

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
ALCHEMY AS A WAY TO DAMNATION:
A STUDY OF THE UNITY OF FRAGMENT VIII
OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

by

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary records concerning alchemy during the Middle Ages show that in the Fourteenth century the general population considered alchemy to be a gold-making science. The alchemist, on the other hand, as revealed in his treatises, considered alchemy to be an art whereby he worked outwardly upon diseased metals to bring them to their golden state of perfection so that he, who began the work in a state of spiritual leadenness, would be himself transmuted. Through alchemy's inner work he believed his own soul was purified, spiritualized and fixed to God's will as spiritual gold. According to the alchemists, sophisticated imposters whose unworthiness prevented them from being granted the secret worked to their own destruction in their alchemical experiments.

This thesis shows that both the popular conception of the art and the alchemists' conception of it are embodied in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, which is structured in the form of an inverted alchemical treatise. An alchemical interpretation of the tale shows that although the Yeoman does not know it, his alchemy has worked but with the opposite results of true alchemy. Instead of gaining salvation through his studies, he has become damned through them. What caused Chaucer to join the Second Nun's Tale to the Canon's Yeoman's was not so much the coincidental similarities of alchemical and Christian topics as it was that he saw the Nun's Tale as expressing the true spiritual alchemy that is perverted by the Canon and his Yeoman.

While the Second Nun's Tale neither needs nor is enriched by

alchemy, Chaucer's meaning in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, that alchemy, perverted, leads man to damnation through the "materialization" of his soul, is entirely dependent upon a Christian understanding of salvation and damnation and the meaning of this tale is enriched through its association with the Nun's Tale. Chaucer joined the two poems together so that the Nun's becomes a standard by which the Yeoman's is to be interpreted. Through its association with the Second Nun's Tale we see that what is wrong with the alchemists of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is that they, like Almachius, have "materialized" themselves, perfected themselves in matter; like Almachius, they are damned. The spiritual significance of alchemy as practised by the Canon is revealed by the Second Nun's Tale, which shows it to be a contemporary and sophisticated form of mammon-worship.

But if, because of its positioning, the reader learns to see the Canon's Yeoman's Tale in terms of the Second Nun's, then he also sees the Nun's Tale in terms of the Canon's Yeoman's. The Nun's Tale, when it is linked to the Yeoman's, takes on an alchemical colouring which was not originally intended when the poem was simply the Lyf of Seinte Cecile, but which becomes valid because of the editorial unity linking the two poems of Fragment VIII. By linking them Chaucer invites them to be interpreted together as a single unit.

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ALCHEMY

CHAPTER I

Most people today know something of alchemy if not by name then at least by reputation. Most commonly it is believed to be a Medieval chemistry that got mixed up somehow with magic or sorcery by which men tried to turn base metals into gold. To the Twentieth century point of view, of course, what the alchemists sought to do is impossible because one species of metal cannot be changed into another. Medieval claims of successful transmutations are explained by the primitive methods of assaying gold during the Middle Ages and by the ingenuity of charlatans.¹

Alchemy is a subject easily dismissed by the modern mind as being just another indication of the superstitious beliefs of the so-called Dark Ages; yet the notion of "alchemy" seems to have some sort of fascination for modern man and the word is commonly encountered in everyday speech: by some strange "alchemy" people meet and fall in love, economies are saved and nations are created. "Alchemy" applies in cases where mere "chemistry" would not do, for "chemistry" implies a natural process whereas "alchemy" implies something more--an unexplained, mysterious, or magical element that transcends the natural. While this metaphorical usage of alchemy says nothing for our purposes, perhaps it says a good deal about the limitations of a strictly quantitative science such as we enjoy in the Twentieth century. If so this may explain in part why it is that in writing about this qualitative art several contemporary authors feel compelled to show that "alchemy" in one form or another is now possible; that modern science has fulfilled

the vision of the alchemists:

...Modern chemistry on its own very different principles has proved transmutation possible--in the countless ways it has manipulated nature to bring gold where there was not gold before: in industrial chemistry, in medicine, in all alleviations that chemistry has brought to man's lot on earth. The "truth" has been revealed; the alchemist's faith has been justified; the Philosophers' Stone has been achieved. We depend on it daily in a thousand ways.²

Duncan's concern with the achievements of modern science, the "real" alchemy, shows that he is looking at the art from a contemporary, utilitarian point of view that has little in common with the alchemists' and prevents, rather than aids, understanding of what alchemy was during the Middle Ages. We know now that transmutation, the way in which the alchemist attempted it, does not work and our intention here is not to show how superstition is transmuted to empirical science but, rather to try to understand alchemy from the point of view of the alchemist and the art as it was regarded by society during the Fourteenth century.

The primary purpose of this chapter is to discuss alchemy as a background for the interpretation of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and the unity of the Eighth Fragment of the Canterbury Tales. To this end the chapter is in two parts: the first examines alchemy to show that what the alchemist attempted was the perfecting of base metal into gold.

The purpose of alchemy is to perfect what is imperfect; the art must be seen as involving both an "exoteric" work upon matter and as an "esoteric" work upon the alchemist himself.³ This double aspect of alchemy is essential to an understanding of the art from the point of view of the alchemist. Alchemy, for him, is neither simply a chemical gold-making technique nor is it simply a metaphor for salvation using the terminology of metallurgy.

To establish what alchemy was to the alchemist the first part of the chapter discusses the study of alchemy in the present and briefly surveys the origins and history of the art in its beginnings in First century Alexandria. Following that, alchemical theory, the outer and inner works of the alchemical opus, the alchemist, and the alchemical treatise are discussed.

The second part considers alchemy's controversial status in Medieval thought and society to show that there is a fundamental discrepancy between what the alchemist believed he was doing in his search for perfection and what society believed he was doing. While the alchemist sought to make gold because gold is the perfection of metals, the general population believed that alchemy's gold-making was an end in itself and that the alchemist sought only earthly rewards through his art. This part of the chapter will examine the attitudes toward alchemy held by the Church, the Law, the Court and by literature and show the role of the charlatan in the formation of the popular opinion of the art.

My secondary purpose in this chapter is to provide as full and as clear a picture of alchemy as possible. My interest is especially directed toward the student of literature, for whom a knowledge of alchemy is useful apart from the Canon's Yeoman's Tale but who may find such books and articles as are currently available, treating alchemy as a proto-chemistry, largely unhelpful for his needs. For this reason, then, the technical and chemical aspects of alchemy are considered briefly and simply while alchemical texts and documents, which are often difficult to obtain, have been quoted often and fully.

Today essentially three different groups study alchemy:

historians of science (especially chemists), psychologists (Carl Jung and his students), and occultists. While each of these groups regards alchemy very differently, together they have a common tendency to study alchemy not for what the alchemist thought he was doing but rather for the needs of their particular disciplines. Thus the chemist studying alchemy is far more interested in the relation of this Medieval art to present day chemistry than in the art itself. Readily condemning the alchemist as being unscientific, he dismisses alchemical notions of transmutation with a certain amount of embarrassment but justifies his own study with the observation that the alchemists, or at least the "puffers," did "to their credit" discover alcohol and that carbon monoxide is poison.⁴

While Carl Jung has greatly contributed to the study of alchemy by his examination of alchemical texts from his psychological point of view, he uses his knowledge of the art to support his theory of the process of Individuation rather than to show alchemy for what it is itself. Jung argues that what the alchemist called "religious" or "holy" was, in fact, "psychological" and that the alchemist was not interested in chemistry nor in matter, of which he had no knowledge, but in the "psychic transformation" within him.⁵ If the alchemist writes obscurely it is not so much deliberately as it is that he cannot express himself any other way:

When contemplating the chemical changes that took place during the opus [the adept's] mind became suffused with archetypal, mythological parallels and interpretations, just as had happened to the old pagan alchemists.... Under these conditions forms of thought emerge in which one can afterwards discover parallels with mythological motifs, including Christian ones; parallels and similarities which perhaps one would never have suspected at first sight. So it was with the old adepts who, not knowing anything about the nature of chemical substances, reeled from one perplexity to the next; willy nilly they had to submit to the overwhelming

power of the numinous ideas that crowded into the empty darkness of their minds. From these depths a light gradually dawned upon them as to the nature of the processes and its goal. Because they were ignorant of the laws of matter, its behaviour did not do anything to contradict their archetypal conception of it.⁶

What Jung is discussing is the inner work of alchemy as it takes place within the alchemist. Ironically, however, his criticism of the alchemists, that they did not know the laws of matter, can be applied to his own argument. The alchemist felt that he did understand the laws of nature and in his work he sought to follow them. Jung, on the other hand, writes authoritatively about the unconscious, the very existence of which is hypothetical and the laws by which it operates at least as tentative and as subject to psychological projection as any that the alchemist used. While certainly it would not be everyone who could tolerate the conditions of the study of alchemy, and the psychology of such men would indeed be interesting, it seems unnecessary to presume as Jung does that when the alchemist observed what he called the uniting of the male and female principles he was actually watching a psychological "blue movie" projected by his sexual inadequacies upon chemicals reacting together.⁷

Whereas the scientist views alchemy for its chemistry, its techniques and its materials and the psychologist studies it for its symbolic processes, the occultist studies the art for its secret knowledge, its "esoteric doctrines." Thus Stanislas Klossowski de Rola begins his book The Secret Art of Alchemy (1973) saying that "This book is an attempt to show...a glimpse of what true alchemy was and is":⁸

Alchemy is a rainbow bridging the chasm between the earthly and the heavenly planes, between matter and spirit. Like the rainbow, it may appear within reach only to recede if one chases it merely to find a pot of gold.

The sacred, secret, ancient, profound science of alchemy, the royal or sacerdotal art, also called the hermetic philosophy,

conceals, in esoteric texts and enigmatic emblems, the means of penetrating the very secrets of Nature, Life and Death, of Unity, Eternity, and Infinity. (p.7)

Comparing the esoteric truths of alchemy to oriental mysticism, de Rola's purpose in studying alchemy seems to be to use it as a means to achieve higher states of consciousness. Thus the goal of alchemy is "Inner-standing" (p.14):

[The] pictorial language [of alchemy] in which not a single detail is ever meaningless, exerts a deep fascination on the sensitive beholder. This fascination does not even necessarily depend upon understanding. If the reader will contemplate these images, that is to say, go beyond their surface, he will often perceive that they correspond to another timeless dimension which we all may find within ourselves. (p.9)

De Rola's is a sentimental portrayal of alchemy that will not be pursued here; if alchemy had importance during the Middle Ages then it deserves to be studied for what it was and what it attempted, not for the uses that its ambiguous language and modern ignorance can make of it.

