly inconsistent tone with the rest of the tale, Stanton J. Lindon has deemed one of "the two most controversial problems in the pars secunda" (48). Lindon argues the Canon's Yeoman's conclusion is consistent with the rest of the tale, saying:

> … the ultimate meaning of the pars secunda is a warning against dabbling in the two opposing types of alchemy: one the gift of God, the other a product of the devil's treachery. There is no inconsistency in the tone of this section, in the character of the Yeoman-narrator, or in the views of alchemy that have been presented … authority has also taught [the Canon's Yeoman] that a true form [of alchemy] may exist, one that is shrouded in the mystery of God's will and wisdom. (Linden *Darke Hierogliphicks* 52)

Linden is correct in assessing the tone of the tale, but he omits an element that directly connects the conclusion to its preceding narrative: the priest. For some, the introduction of explicitly Christian elements in the last fifty-six lines may seem out of place, but it is in these lines that the Canon's Yeoman makes explicit the context in which the priest has

engaged with alchemy. Despite this connection coming across as a mere afterthought of the Canon's Yeoman, the possibility of being deemed worthy enough to catch a glimpse of God's secret wisdom is the driving force behind the narrative of the pars secunda.

Instead of seeing the priest merely as a one-dimensional victim, exploring the way in which he is deceived reveals a unique portrayal of the failings of the medieval Church. The priest's failure is not one of blatant maliciousness or stupidity, but instead one of pure intention unfulfilled due to a lack of preparation. The overburdened and underqualified priests of Chaucer's time would often be left to self-educate, making them ideal targets for puffers. What little education these priests did possess undoubtedly exposed them to the world of alchemy, while at the same time leaving them ill-equipped to engage with its esoteric textual traditions. The challenges presented by the textual tradition could be avoided by focusing on the applied nature of alchemical knowledge to create a physical scene in which the puffer could control both the victim and the process. This control allowed the process to appear successful, which, when set within the greater theological framework of the fourteenth-century, saw the successful alchemist as the recipient of divine knowledge only bestowed to the most worthy of Christians. Through his reliance and development of the alchemical traditions of language, application, and theology, the canon creates a scene specifically tailored to manipulate the misguided, yet pure, intentions of the priest.

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