F. Sherwood Taylor's book The Alchemists remains, I think, the best single volume concerning the subject because in it Taylor tries both scientifically and intellectually to see the art as the alchemists themselves saw it. Alchemy, says Taylor, is to be seen as being both a "craft and a creed"⁹ that results from "understanding...nature in terms of life whereby the changes in matter are to be seen as analogous to the changes in living beings, especially in man" (p.124). Its purpose is the "perfection of all things in their kind and most especially metals" (p.151):

Nothing [of what was available to the modern scientist] was available to the alchemist, who had not conceived the idea of classifying chemical changes and had nothing that could, in our sense, be called chemical science into which they might be fitted. He had to explain what he saw by finding analogies for

it among his own ideas of the world. To the man of the Middle Ages, the important things in life were his relations with God and his neighbour...and the alchemical process became intelligible to him when expressed in those terms.... The whole alchemical process has, as it were, a spiritual significance; it is a perfection of matter and was viewed with feelings appropriate to the sight of perfection. The alchemical process was a small illustration or example of the whole purpose of things, which were impelled to seek perfection by their striving towards the perfect ideas of their kind in God; it was likewise a symbol of man whose end in life is to find bodily perfection in the glorious body, spiritual fulfillment in the beautiful vision of God. (p.123)

Elsewhere he says more briefly: "The hall-mark of alchemy is the combination of a spiritual and practical aspect in the making of precious materials."¹⁰

Taylor's definition comes closest to the understanding that the alchemists themselves have of the art. Through their art they sought perfection: the perfection of metals and of man. Beginning his treatise Of the Investigation or Search of Perfection with a section entitled "Of Things Perfecting And Corrupting Metallick Bodies" Geber¹¹ (pp.4-5) defines alchemy as a "Science [that] treats of the Imperfect Bodies of Minerals, and teacheth how to perfect them" (p.4). Both imperfect bodies (tin, lead, copper and iron) and bodies already perfect (silver and gold) are stripped of their "corporality" by means of a "preparation," the Philosophers' Stone, so that the spiritual gold that is potential within them becomes actual:

...Imperfect Bodies are not reducible to Sanity and Perfection, unless the contrary be operated in them; that is, the Manifest be made Occult, and the Occult be made Manifest: which Operation, of Contrariation, is made by Preparation, therefore they must be prepared, Superfluities in them removed, and what is wanting supplied; and so the known Perfection inserted in them. But Perfect Bodies need not this preparation; yet they need such Preparation, as that by which their Parts may be more Subtiliated, and they reduced from their Corporality to a fixed Spirituality. The intention of which is, of them to make a Spiritual fixed Body, that is, much more attenuated and subtiliated than it was before.

(Geber, Investigation of Perfection, p.5)

According to Geber the purpose of alchemy then is to make "spiritual fixed bodies": what is manifest in the metal, (the qualities that make it tin, copper, lead or iron) is to be made occult--rarified by a process of spiritualization. And what is occult is to be made manifest; that is, the potential of the metal to be gold is to be brought into actuality.

It would seem from the above quotation that Geber is concerned only with alchemy's outer work as his definition lacks any overt reference to an inner work and sticks doggedly to the literal discussion of the perfecting of metals. This is generally the case in alchemical writings and while there is abundant evidence of the inner work within the treatises, it is very rare indeed that an alchemist will openly state the presence of the inner work as Morienus does when he tells Khalid that "God in His mercy has created this extraordinary thing in yourself" or as Dorn does when he exclaims: "transmute yourselves from dead stones into living philosophical Stones." Nor does the alchemist often define alchemy as involving a spiritual work as (the Pseudo) Democritos does in the title of his treatise: "An art purporting to relate to the transmutation of metals, and described in a terminology at once physical and mystical."¹²

With the exception of the mystical treatises, little evidence of alchemy's inner work is apparent in the treatises because the alchemist sees and expresses redemption in alchemical terminology.¹³ His understanding of the inner spiritual nature of the work is typically revealed in other portions of the treatise. Where he discusses the nature of the Stone, the giving of the secret, who should and who should not study alchemy, he is especially likely to show he conceives the work of

alchemy to involve a spiritual dimension. In the Sum of Perfection Geber shows his understanding of the work in spiritual terms when, discussing the secret, he writes of the alchemist's ability to know the secret as divine illumination:

Now let the High God of Nature, blessed and glorious, be praised, who hath revealed to Us the Series of all Medicines, with the Experience of them, which by the goodness of his Instigation, and by our own incessant Labour, We have searched out; and have seen with our Eyes, and handled with our Hands, the Compleatment thereof sought in our Magistry. But if We have concealed this, let not the Son of Learning wonder. For We have not concealed it from him, but have delivered it in such a Speech, as it must necessarily be hid from the evil, and unjust, and the unwise cannot discern it. Therefore, Sons of Doctrine, search ye, and ye will find this most excellent Gift of God reserved for you only.

(Geber, pp.178-79)

Alchemy is not only defined, but classified by Petrus Bonus of Ferrara whose New Pearl of Great Price is influenced by Geber's Sum of Perfection. Bonus writes:

Our subject is the transmutation of metals into true gold and silver by the skill of art. It deals not alone with the formation of metals in the earth but of their manufacture out of the earth. Alchemy is the Art by which the principles, causes, activities, properties, and affections of metals are thoroughly apprehended; and by means of this knowledge those metals which are imperfect, incomplete, mixed, and corrupt, and therefore base, are transmuted into gold and silver.... Alchemy is an operative science, and produces effects by supplying natural conditions, e.g., by the action of fire...it instructs us how to restore and cure, as it were, the diseases of metals, and to bring them back to a state of perfect health, in which state all metals are either silver or gold.¹⁴

(pp.100-01)

Alchemy is not only an operative science for Bonus; it is also a Divine Art that transcends science:

It is to be noted that natural operations which lie out of the course of ordinary natural development, have in them a Divine or supernatural element. And the power which is in Nature is also derived from God. Our Magistry depends quite as much on Divine influences as upon the operations of Nature.... The change is brought about by the power of God, which operates through the knowledge of the artist. (p.127)

For Bonus, as for Geber, the alchemist must make himself worthy of divine illumination, as it is through his spiritualization that he is able to perform the work of the alchemical experiment. Bonus' position is summed up in the Nuncupatory Discourse preceding the New Pearl:

...The art is sacred, and all its adepts are sanctified and pure. For 'men either discover it because they are holy, or it makes them holy.'¹⁵

(Janus Lacinius, p.11)

THE ORIGINS OF ALCHEMY

Many of the persistent ideas, expressions and practises used throughout alchemy's history are first used in the earliest alchemical writings and have their origins in Alexandrian thought of the First century A.D. As with every other aspect of alchemy its origins are elusive; it exists fully established as an art by the time of its first records. Since precisely the manner in which its various sources came together remains unknown, studying alchemy's origins shows the available currents of thought and technical practice concurrent with its development. Because alchemy is so much a product of the influences it first embodied, the value of studying its origins is not so much to account for the existence of an improbable art but to help make its ideas and intentions understandable.

As alchemy is most apparently a craft involving laboratory procedures, the most obvious place to find its source is in the activities of the Alexandrian "chemists" at the time of alchemy's appearance. Before and during the first century available supplies of gold had diminished and predictably it became expensive.¹⁶ In response to increasing demands Alexandrian jewellers found ways of "multiplying" gold by alloying it with copper and silver: "Silver gives gold a greenish,

copper a reddish tinge; the admixture of both copper and silver hardly altered the hue."¹⁷ Gold was also "falsified" by the jewellers who "tinged" the surface of base metals:

To a large quantity of fused base metal a little gold was added and the whole cooled to form one "metal," and this solid solution ...was then etched on the surface by alum or other mordant salt [a fixing agent]. The surface of the base metal, such as lead, by this process would be dissolved away, leaving granules of pure gold in relief.... This process had been known from the very early times. It is even now in use by our modern jewellers.¹⁸

Alchemy also used technical terms and methods of the dyeing crafts that imitated royal purple. The method of dyeing fabrics remains essentially the same today as it was in the First century. A fabric to be dyed, being made as white as possible, is dipped either directly into a dye bath or first into a mordant bath which fixes the colour "making it cling to the material and making the dye fast."¹⁹ According to Hopkins the alchemical work had its origins in the dye shops when the alchemist sought to apply the techniques of the dyeing of fabrics to the dyeing of metals.

Because alchemy's technical aspects were based upon the imitative arts of the Alexandrian craftsmen, Hopkins has remarked:

It has been said that the whole object of alchemy was deception.... But this characterization...should be accepted, even if granted, not as a disgrace; for the artisans were supplying the people with metals which were frankly baubles.... Their only fault was that they succeeded too well. The real alchemists accomplished so much that this early history, this bar sinister, may well be forgotten. (p.45)

Holmyard, in contrast to Hopkins, does not regard the alchemist as deliberately falsifying metals but as misunderstanding the object of the crafts due to his lack of training:

From making a metal that resembled gold to believing that the artificial product was true gold was only a short step for the alchemists, who lacked the technical training of the goldsmiths,

and whose fundamental curiosity was philosophical.... If a metal had a golden lustre, they thought, it must be gold.... (p.26)

Support for alchemy's association with the dying and the metallurgical crafts is seen in the Leyden and Stockholm Papyri compiled at the end of the Third century A.D. The papyri contain recipes for the preparation of gold, silver, asemos (a white silver-like metal),²⁰ precious stones and dye stuffs. The papyri, which are concerned with entirely practical results, are not alchemical and one of them mentions the alchemist Democritos. Taylor writes:

We should say that these papyri were the work of alchemists were it not that their gold-making is treated as an entirely matter-of-fact and practical process. There are no hints of revelations from gods or of traditions of ancient philosophers. There is no concealing of methods under symbols and no rhapsodies about the divine character of the art. Nonetheless these papyri are the earliest documents which reveal the idea of making precious metals; the methods they use, moreover, are very like those of one of the groups of early alchemists.

("Origins," p.36)

The most important of the earliest alchemists was (the Pseudo) Democritos.²¹ His Practica et Mystica, which is actually a composite work, dates from the Second century and deals with practical recipes for dyeing cloth purple, gold-making and silver-making. At two points in the manuscript the practical recipes are interrupted by "mystical" sections: the first of these tells how Democritos learned how to "bring natures into harmony" (see p.40 below for the text).²² After this mystical section there is an abrupt return to the practical recipes. According to Jack Lindsay the title Physica et Mystica cannot be translated "Physical and Mystical Matters" as Taylor translates it:

physika here refers to the hidden forces in nature. It is equivalent to physikae dynamesis, with a special reference to sympathies and antipathies. The aner physikos was the man who in the hellenistic epoch was learned in occult relationships and forces; he was a mage. (p.100)

The papyri and the Physica et Mystica show that there is a difference between the practical Alexandrian crafts and alchemy with its necessary mystical aspects, making it unnecessary to believe that the alchemists simply misunderstood the craft tradition. The early alchemist benefited from the laboratory arts of their day, borrowing much of his methods from their procedures; but if alchemy is both a "craft and a creed," then it is necessary to account for its mystical aspects as well as its laboratory techniques.

The mystical aspects of alchemy seem to be influenced by the widespread influence of oriental ideas embodied in the mystery religions of the First century, a period of history described by Copleston as being "philosophically eclectic": characterized by a strong interest in science and by an even stronger interest in religious mysticism. The mystical tendencies, says Copleston, have a common basis with the tendencies towards science: "While the latter factor might lead to scepticism or to devotion to scientific pursuits, it might easily result in a tendency towards religious mysticism."²³ With the fall of city-state and state religions the mystery religions were popular because they offered personal, rather than corporate redemption through transcendent gods.²⁴ Entrance into the mysteries required initiation by which the initiate was redeemed through ritual death and rebirth which re-enacted the death and rebirth of a god:

...The essence of initiation into the Mysteries consisted of participation in the passion, death and resurrection of a God. We are ignorant of the modalities of this participation but one can conjecture that the sufferings, death and resurrection of the God, already known to the neophyte as a myth or as authentic history, were communicated to him during the initiations, in an "experimental" manner. The meaning and finality of the mysteries were the transmutation of man. By experience of initiatory death and resurrection, the initiate changed his mode of being (he became immortal).²⁵

According to Eliade this initiation rite is a source of alchemy: in his experiments the alchemist "projected onto matter the initiatory function of suffering" (p.151). Treating "matter as the God was treated in the mysteries, the mineral substances 'suffer,' 'die' or are 'reborne' to another mode of being, that is, are transmuted" (pp.149-50).

The Mystery religions were not the only source of initiation rites influencing alchemy. Gnosticism, which developed at the same time as alchemy was, like the Mysteries, also concerned with the problem of redemption. Through initiation the neophyte was led from the "corporeal to the psychic and thence to the spiritual state."²⁶ In his articles "Gnosticism and Alchemy" and "The Redemption Theme and Hellenistic Alchemy," H. J. Sheppard argues that alchemy's mystical aspects are the result of its being influenced by Gnosticism through Stoicism, and that alchemical treatises were read by the Gnostics as allegorically expressing the road to true soteria, the redemption of the soul from the matter that imprisoned it.²⁷ What Sheppard actually shows, however, is not so much that alchemy's inner work has its origins in Gnosticism as that the two disciplines influenced each other, both of them being also influenced by such contemporary ideas as redemption, the unity of matter and "corporifying the incorporeal" (see below pp.19-20).²⁸

Both a "craft and a creed," alchemy bridges the two extreme tendencies towards the scientific and mysticism; while it inherited its laboratory techniques from the Egyptian crafts and its ideas concerning the inner work from Oriental thought and initiation rituals, it received its theoretical basis from Greek philosophy.

In their natural philosophy the Greeks were interested in the ultimate principles and causes of things and the processes of how things

came-to-be and passed-away in relation to process of change. There were two basic approaches: in the first, called "monism," the philosophers argued that there was one substance from which all material things are derived; in the second, philosophers held that matter was composed of several irreducible parts or atoms.²⁹ Aristotle's theory bridges the two conceptions: for him there is a first matter, materia prima, from which all things are ultimately derived; and a secondary matter one stage removed from materia prima, which is composed of the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. These four elements are the proximate source of substances. Materia prima lacks any qualities and is best characterized as "potential." In one sense it is a philosophical substance since it never actually exists unless qualities are impressed on it by form; yet it is actual, inasmuch as it is present in every body.³⁰ Because all substance is ultimately derived from materia prima, it is the basis for all change.³¹

The four simple bodies, or elements, are also philosophical substances and are not to be confused with their terrestrial counterparts after which they are named. Aristotle writes:

In fact, however, fire and air, and each of the bodies we have mentioned, are not simple, but blended. The "simple" bodies are indeed similar in nature to them, but not identical with them. Thus the "simple" body corresponding to fire is "such-as-fire," not fire: that which corresponds to air is "such-as-air": and so on with the rest of them.³²

Bodies are composed of all four elements in varying proportions: a substance that burns easily, for example, is said to contain a large quantity of the element fire. In addition to the four elements there are four qualities--the hot, the cold, the moist and the dry, in which the opposites, the hot and the cold, the moist and the dry, could not be mated.³³ Each of the elements has two qualities, although one quality

predominates in each element so that fire is hot and dry (mostly hot), air is moist and hot (mostly moist), water is cold and moist (mostly cold) and earth is dry and cold (mostly dry). The four elements and their qualities can be diagrammed as follows:

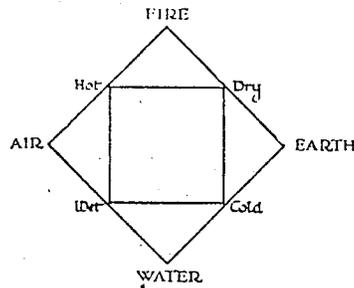


Figure 1³⁴

While Aristotle's four elements are irreducible to smaller particles, they differ from a modern understanding of elements inasmuch as they can change one into the other, through the shared quality: fire becomes earth through its dryness; earth becomes water through its coldness, water becomes air through its moistness and air becomes fire through its heat.

Matter, for Aristotle, cannot exist by itself unless it is impressed by a "form" which gives matter not only its "shape" but all of its properties. Change occurs within substances as a result of a change in its form, the underlying matter remains the same.³⁵ Thus, since all things are composed of the four elements, what differentiates one thing from another is its form. From this idea the alchemists derived their conception of the ability for one metal to change into others³⁶ although Aristotle does not suggest the idea of transmutation.

Until the Seventeenth century natural philosophy was influenced by "hylozoism," the idea that "all nature is alive and sensitive."³⁷

Substances come-to-be through generative processes involving male and female principles. Metals, as well as vegetables and animals, were thought to be composed of bodies and souls:

Just as there is generation and growth in the vegetable and animal kingdoms, so also in the mineral kingdom. Minerals are undergoing a process of coction in the bowels of the earth. Moreover, Aristotle argues that all nature tends to perfection. Hence the changes in minerals are in an upward scale. Thus when the alchemists found lead ore (galena) containing traces of silver they considered that the lead was gradually being changed into the more perfect metal.³⁸

Aristotle describes the generation of metals as being the result of two "exhalations" operating upon each other within the earth: it is the vaporous exhalation that is the cause of metals, which generate when the vaporous exhalation is imprisoned in the earth and compressed by its dryness. Aristotle writes:

We maintain that there are two exhalations, one vaporous the other smoky, and there correspond two kinds of bodies that originate in the earth, fossils [minerals] and metals. The heat of the dry exhalation is the cause of all fossils.... The vaporous exhalation is the cause of all metals, those bodies which are fusible or malleable such as iron, copper, gold. All these originate from the imprisonment of the vaporous exhalation in the earth, and especially in stones. Their dryness compresses it, and it congeal just as dew or hoar-frost does when it has been separated off, though in the present case the metals are generated before that segregation occurs. Hence, they are water in a sense, and in a sense not. Their matter was that which might have become water, but it can no longer do so: nor are they, like savours, due to a qualitative change in actual water. Copper and gold are not formed like that, but in every case the evaporation congealed before water was formed. Hence, they all (except gold) are affected by fire, and they possess an admixture of earth; for they still contain the dry exhalation.³⁹

A second contribution of Greek philosophy to alchemy was the doctrine of pneuma, "breath" or "spirit," as it was developed by the Stoics. The concept of pneuma first entered Greek philosophy in the writings of Anaximenes who suggested that pneuma (or "breath" as he calls it) was the one basic substance from which the material world

originates.⁴⁰ Pneuma produces particular substances by the processes of rarefaction and condensation:

Being made finer it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones; and the rest come into being from these....

Anaximenes...said that infinite air was the principle, from which things that are becoming, and that are, and that shall be, and gods and things divine, all come into being, and the rest from its products. The form of air is of this kind: whenever it is most equable it is invisible to sight, but is revealed by the cold and the hot and the damp and by movement. It is always in motion: for things that change do not change unless there be movement. Through becoming denser or finer it becomes fire, while winds, again, are air that is becoming condensed, and cloud is produced from air by felting. When it is condensed still more, water is produced; with a further degree of condensation earth is produced, and when condensed as far as possible, stones. The result is that the most influential components of generation are opposites, hot and cold.⁴¹

While for the Stoics, pneuma is a fire, not a breath, we see in Anaximenes' formulation that pneuma is a material "spirit" of which even the gods are composed, an idea shared by the Stoics. According to Stoic belief the material world is created of a debased form of pneuma, which itself originated as a part of God who was Divine Fire:

When part of the Divine Fire condensed and coarsened, the Divine Nature was lost and it became the elements..., out of which the remaining Divine Fire fashioned the Cosmos. At the centre was the world, partially covered by an envelope of Divine Fire from which God interpenetrated the whole of matter in the form of pneuma. Eventually the Cosmos would undergo destruction by the Divine Fire but would re-emerge from a remaining "seed" through the action of the pneuma.⁴²

This Divine pneuma is directly referred to in the Emerald Table, the influential treatise attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the mythical founder of alchemy:

What is below is like what is above, and what is above is like what is below, for accomplishing the marvels of the One Thing.

And as all things were from one thing, by the mediation of one thing, so all things were born of this one thing by adaptation.

Its father is the Sun, its mother is the Moon. The Wind carries it in its womb, its nurse is the Earth.

It is the father of all Perfection of the whole world.
Its power is integral, if it be turned into Earth.
Separate the Earth from the Fire, the Subtle from the Gross,
smoothly and with judgement.⁴³

The Table shows that the intention of alchemy is to capture and solidify a piece of pneuma in the form of the Philosophers' Stone.

ALCHEMICAL THEORY

The alchemists had a distinctly anthropomorphic conception of nature; the same processes of generation and reproduction that govern man were seen by them to govern all nature and the cosmos. Mircea Eliade characterizes the alchemist's conception of nature as being similar to that of primitive man. Both live in "a universe steeped in sacredness":

The alchemist was...continuing the behaviour of primitive man, for whom nature was the source of sacred revelations and work a ritual. (p.174)

"Modern man," says Eliade, "is incapable of experiencing the sacred in his dealings with matter; at most he can achieve an aesthetic experience":

Not that man in primitive society was still "buried in nature," powerless to free himself from the innumerable "mystic" participations in Nature, totally incapable of logical thought or utilitarian labour in the modern sense of the word. Everything we know of our contemporary "primitives" shows up the weakness of these arbitrary judgements. But it is clear that a thinking dominated by cosmological symbolism created an experience of the world vastly different from that accessible to modern man. To symbolic thinking the world is not only "alive" but also "open": an object is never simply itself (as is the case with modern consciousness), it is also a sign of or a repository for, something else. (pp.143-44)

Metals, for the alchemists, are alive inasmuch as they generate from seeds, develop to maturity, and reproduce. Like men, metals have bodies composed of matter, and souls or spirits, which, as for the

Stoics, are also material.

Borrowing Aristotle's theory of the exhalations, the alchemists believed that metals generate by natural processes within the earth. They identified the vaporous, or moist exhalation, that is "the cause of all metals" with mercury. The smoky or dry exhalation, "the cause of...the kinds of stones that cannot be melted," they identified with sulphur. This theory, known as the Sulphur-Mercury theory of the generation of metals, is characteristic of all alchemical and Medieval thinking concerning the composition of metals; it was advanced first by Jabir and popularized by Avicenna.⁴⁴

Metals, then, are formed by the combination of the moist and dry vapours, the combination of sulphur and mercury. Actually the "sulphur" and the "mercury" (as with the elements earth, air, fire, and water for Aristotle) were considered by the alchemists as being the philosophical substances that common sulphur and mercury most resemble. Thus the alchemist spends great energy in his treatise distinguishing between sulphur and philosophical, or "our" sulphur as he calls it, and mercury and "our" mercury. Much of the difficulty in reading a treatise arises from the fact that it is virtually impossible to determine what it was that the alchemists used instead of these substances and how they prepared them.

According to the Sulphur-Mercury theory the perfect combination of sulphur and mercury in their purest forms produces gold. If the substances are impure and (more important) if the proportion of sulphur to mercury varies from perfection so that there is too much sulphur, then silver, lead, tin, iron, or copper result. Avicenna, who follows Jabir, discusses the compositions of the various metals. If the mercury

is pure and is comingled with the virtue of a white sulphur that neither induces combustion nor is impure, the product is silver. If the sulphur, besides being pure, is better than that producing silver and is whiter, possesses a tinctorial, fiery, subtle nature and also has a non-combustive virtue, then it solidifies mercury into gold. Copper is produced by the mixture of mercury of good substance, and impure sulphur that possesses a property of combustibility. Iron is formed when the mercury is corrupt, unclean, lacking in cohesion and earthy; its sulphur is also impure. Tin is formed of good mercury but corrupt sulphur; the comingling of the two is not firm. Lead is probably formed from an impure, fetid and feeble sulphur so that its solidification is not thorough.⁴⁵

All metals for the alchemists were of the same "species"; all of them had the potential to become gold. But some metals, because of their conceptions and gestations, were diseased or sick and when left to gestate for a longer period in the earth they would eventually become gold by natural processes. Thus, during the Middle Ages mines were shut down for the metal to "ripen."⁴⁶

The transmutation that the alchemist attempted, then, was hardly the peculiar idea that it seems to be today. With the assurance that all matter is derived from materia prima and that the four elements can be converted one into the other justifying his belief in transmutation, and with his belief that base metals have the potential to become gold because they belong to the same species, the alchemist's theory was remarkably sensible and sound. What he attempted was not to make metals, but to bring base metals to their perfection. All that he did in doing so was to speed up a natural process.

While metal could, and would, ripen to its golden potential within the earth by natural generative processes, to do what the alchemist sought to do in speeding up these processes required not natural principles, but the principles of art. Discussions of the relation of art to nature are important aspects of both Geber's and Bonus' theories. According to Bonus: "alchemy is an art that regulates natural action;" it works upon "a proper matter towards the attainment of a design of Nature's own conceiving..." (p.79). As alchemy is the "minister and follower of nature," its work embodies both natural and artificial principles:

The natural principles are the causes of the four elements, of the metals, and all that belongs to them. The artificial principles are, according to Geber, eight in number: Sublimation, Separation, Distillation, Calcination, Dissolution, Coagulation, Fixion and Ceration.... (p.88)

According to Bonus if nature did not change common metals into gold all the efforts of the alchemist's art would be in vain (p.195).

Since all metals are sick and even gold can be further "subtiliated"; what the alchemist sought to do by his art was to correct this sickness, to remove the impurities and the excess sulphur that prevented base metals from being gold. He sought to cure the metals with the Philosophers' Stone, which, when put into combination with a piece of metal, transmuted it into silver or gold, instantly removing its excesses and supplying its deficiencies. The transmutation of base metals is the last stage of the alchemical opus, Projection. In the earlier stages the alchemist collected and purified the ingredients that he used to obtain his "sulphur" and his "mercury."

There were two degrees of perfection of the Stone; the White Stone could transmute base metals into silver and the Red Stone, a

continuation of the process, transmuted them into gold. In Geber's terms the Stone is a spiritual fixed body--a body from which the soul has been extracted, spiritualized, and returned to its body which then becomes spiritual. It is said to be "fixed" because spirits, by their nature, are "fugitive" and remain in their bodies only if they are fixed there.

The making of the Philosophers' Stone was the most difficult part of the experiment. The object was to find a piece of matter that by various steps could be reduced to materia prima - matter without form, without qualities. Once the alchemist had obtained materia prima he added, step by step, each of the elements in the correct proportion.

These elements were added in a specific order:

Convert the earth into water, water into fire, fire into air, and conceal the fire in the depths of the water, but the earth in the belly of the air, mingling the hot with the humid, and the cold with the dry.⁴⁷

(Turba Philosophorum, p.142)

The process of the conversion of the elements, with the corresponding procedures is presented schematically by Serge Hutin:

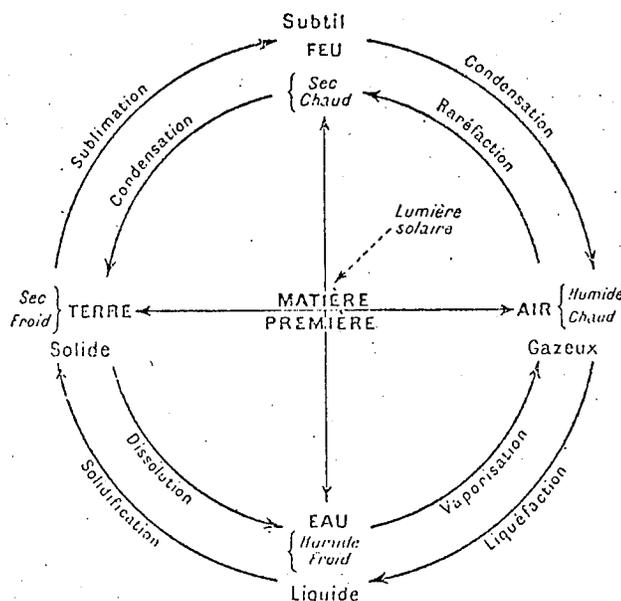


Figure 2⁴⁸

The same process can be considered from the point of view of the body, soul, and spirit. Beginning with "earth" which is "fixed" matter, the alchemist extracted its soul by a process of sublimation. The soul was spiritualized and returned "to its earth" so that the result is the "spiritual fixed body." There are two stages of operations involved: volatilization of the soul and its fixation in the body, the ascending and descending motions prescribed by the Emerald Table:

Separate the Earth from the Fire, the Subtle from the Gross, smoothly and with judgement. It ascends from the Earth into the Heaven and again descends into the Earth and unites in itself the power of things superior and things inferior.⁴⁹

From a third point of view, the creation of the Stone is seen to be the death of matter and its rebirth through corruption or "putrefaction." The uniting of the active, male principle, "sulphur," with the passive, female principle, "mercury," was believed to result in the death of the male and female seeds. From this corruption the new seed of the offspring, the embryonic Stone, was engendered. The female principle (mercury) is also the principle of volatilization; the male principle (sulphur) is the principle of fixation. It is sulphur that coagulates mercury and "tinges" or colours it; the active principle, spirit or form, whose qualities are hot and dry, permeates and fixes the passive principle, body or matter, whose qualities are cold and moist.⁵⁰

Once the Stone is created it is indestructible because as the Emerald Table indicates, "it unites the powers of things superior to things inferior." Not only the Stone, but its product, too, is indestructible:

...Hermes says that earth is the element out of which everything is made, and into which everything is converted. In the composition of the Stone and of gold we have a perfect equation of the

elements. This well-tempered substance can neither be destroyed by the violence of the fire, nor vitiated by the impurity of the earth, nor spoiled by an excess of water or air. The Stone and gold are thus generated in the fire, and, like everything else, flourish in their native element. They are, therefore, indestructible by fire, and are rather perfected and improved by it than otherwise.⁵¹

ALCHEMICAL PROCESSES AND APPARATUS

Because the alchemists were interested in separating souls from bodies and returning them, the processes of their experiments were based upon the processes of sublimation, distillation and condensation. Sublimation is the "heating [of] a substance until it vaporizes and then condensing the vapour directly to the solid state by rapid cooling"; distillation is the "boiling of a liquid and reconvertng the vapour into a liquid by cooling."⁵² Of the operations of the alchemical experiment Lindsay writes:

The notion of Up and Down...is important in Greek alchemy: on one hand because the microcosmic image in which things below reflect things above or correspond with them, and on the other hand because in processes such as distillation and condensation the production of vapour and water seemed to reflect the evaporation, mists, clouds, and rains seen at work in a circular movement between earth and sky. (pp.187-88)

According to Lindsay the typical alchemical process:

Involved volatile substances, spirits, and was done by means of distillations and sublimations. All pictures of apparatus or workshops show instruments for dealing with volatile substances. Only such apparatus could be imagined as extracting the spirit from a body or re-fusing it. (p.218)

The apparatus used in the alchemical experiment, the Kerotakis (a device in which metals are attacked by vapours), the still, and the great number and varieties of furnaces, is largely known through Zosimos' discussions of the works of Maria the Jewess. Maria was a Greek alchemist who stressed the importance of the "up and down"

movement and "gave the conception by Hermes of the macrocosm-microcosm relationship...a more dynamic and concrete basis by linking the above and the below system with the actual process of alchemy...."⁵³ Lindsay quotes Ibn Umail's (Senior's) commentary of Maria's works to show the importance she placed upon distillation. The quotation also gives an indication of what, besides chemistry, interested the alchemist.

Senior writes:

Maria...also said: The Water which I have mentioned is an Angel and descends from the sky and the earth accepts it on account of its...moistness. The water of the sky is held by the water of the earth, and the water of the earth acts as its servant, and its Sand [serves] for the purpose of honouring it. Both the waters are gathered together and the Water holds the Water. The Vital Principle...holds the Vital Principle, and the Vital Principle is whitened by the Vital Principle. She meant Coction of the Soul with the Spirit until both mix and are thoroughly cooked together and become a single thing like Marble...

(As for the Angel) she meant by this the Divine Water which is the Soul. She named it Angel because it is spiritual and because that water has risen from the earth to the sky...of the Alembic.

As for her statement (the Water) descends from the sky, she meant by this its return to their Earth; and this Angel she mentioned.... She meant by this the Child which they said will be born for them in the Air while Conception has taken place in the Lower (region)--this being through the Higher Celestial Strength which Water has gained by its absorption of the Air.

(p.249)

The distillation process was carried out in the alembic, or still. Its receiver, is called the Aludel or, in the West, the Vase of Hermes or Vase of the Philosophers. It is this piece of apparatus that is most commonly represented in the alchemical pictures and it is in the Vase that the famous alchemical colour changes occur as they occurred in Maria's Greek alchemy in the Kerotakis.⁵⁴

Furnaces were extremely important because the alchemical opus required several different degrees of heat ranging from "our dung," a very low heat deriving its name from the temperature at which dung

putrefies, to the very intense heat required to fix the Stone. Such a fire is Norton's dangerous "fire of Magnetia" against which the alchemist must protect himself. Norton says:

For Magnetia is Fier of effusion,
Full of perills and full of illusion,
Not onely perill which to the Warke maie fall.
But such alsoe which the Master hurte shall;
Against which once received is noe boote.
Ordaine therefore to fetch breath from your foote;
Provide for Mouth, Eyes, Eares, and Nose,
For it is worse than ten times the Pose.
Men hereby hath found paines sore,
Because they had not this warning before.⁵⁵
(p.104)

So important was the furnace to the alchemists that the Latin Geber devoted an entire book to it in which he lists seven kinds of furnaces to be used for different purposes.⁵⁶

The outfitting of an alchemical laboratory was expensive, ingredients were hard to obtain and the apparatus often had to be specially made. As the alchemist did not want his occupation to be known he had to have unusual pieces made without revealing why he wanted them.

Thomas Charnock records these difficulties in his Breviary of Philosophie (1577):

But if he [the potter] say unto you, Good Master myne,
Tell me for what purpose or what engine
Shall these Vessels serve that thou cause me to make...
Then say unto him to satisfie his minde,
That ye have a Father which is somewhat blinde,
Who if it please God you will indeavour,
To stil a water his blindness to dissever.⁵⁷

The alchemical apparatus, while ingenious, was largely inefficient and faulty. Glass, before the days of Pyrex, was brittle and impure and in an operation that depended so much on heating and cooling, it was very likely to break or explode. The English alchemists following Ramon Lull (c.1320) especially had difficulty with breaking or exploding

instruments because their alchemical method involved as many as six hundred "circulations." The circulation is a "refluxing process whereby liquid is evaporated and condensed."⁵⁸ In his Ordinall Thomas Norton devotes some attention to the materials from which alchemical vessels should be made. The alchemist is free, he says, to choose whatever vessel he pleases; the best vessel, however, "concordeth with the Vessel of Nature." (p.96) Clay vessels are particularly suspect:

Dead Clay is called such a thinge
As hath suffered greate roastinge;
Such medled in powder with good raw Claye,
Will Fier abide and not goe away;
But manie Claies woll leape in Fier,
Such For Vessells doe not desire. (p.95)

If the vessel broke or the fire went out the entire experiment was ruined and had to be started again from the beginning. While the impurities in the materials of which the vessels were constructed has led Burland to hypothesize that chemical reactions took place that cannot be duplicated today, Taylor suggests that the frequent breaking of the vessels helps to account for the discrepancy between what the alchemists say they do and what is known by modern standards to be chemically impossible. Since the alchemist's experiment usually ended prematurely because of one or another accident, his treatise describes not so much what he observed but what he thought would happen, had the experiment been completed.⁵⁹

The Outer Work

Watching vapours rising and descending, dissolving and coagulating in his vessel, the alchemist thought of chemical phenomena in terms of natural processes. Given that what he saw suggested to him the union of opposites, the male and the female, the active and the passive, form

and matter, and the permanent union of the body, soul and spirit, what he sought to do is sensible for he could justify his work by theory derived from Aristotle and by his own observation. But what was it that the alchemist was watching that made him think of these things? In other words, what does the alchemist actually do in his experiments?

Unfortunately the actual work of the experiment, what goes in to what pot at what time and with what effect, is almost impossible to determine from the treatises. The substances that the alchemist uses to obtain his two principles he keeps secret and describes in ways that never fail to confuse modern readers. Similarly the alchemist is equally secretive about the methods he employs.

One of the treatises, Canon Ripley's The Compound of Alchemy (1471) lists twelve stages by which the Stone is made and projected and promises to give the reader a good description of what takes place in the alchemical opus both from the theoretical and practical points of view:

But into Chapters thys treatise I shall devyde,
In number Twelve with dew Recaptylatyon;
Superfluous rehearsalls I ley asyde,
Intendyng only to geve trew Informatyon,
Both of the Theoryke and Practycall operatyon:
That by my wrytyng who so wyll guyded be,
Of hys intente perfytyly speed shall he.

The Fyrst Chapter shalbe of naturall Calcination;
The Second of Dyssolution secret and Phylosophycall;
The Thyrd of our Elementall Separation;
The Fourth of Conjunction matrymonyall;
The fyfthe of Putrefaction then followe shall;
Of Congelatyon, albyfycative shall by the Syxt,
Then of Cybatyon the Seaventh shall follow next.

The secret of our Sublymation the eyght shall shew;
The nynth shall be of Fermentation,
The Tenth of our Exaltation I trow;
The Eleventh of our mervelose Multyplycatyon;
The Twelfth of Projectyon; then Recaptylatyon;
And so thys Treatise shall take an end.⁶⁰

If Ripley's Compound seems promising at first, the reader quickly meets with disappointing confusion since the twelve stages are described very obscurely. Of Projection, for example, Ripley writes that the ignorant are often unsuccessful because they do not cleanse the metals that they are trying to transmute (p.185), a statement which suggests that many of the first stages of the operation are repeated. The method by which the actual projection takes place, he says, is recorded in the Psalms:

On Fundamenta cast fyrst thys Psalme Nunc Dimittis,
Uppon Verba mea then cast Fundamenta blyve;
Than Verba mea uppon Diligam, conseve me with thy wyttis;
And Diligam on Attende yf thou lyst to thryve....⁶¹

For all their obscurity, however, Ripley's twelve stages are representative of the alchemical process and they have been tentatively interpreted by Sherwood Taylor and Richard Cavendish.⁶² Not all alchemists use twelve stages and even the processes that overlap with Ripley's are likely to occur in a different order. Geber says that there are eight operations which he lists in stages:

These ways are indeed divers in themselves. For one way is Sublimation, and Descension another; and Distillation is also one way, Calcination another, Solution another, and Coagulation another: but the seventh way is Fixation, and the eighth Geration.

(The Sum of Perfection, p.71)

According to Geber the work consists of three degrees of perfection which he describes in his "Recapitulation of the Whole Art" where he comes closer than most alchemists to telling how the Stone is made. In fact, so "exoteric" is Geber's Sum of Perfection that the disciples who followed him became known as "Geber's cooks":⁶³

Therefore we say, the Sum of the whole Intention of the Work is no other, than that the Stone...should be taken, and with instance of Labour, Sublimation of the first Degree, repeated

upon it: for by this it will be cleansed from corrupting Impurity. And the Perfection of Sublimation is the Subtiliation of the Stone by it, until it can come to the ultimate purity of Subtlety, and lastly be made Volatile. This being done, by the Way of Fixation it must be fixed, until it can rest in the Asperity of Fire. Herein consists the Measure of the Second Degree of Preparation. The Stone is likewise administered in the third, which consists in the ultimate Complementment of Preparation: and that is this: You must make the now fixed Stone, by the ways of Sublimation Volatile, and the Volatile fixed; and the Fixed, Dissolved; and the Dissolved again Volatile, and the Volatile again Fixed, until it flow and alter, into Solifick, and Lunifick, with certain Complementment.

From the Reiteration of Preparation of this third Degree, results the Multiplication of the Goodness of Alteration of the Medicine. Therefore, from the Diversity of the Work repeated upon the Stone, in its Degrees, results the Diversity of Multiplication of the Goodness of Alteration; so that among Medicines, some transmute into a true Solifick and Lunifick Body of Perfection, an hundred-fold as much as their own weight...and some to Infinity.

(The Sum of Perfection, pp.195-196)

While from this description we would never know how to go about making the Stone, we see that in its three degrees of perfection the general procedure that Geber and all alchemists use. The first degree is the preparation of materials, removing from them their impurities. The second degree is the volatilization and fixation of the Stone. The third degree is the multiplication of the Stone, increasing its abilities to transmute base metals into silver or gold. Thus, in his recapitulation, Geber has described how the Stone is made. But beyond this, however, the fixed Stone must be projected upon base metal. Such a method of alchemy's operation is conveniently systematized by John Read in his Prelude To Chemistry:

1. Purification of the primitive materials
2. Preparation of the proximate materials
3. Treatment in the Philosopher's Egg...
4. Increasing the potency of the resulting Stone (multiplication)
5. Transmutation (in the operation of projection)⁶⁴

The first two stages of purification and preparation are often called the Lesser Work; the last stages are called the Great Work or Grand Magisterium.⁶⁵

In the Lesser Work the alchemist takes a substance, which is the Stone in potential, and strips it of its qualities to obtain from it the prime matter that it contains. What this substance might be is one of alchemy's mysteries and it is described so as to deceive the ignorant. Described as being foul to those who do not know it and dear to those who do know it, it is the vilest and the most precious, the most common and yet the rarest thing on earth:

The Stone is familiar to all men, both young and old, is found in the country, village and in the town, in all things created by God; yet despised by all. Rich and poor handle it every day. It is cast into the street by servant maids; Children play with it. Yet no one prizes it, though, next to the human soul, it is the most beautiful and precious thing upon earth, and has power to pull down kings and princes. Nevertheless it is esteemed the vilest and meanest of earthly things.⁶⁶

Having received the materia prima, the alchemist next formed the two "proximate substances," the "sulphur" and the "mercury" by which metals are produced. When the two principles are produced they are treated in the Vase where the treatments are seen to be the death and re-generation of the Stone, the separation, rotation and fixing of the elements.

The alchemist judged the progress of his work by the appearance of a standard series of colour changes. The nigredo, or black stage signifies the death of the substance, the corruption by which the Stone is engendered. This stage signifies "chaos" to the alchemists and is sometimes called "massa confusa." The black stage is followed by the white stage, the albedo, which is the Stone at its first stage of perfection. The white Stone is capable of transmuting base metals into

silver. Immediately preceding the white stage is the "peacock's tail," so named because of the many luminous colours that appear before the Stone turns white. The last stage, called the rubedo, is the creation of the Red Stone or the red elixir that transmutes base metals into gold.

The colour stages are particularly important to the alchemist not only because the appearance or non-appearance of the colours objectively indicates the progress of the work,⁶⁷ but because colour was believed to be a spirit, a form of pneuma, that revealed the inner nature of a metal and its changes.⁶⁸ The colour changes were identified as a change in quality, a change in the inner organization of a metal.⁶⁹

Although by the Fourteenth century and continuing into the Renaissance the colour sequence was fixed as a progression from black to white to red this had not always been the case. Jung reports that there was a fourth colour, the yellow stage, citrinatas, that occurred between the white and the red stages. This stage is not present in the works of the later alchemists.⁷⁰ Hopkins, who believes that western alchemy was "founded upon a mistake in interpretation and translation, buoyed up by the false hopes of the people, advertised and exploited by charlatans," (p.192) regards the black-white-red colour sequence as a misunderstanding of:

the original Egyptian meaning of such expressions as the familiar "body, soul and spirit", the "tincture of the metals," the "tempering of copper," the "baptizing of fabrics" and all the color ideas locked up in that oft-quoted and ancient sequence: black, white, yellow and violet. (pp.182-84)

For Hopkins, alchemy and its black-white-red colour sequence is a corruption of the black-white-yellow-violet of the Egyptian dying industries.

The processes in the Vessel with their attendant colour stages are described with considerable attention to the physical description of what takes place by George Starkey in his treatise The Stone of the Philosophers (1664). Starkey's is a later alchemy, a type that follows Lull's "circulations" and Dastin's idea that gold and silver can be used for obtaining "our" sulphur and mercury. It is not often that an alchemist speaks in language as clear as Starkey's and, perhaps for that reason his is to be held suspect. Nevertheless his description of the final steps of the process provides a good idea of the alchemist's work:

...Our vessel being warily heated at the first for fear of its cracking, an ebulliation of the contained matter is brought on, so that the moisture is alternately circulated in white fumes above and condensed below, which may continue for a month or two, nay, longer, increasing the heat gradually to another degree, as your matter discovers a disposition for fixing, by the vapour continuing at longer intervals condensed, and rising in a lesser quantity of an ash colour, or other dark shades which it will assume as a medium to perfect blackness, the first desirable stage in our harvest...

A pellicle or film on the matter shows its disposition for fixing, retaining the vapour captive for some time till it breaks through at different places on its surface...with darker clouds, but quickly dissipated, and growing less in quantity, till the whole substance resembles molten pitch,...bubbling less and less, resting in one entire black substance at the bottom of your glass. This is called the blackness of black, the head of the crow, etc., and is esteemed a desirable stage in our philosophical generation, being the perfect putrefaction of our seed, which will ere long show its vital principle by a glorious manifestation of Seminal Virtue.

When the putrefaction has been thus completed, the fire may be increased till glorious colours appear, which the Sons of Art have called the Cauda Pavonis, or the Peacock's Tail. These colours come and go, as heat is administered approaching to the third degree till all is of a beautiful green, and as it ripens assumes a perfect whiteness, which is the White Tincture...

(Starkey, pp.176-77)

Starkey continues his description until the White Stone, enduring the fire of the fourth degree "acquires a redness like the blood taken from a sound person" (p.177).

When the Stone is first made it has only power enough to transmute its own weight of base metal into silver or gold until it is multiplied. Through Multiplication the Stone acquires the ability to transmute almost infinite amounts of base metal into precious metal. Multiplication is accomplished by dissolving the Stone in mercury that has been fermented with a small quantity of gold; the more often this is done the stronger it becomes.⁷¹

The final product of the Great Work is the Philosophers' Stone that transmutes base metals to their golden perfection and, as the Elixir, "most wonderfully pervades the human body, to the extirpation of all disorders, prolonging life by its use to its utmost period" (Starkey, p.177). The Stone created through the Great Work is described rapturously by the alchemists:

But when the colours begin, we shall behold the miracles of the wisdom of God, until the Tyrian colour be accomplished. O wonder-working Nature, tingeing other natures! O heavenly Nature, separating and converting the elements by regimen! Nothing, therefore, is more precious than these Natures in that Nature which multiplies the composite, and makes fixed and scarlet.

(Turba Philosophorum, p.191)

The Stone did not necessarily resemble a stone and it is capable of assuming solid, liquid, or gaseous states:

If you seek to dissolve, it shall be dissolved; but if you would coagulate, it shall be coagulated.... It is also a stone and not a stone, spirit, soul, and body; it is white, volatile, concave, hairless, cold, and yet no one can apply the tongue with impunity to its surface. If you wish that it should fly, it flies...

(Turba, pp.206-07)

Once more, Starkey describes the Stone in plainer language:

it is easily reducible to powder by scraping, or otherwise, and in being heated in the fire flows like wax, without smoking, flaming or loss of substance, returning when cold to its former fixity, heavier than gold bulk for bulk, yet easy to be dissolved in any liquid...

(Starkey, p.177)

Bonus describes how the Stone acts upon base metals to cause their transmutation:

Let us suppose the metals to be penetrated by some more powerful and all-pervading agent in their very inmost parts, and throughout all their molecules--and we have something closely resembling the alleged action of the Philosophers' Stone. (p.98)

It is interesting that Bonus argues, as alchemists often do, that the Stone "tinges" the metal to its innermost parts not just the surface. In arguing this way he is answering frequent charges that the product of alchemy is merely superficially coloured and not transmuted.

The process of Projection is performed in several different ways. While Ripley, as we have already seen, "follows the Psalms," Read suggests in a somewhat more mundane fashion that the "powder of projection" is "enclosed in wax or paper and thrown onto hot quicksilver, molten lead or other material to be transmuted."⁷² Starkey's exoteric The Stone of the Philosophers describes a method of Projection that is very similar to the one that the Canon fakes in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale:

When the artist would transmute any metal--for instance lead--let a quantity be melted in a clean crucible, to which let a few grains of gold in filings be cast; and when the whole is melted, let him have in readiness a little of the powder, which will easily scrape off from his Stone, the quantity inconsiderable, and cast it on the metal while in fusion. Immediately there will arise a thick fume which carries off with it the impurities contained within the lead, with a crackling noise, and leaves the substance of the lead transmuted into most pure gold, without any kind of sophistication...

(Starkey, p.178)

The gold produced by alchemy is described by Bonus as being natural gold: "it differs in no respect from natural gold because its form is natural and not artificial" (p.161). Yet it is purer than natural gold:

It contains no impurity of any kind but its perfect quality is made evident by the examination of the fire, whence it follows

that it is true gold and natural, form for form and quality for quality. As a fact, it is purer and more precious even than natural gold. (pp.188-89)

The Inner Work

Discussion of the alchemical opus has so far treated it as an entirely exoteric work upon matter; a view that is seemingly reinforced by the quotations from Starkey's The Stone of the Philosophers. But, as Eliade argues the alchemists "were from the very beginning aware that in pursuing the perfection of metals they were pursuing their own perfection" (p.158). By the Seventeenth century when alchemical writings are almost entirely mystical and more appropriately described as Hermetic,⁷³ it is very apparent that there is an inner work in alchemy that leads to the perfection of the alchemist and is synonymous with salvation. This is most easily seen in the illustration for Arnald's Rosary in which the hidden Stone, having died and been reborn as the Philosophers' Stone, is depicted allegorically by Christ as he emerges triumphant from the grave (see Figure 3 below):



Alchemical resurrection (from *The Rosary*)

This association Christ with the Philosophers' Stone, called the Lapis-Christus parallel by Jung,⁷⁵ is strangely appropriate for expressing alchemy's inner work. Christ, the "Spirit made flesh," equally human and divine, very aptly portrays what the alchemists considered to be the nature of the Philosophers' Stone, the spiritual fixed body. And the alchemist made of himself a spiritual body fixed to God's will by inwardly making himself the womb or vessel from which Christ is born within him.⁷⁶ Thus the alchemist is perfected, redeemed, through alchemy. The late treatises abound in metaphors that are overtly Christian and express alchemy in terms of salvation. One example of this is the Preface to Ripley's Compound of Alchemy in which alchemical and Christian metaphors are mixed together:

O Hygh Yncomprehensyble and gloryous Mageste,
Whose Luminous Bemes obtundyth our speciation;
One-hode in Substance, O Tryne hode in Deite;
Of Hierarchycall Jubylested the gratuland gloryfyation;
O pytewouse purifyer of Soules and puer perpetuation;
O deviant fro danger, O drawer most deboner;
Fro thys envyos valey of vanyte, O our Exalter.

While Ripley is invoking the Deity, the terms "purifyer of souls" and "exalter" apply with equal validity to the attributes of the Philosophers' Stone. The Invocation continues, equating the works of alchemy and man's preparation on earth for heaven; the treasure obtained through alchemy with the "treasure" of salvation. It is in hope of salvation and the alchemical secret that he has renounced the world, his own will and the lusts of the flesh:

O Power, O Wysdom, O Goodness inexplicable;
Support me, Tech me, and be my Governour,
That never my lyvyng be to thee dysplycable,
But that I aquyte me to thee as a trew professor:
Att thys begynnyng good Lord here my prayer;
Be nygh with Grave for to enforce my wyll;
Graunt well that I may my entent fulfyll.

Most curyose Coffe and copyose of all tresure
Thou art, fro whom all goodness doth deffend,
(To Man) and also to every-ech Creature;
Thyne Handy-warke therefore vouchsaufe to defend,
That we no tyme in lyvying here myspend,
With truth thou graunt us our lyvelode to wyn
That in no daunger of Synfulnes we renne.

And for soe much as we have for thy sake
Renowncyd the World, our Wyls, and the Fleshys Lust,
As thyne owne wylfull professyors us take;
Syth in thee only dependyth all our trust,
We can no ferther, to thee enclyne me must:
Thy secret Tresorars, vouchsafe to make us,
Show us thy Secrets, and to us be bounteous. (pp.121-22)

The concept of the inner spiritual work of alchemy was not the discovery of late Christian alchemists, however, although this was the opinion of A. E. Waite in his book The Secret Tradition in Alchemy.⁷⁷ Nor is the inner work necessarily dependent upon Christian concepts: from its very origins in First century Alexandria, alchemy is characterized by its mystical as well as its technical aspects. Lacking a theology of its own, alchemy adapted its theological as well as its theoretical bases from the societies in which it is found.⁷⁸ The concept of alchemy's spiritual work is not confined to the mystical treatises that deliberately use alchemical symbolism allegorically to express conditions of the soul, although certainly the spiritual work is more pronounced in the mystical than in the practical treatises. Alchemy, to be alchemy, must combine the concepts of the practical and the mystical, the outer and the inner works. In fact, this is the acid-test of alchemy: without the spiritual aspects the search for perfection turns into chemistry. Without the practical aspects it turns into mysticism.

The concept of alchemy's inner work is prominent in the pagan Greek and Arab philosophers as much as it is in the Christian adepts.

Zosimos' treatise On Virtue (300 A.D.), a series of dream visions, describes the initiation ritual of the priest Ion. Through death and dismemberment Ion had become a "spirit":

And having heard the voice of him who stood on the bowl shaped altar I Zosimos questioned him.... He answered me in a weak voice saying I am Ion, the priest of the sanctuary and I have survived intolerable violence. For one came headlong in the morning, dismembering me with a sword and tearing me asunder according to the rigour of harmony. And flaying my head with a sword which he held fast he mingled my bones with my flesh and burned them in the fire of the Spirit, until I learnt by the transformation of the body to become a spirit.⁷⁹

Discussing Zosimos' visions Taylor says that there is nothing quite like them in Greek alchemical literature ("Visions," p.88). Yet it seems that Zosimos was following the tradition of the secret being revealed through a dream or vision that was used by Democritos in a story having as its theme the "painstaking search for truth." This theme is common in Hellenistic literature and, according to Sheppard, for Gnostics and Hermeticists it would represent the revealing of the way of salvation.⁸⁰

The secret was revealed to Democritos after he had invoked the ghost of his dead master Ostanos when a column of the temple burst open:

...When we bent to look we saw in surprise that nothing had escaped us except this wholly valuable formula which we found there "A nature is delighted by another nature, a nature conquers another nature, a nature dominate[s] another nature." Great was our admiration for he had concentrated in a few words all the scripture.⁸¹

The formula revealed here is the triadic formula that forms the basis of the influential Turba Philosophorum.⁸²

The inner work of alchemy, present in the initiation ritual leading to spiritual illumination, is the whole focus of Stephanos' "Of This Great and Sacred Art of the Making of God." The highly rhetorical

mysticism of this treatise centres upon the triadic formula:

I confess the grace of the giving of light from above, which is given to us by the lights of the Father.... [Stephanos "confesses" the triadic formula and comments upon it:]

For it rejoices on account of the nature being its own, and masters it because it has kinship with it, and, superior to nature, it conquers the nature when the corporeal operation of the process shall fulfill the initiation into the mysteries...

He continues, describing the experience of spiritual initiation:

From thee the whole mystery is fully brought to perfection, thou alone shalt have no fear of the knowledge of the same, on thee will spread the radiant eastern cloud.... The cup bearer again serving the fire throwing bearer of coals (then carrying such a brightness from afar, in bridal fashion you veil the shrine, you receive the undefiled mystery of nature).⁸³

The inner work of alchemy is also present in the works of the Arab philosophers who translated almost the whole corpus of Greek texts and later developed alchemical theory and practice apart from them. Jabir Ibn Hayyan (who was responsible for the Sulphur-Mercury theory) was, according to Holmyard, a member of the Sufi, the Moslem mystics, "whose members sought ecstatic union with God, practised rigid austerity, and gave themselves to contemplation and religious exercises" (p.71). Taylor disagrees with Holmyard's identification of Jabir and thinks that the Jabirian treatises were composed by a religious sect (the Sufi?) that resembled the Brethren of Purity, a secret sect of natural philosophers "with a strong belief in the power of science to purify the soul" (Taylor, The Alchemists, p. 71). Whatever their source, however, it can be assumed that the Jabirian treatises saw alchemy as a way of perfection of metals and as a perfection of the human soul.

The inner work of alchemy is clear in the Turba Philosophorum which was later one of the most important treatises in Western alchemy. According to the Turba the alchemical secret is God's and he gives it to his "elect" (p.179) and withholds it from the vulgar "lest the world

be devastated" (p.188). The main symbolism of the Turba is that of the body, soul, and spirit, symbols that apply as much to the alchemist as to the metals upon which he works. Thus we read that "he who cooks with the sun is himself congealed" (p.174) and that metals, like men, have souls and bodies. Hermigamus testifies:

...The definition of this Art is the liquefaction of the body and the separation of the soul from the body seeing that copper, like a man, has a soul and a body.

As Hermigamus' testimony continues it becomes apparent that while he tells the assembly of an operation of the outer work he is at the same time addressing the alchemists morally concerning the preparation of their souls for salvation:

...It behooves you, O all ye Sons of the Doctrine, to destroy the body and extract the soul therefrom! Wherefore the Philosophers said that the body does not penetrate the body, but that there is a subtle nature, which is the soul, and it is this which tinges and penetrates the body.

The Turba rebukes Hermigamus for his "dark words" whereat he "explains" his ideas, confining himself to the chemical operation: "...The splendor of Saturn does not appear unless it perchance be dark when it ascends in the air..." (p.193). Alchemy is explicitly linked with salvation and resurrection in the Turba when the soul descends into the body:

...The weakness being taken away, that matter will be made strong, and after corruption will be improved, even as a man becomes stronger after resurrection and younger than he was in this world. (p.101)

As with the Greek and Arab philosophers, whose works they translated into Latin, the Christian alchemists took the body-soul-spirit metaphor as expressing alchemy's spiritual work but they gave it a Christian interpretation. The Christian alchemist thought of the Philosopher's Stone as operating in the same way as Christ operates within

the human soul. Arnaldus de Villanova's Flos Paradisi (early Fourteenth century) describes the alchemical process as being analogous to the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ⁸⁴ and this is perhaps the first example of the Lapis-Christus parallel in western alchemy. If this Lapis-Christus parallel led the alchemists into the daring theology and heresy that Jung has suggested, then the heretical aspects were not apprehended by the alchemists. Jung has charged that the alchemists were trying to secure redemption by taking the matter into their own hands, making themselves their own redeemers.⁸⁵ This, however, is clearly not the case and alchemists universally stress that it is not they who perfect the Stone at all, but rather that it is God who perfects it. The Turba says: "This, therefore, is that special and spiritual nature to which the God thereof can give what fire cannot" (p.35). Geber writes: "And He, who shall operate according to this Book, he shall (through God) with Joy find that he is come to the True end of this art" (p.24). And again:

Yet we do not do this, but Nature...we alter not metals, but Nature; for whom according to art, we prepare the matter: for she herself acts, not we; yet we are her administrators.
(Sum of Perfection, p.40)

The alchemists also realized that their redemption through alchemy was not independent or alternative to redemption through Christianity.

Bonus says:

...Our art is more noble and more precious than any other science, art or system, with the single exception of the glorious doctrine of Redemption through our Saviour Jesus Christ.
(p.138)

Here it could seem that Bonus denies the relationship between alchemy's inner work and salvation. But by mentioning the two of them together he associates them at the same time as he recognizes that the alchemist's

work cannot exist apart from Christianity.

In fact, the very name "Petrus Bonus" suggests the linking of salvation with alchemy, a suggestion that is reinforced by the title New Pearl of Great Price, given Bonus' treatise by Lacinius, with its obvious reference to the biblical parable of the man who sold all that he had to purchase the pearl of great price, which signifies the kingdom of heaven.

As a Christian who sees alchemy as involving a spiritual work upon the operator within a Christian context, Bonus must deal with the problem of the pagans being given God's secret. If alchemy is a way to salvation, a spiritualizing of the human soul and a fixing of the human will to God's, then how is it possible that the pagans were given the secret?

Bonus answers that the hidden Stone, which is the Gift of God, "exalted [the ancient sages] above the ordinary level of human nature" (pp.124-25). On this basis, although the early sages were heathens, they were able to prophesy such events as the coming of judgement, the resurrection of the dead "when every soul shall be reunited to its body, not to be severed from it thenceforward forever":

Then they said that every glorified body would be incorruptable, and perfectly penetrated in all its parts by the spirit, because the nature of the body would then resemble the spirit.
(p.125)

Moreover the pagan sages know that God must become man and that the creator "must become one with creature" (p.126). In short, according to Bonus, the pagan sages were led to a true, a Christian, understanding through their study of alchemy. And, if a pagan should find the secret of alchemy, he would be instantly converted (p.275).

This leads us to consider how the alchemists thought that the

inner work manifested itself. While the inner work is in fact redemption, a work that only perfect men can perform or a work that perfects them, the alchemists almost always saw that their spiritualization was manifested first through supernatural illumination. Bonus sums up this idea when he writes:

We may well call this Magistry a divine and glorious mystery, which transcends not only Nature, but the God-like reason of man... (p.127)

The alchemist's inner work then, is accomplished by God who, in revealing the secret, transforms the alchemist, exalts him above human nature. The alchemist is only granted this gift of God if he has made himself worthy of receiving this illumination within the limitations of his human nature. The most interesting and complete account of the experience of receiving divine illumination is recorded in the Turba Philosophorum:

I swear to you by God that I have searched for a long time in books so that I might arrive at the knowledge of this one thing, while I prayed also to God that he would teach me what it is. My prayer was heard. He shewed me clean water, whereby I knew pure vinegar and the more I did read books, the more I was illuminated. (p.54)

While alchemy's inner work roughly parallels the outer work of the opus, it is difficult to determine what takes place at each stage of the work. The difference between the White Stone and the Red Stone with reference to the alchemist's spirituality is impossible to say. The alchemist, like metals, endures a first stage of purification and a soul-less state which is close to despair, the equivalent of putrefaction in the outer work. Out of this death of the old self the alchemist is reborn, illuminated, nourished in wisdom and fixed to God's will. Thus the Stone is created within the alchemist and he has become a spiritualized fixed body.

The outer stage of multiplication, in which the Stone acquires the ability to transmute large quantities of base metals to gold is associated with the addition of charity to the alchemist's soul. As he is perfected so he leads others to perfection. Ripley associates multiplication with charity in his Compound of Alchemy:

Hys owne gret Gyfts thefore and hys Trespure,
Dyspose thou vertuosely, helpyng the poore at nede,
That in thys World to the thou may procure
Mercy and Grace with Hevenly blys to mede,
And pray devoutly to God that he the lede...
("Of Multiplication," p.183)

The alchemist's charity is specified by Geber's translator, Richard Russell in his Preface:

For every conscientious Man, exercised in Chymistry, sees Cause enough to lay his Hand upon his Mouth; and yet neglects not to do what Good he can, without blowing a Trumpet. He that doth otherwise, may be suspected...⁸⁶

Charity is also associated with alchemy by Bonus:

Our Art frees not only the body but also the soul from the snares of servitude and bondage; it ennobles the rich, comforts and relieves the poor. Indeed, it may be said to supply every human want, and to provide a remedy for every form of suffering (p.139).⁸⁷

Himself the product of alchemy, the alchemist, fixed to God's will, performs charitable acts for others, often in the building of hospitals and churches, as in the case of the exemplary Nicholas Flammel, whom we will consider below.

A Way to Damnation Through the Inner Work

In the quotation above there is a strong association of alchemy with redemption in that the Stone frees the body and the soul from the "snares and servitude of bondage." The "snares and servitude of bondage," associated with the freeing of the body and the soul suggests, of course, salvation itself. Alchemy, which "exalts the mind of man and

raises it to God" (Bonus, p.138) is a divine art perfecting man and leading him to redemption if he follows God's will and is given the secret by him.

Should the wicked attempt to study alchemy, and many do, instead of being illumined, they "depart from unity and truth" and "become involved in the bewildering mazes of confusion and terror," writes Bonus (p.132). The confusion of the sophisticated imposter and his futile attempts at alchemy are legendary in the treatises. Sometimes, though not always, the alchemists suggest that the imposter's attempts to make gold have led him to damnation: In the Physika Democritos writes:

Those people who, on a rash and thoughtless impulse, seek to prepare the remedy which would heal the soul and rid it of all affliction, do not understand that they will go to their doom.⁸⁸

In his Nuncupatory Discourse prefaced to the New Pearl of Great Price, Lacinius has "Bonus" discuss alchemy as a way to damnation. Asked whether alchemy is a profane art, Bonus replies that alchemy is a blessed art serving God, but that the sophisticated imposter is evil and serves mammon (Bonus, pp.11-12). His opinion is shared by Roger Bacon in his Opus Tertium:

For God has always concealed the power of this science from the multitude, for the crowd is not only ignorant of how to use these most worthy things but even converts them to evil purposes.⁸⁹

Geber, however, is the most outspoken of the alchemists in his condemnation of sophistry and in his conviction that sophists are damned through their efforts to make gold. Speaking to the imposter, he says:

...Our Art is reserved in the Divine Will of God, and is given to, or with-held from, whom he will; who is Glorious, Sublime, and full of all Justice and Goodness. And perhaps, for the punishment of your Sophistical Work, he denies you the Art, and lamentably thrusts you into the By-Path of Error, and from

your Error into perpetual Infelicity and Misery: because he is most miserable and unhappy, to whom (after the End of his Work and Labour) God denies the sight of Truth. For such a Man is constituted in perpetual Labour, beset with all Misfortune and Infelicity, loseth the Consolation, Joy, and Delight of his whole Time, and consumes his Life in Grief without Profit.

(Sum of Perfection, p.31)

If Geber is sympathetic towards the misery of the sophist here, he is not nearly so sympathetic elsewhere:

Be they therefore blasphemed to Eternity, because they have left to their Posterity Blasphemies and a Curse, and by their Error brought the same on Men Philosophising. For they left not behind them after their Death, Verity, but a Diabolick Instigation rather...

(Sum of Perfection, p.44)

Geber suggests here that not only has alchemy's proper spiritual work been perverted by the sophister so that he has led himself to damnation; but that he has also diabolically led others into his cursedness.

THE ALCHEMIST

Recalling Bonus' statement that men are either perfect when they begin the art or they are made perfect by it, we may well ask what sort of man became an alchemist. It is a question to which the treatises devote some attention. Geber devotes a chapter to the "Qualifications of the Artificer" saying that the alchemist must be well skilled, perfect in the sciences of natural philosophy and helped by a most deep search and have a natural industry by which he may correct his errors. He must also be naturally profound in wit and desire, and helped by learning. He must be constant of will, diligent in work, temperate and slow to anger, avoid being sophistical but be intent upon the true completion of the work. Finally, the alchemist must be careful to keep his money so as to avoid the misery and desperation of poverty (Sum of

Perfection, pp.29-31).

Like Geber, Petrus Bonus specifies that the alchemist must know natural principles and the principles of art if he is going to complete the work of the experiment. Because man "knows" through the senses (perceptions which are called by Bonus "minute oracular observations") (p.128) as well as the reason, the alchemist must extend both these faculties to their fullest development so as to make himself worthy of divine illumination, the knowledge of the alchemical secret, God's gift, which surpasses human understanding, the knowledge that is given to the saints in heaven (p.127).

Of the character of the alchemist Bascen says to the Turba:

O All seekers of this art, ye can reach no useful result without a patient, laborious and solicitous soul, perservering courage and continuous regimen. He, therefore, who is willing to persevere in this disposition, and would enjoy the result, may enter upon it, but he who desires to learn over speedily must not have recourse to our books.... (p.127)

Patience and endurance are two of the most important of the alchemists' qualities and the treatises are strict about the fact that the alchemist must desire neither material wealth or power although he will gain both in great portion at the end of his work.⁹⁰ Only when the desires to be "wizard-like" (sophistical), and glorify his own power and intellect (the symptoms of pride) are stripped away from his soul and killed within him is he inspired with the secret. Zosimos writes:

Abide at thine own fireside acknowledging but one God and one Art; do not deviate in search of another God; for God will come to thee, He who is present everywhere.... Rest thy body, and hush thy passions; so governing thyself, thou shalt call unto thee the Divine Being, and the Divine Being will come unto thee.... When thou shalt know thyself, then thou shalt also know the only God existing in thee; and acting thus thou shalt attain truth and nature, rejecting matter with contempt.⁹¹

An adept, knowing alchemy's secret, may tell his disciple, who

usually knows a good deal about the art already and has been repeatedly tested by the adept. Norton writes about the circumstances leading to his initiation in his Ordinall of Alchemy. His account is interesting, too, for its characterization of the alchemist:

But who can find such a master out
As was my Master, him needeth not to doubt:
Which right nobil was and fully worthy laude,
He loved justice and he abhorred fraude;
He was full secrete when other men were lowde,
Loath to be knowne that here of ought he Could;
When men disputed of Colours of the Rose,
He would not speke but keepe himself ful close;
To whome I laboured long and many a day,
But he was solleyn to prove with straight assaye,
To search and know my Disposition,
With Manifold proofes to know my Condition:
And when he found unfeigned fidelity
In my grete hope which yet nothing did see,
At last I conquered by grace divine
His love, which did to me incline. (p.32)

Norton's many letters moved the alchemist to compassion and he sent Norton the following reply:

The tyme is come you shall receive this Grace,
To your great comfort and your solace:
Your honest desire with your great confidence,
Your vertue proved with your sapience;
Your love, your trewth, your long Perseverance,
Your stedfast mind shall your your Desire advance:
Wherefore it is need that within short space
We speake together, and see face to face.
.....

And when you come mine Heier into this Arte
I will you make, and fro this londe departe.
Ye shal be both my Brother and Mine Heier
Of this Greate Secrete whereof Clerkes despaire:
Therefore thank God which giveth this renowne,
For it is better then to were a crowne:
Next after his Saints, our lord doth him Call
Which hath this art to honour him withall. (p.33)

Accounts of the details of the secret and the period of instruction it takes a man to become an adept vary considerably. Bonus says that alchemy can be learned in an hour. Charnock says that the secret was

expressed to him by his Master in three or four words, while Norton says he studied with his Master for forty days. Cremer studied with Ramon Lull for two years, but it is not clear from his Testament just at what point Lull "discovered" the secret to him.⁹²

The alchemical treatises bear out the description of the alchemist as a divinely inspired, spiritual being. As the adept recounts the events of the magisterium he is often overcome by the truth to which he testifies, the mysteries of nature, so that he "boils over" in effusive rhapsodies concerning the unity of the work, its divine nature, the glory of God:

I say that men shall not cease to eat of the fruit of that tree to the perfection of the number (of the days) until the old man becomes young. O what marvellous natures, which have transformed the soul of that old man into a juvenile body, and the father is made into the son, Blessed be thou O most excellent God.

(Turba, p.176)

While the alchemist feels the blessedness of his art once he has become an adept, this is not always his experience of alchemy. The Sons of the Doctrine are likely to spend years in their search before they discover the secret and bring the work to its perfection; their early experiences are traumatic and bring them close to despair. Such experiences are recorded by Norton in the second chapter of his Ordinall, the "Paines of This Art" (pp.28-38) and by Charnock, who, at one point demolished his apparatus with an axe (p.302). Nicholas Flamelle (1330-1417) spent twenty-one years experimenting with alchemy before he met Master Canches, a Jew converted to Christianity, who instructed him in the secret before he (Canches) died. Even with the secret it took three years of experimentation before Flamelle prepared the White Stone in 1382.⁹³

Flamelle's story is the record of an exemplary alchemist, a spiritualized being, who used his wealth to found and endow fourteen hospitals, build three chapels and repair several church buildings in Paris. Even the skeptical Holmyard, who observes that Flamelle could well have made his wealth from his publishing business, admits of him that:

The popular opinion was unanimous in regarding Flamelle as a triumphant alchemist, who, an exception to the rule, used his mastery of the art, not for his own advancement, but for the advancement of the poor and to the greater glory of God.
(p.246)

In addition to the charitable works that Flamelle and his wife Perenelle performed, he had the figures of the Book of Abraham the Jew, the book that led him to his alchemical career, painted in the church yard of the Church of the Innocents in Paris. These figures "reveal two things according to the understanding and capacity of them that behold them":⁹⁴

First, the mysteries of our future and undoubted Resurrection, at the day of Judgement and coming of good Jesus (whom may it please to have mercy upon us) a history which is well agreeing to a churchyard. And secondly they may signify to them that are skilled in Natural Philosophy, all the principal and necessary operations of the mastery. These hieroglyphic figures shall serve as two ways to lead into the heavenly life; the first and most open sense teaching the sacred mysteries of our salvation; (as I will show hereafter) the other teaching every man that hath any small understanding how the stone, the linear way of the work, which being perfected by any one, the change of evil into good, takes away from him the root of all sin (which is covetousness) making him likeable, gentle, pious, religious, and fearing God, how evil soever he was before. For from thenceforward he is continually ravished with the great grace and mercy which he hath obtained from God, and with the profoundness of his Divine and admirable works.⁹⁵

Unlike the true Sons of the Doctrine, some men refuse to accept the suffering that is necessary for the purging of pride, sophistry and materialistic desires by which the alchemist's soul is cleansed of sin. But rather, driven by poverty and despair, these men, known from the treatises as Sophistical Imposters, proudly claim themselves to be

adepts, and, having deceived themselves wilfully deceive others turning "holy" alchemy into a "profane pursuit."⁹⁶ The sophistical imposter is the very antithesis of the true alchemist and is blamed by the adepts for alchemy's bad public reputation, which we will consider below.

The character of the sophister takes on clear dimensions in the treatises in spite of the fact that the adepts seem willing to attribute just about anything that they dislike to him. Most important of the sophist's attributes is his greed which leads him to study alchemy for the gold he hopes to get from it. Believing alchemy to be simply a matter of chemistry, he is easily swindled by a charlatan:

...The motive which prompts them is an illiberal love of gold. Their hearts are as hard as the flints which they wish to change into precious metals and they are as ignorant withal of the elementary facts of nature as the poorest labourer. The consequence is that they fall an easy prey to imposters and charlatans, and spend their lives foolishly experimenting with arsenick, sulphur, and all manner of solvents. Thus instead of learning to prepare the Stone they dissipate their money and have empty pockets for their pains.

(Lacinius, Nunccpatory Discourse, p.19)

The sophist practises alchemy diligently and even has some success at it in its initial stages but he is unable to fix the Stone, Bonus says, because that is the divine part of the art:

Many students of our Art who have operated naturally only, have accomplished the first part of our Magistry; but as the second part contains a supernatural element, being ignorant and incredulous, they were not able to perform it.... The permanent fixation of the Stone is the Divine or supernatural department in our Art, which is performed by the composition of these simple elements together, when the fixed Stone retains the volatile, and when they remain together eternally, wherein is the whole power of Alchemy, which is neither accomplished by Art or Nature only, but by God the glorious. (pp.141-43)

The sophistical imposter is particularly obtuse, and not knowing the secret, he cannot understand what the treatises are talking about. What is expressed allegorically, the sophist invariably takes literally.

He is especially (and appropriately) interested in the loathsome qualities of the matter by which the Stone is to be made and, on the basis that it is the vilest and meanest thing on earth, he seeks to use excrement and many other substances to prepare materia prima, much to the amusement of the alchemists who maintain that only metals could produce metals and that the Stone must be prepared from metallic substances.⁹⁷

For his pains he suffers poverty and despair, and, refusing to give up his greedy purposes, he ensures that God will never grant him the secret. Geber writes:

There are others...detained by the various cares and solitudes of this world occupying themselves wholly in Secular Business; from whom this our precious science with draweth her self.

(Sum of Perfection, p.29)

And, as we have already seen, the sophisticated imposter is considered to be damned, fixed to the earth by his own concupiscent materialism:

Lacinius: I suppose they expect the knowledge to be showered down from heaven. Surely we have reason to pray that such people may be delivered from their own blinding meanness and illiberality.

Bonus: Would that a ray of Divine light would illumine the gross darkness of their understandings! But I am afraid their folly is past praying for. If indeed they could be brought to see that this world is under Divine rule and governance, 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 is not to be bestowed on any man.

(Lacinius, Nuncupatory Discourse, pp.17-18)

What prevents men from discovering the art is considered in detail by Geber:

The impediments to this work are generally two viz. natural Impotency and Defect of Necessary Experience of Occupations and Labour. Yet we say, Natural Impotency is Manifold; viz. Partly from the Organ of the Artificer, it is also Manifold; for either the organ is weak, or wholly corrupted. And it is manifold from the impotencies of the Soul; either because the soul is perverted in the organ (having nothing of Rectitude,

or Reason in itself) as the Soul of a mad or infatuate Man; or because it is Fantastickal, unduly susceptible of the contrary of Forms, and suddenly extensive from one thing Knowable, to its opposite, and from one Will to its opposite. (pp.25-26)

Of the impediments to the artist's body, Geber says that a man whose organs and limbs are incomplete, who is blind, weak, feverish or has the body of a leper, cannot attain the completion of the art (p.27). His discussion of the impediments to the artist's soul is particularly interesting. Some men lack natural ingenuity because they have souls that do not search out the fundamentals of nature and art, while others can scarcely understand common speech. Others of a second group have souls "easily opinionating every phantasie" so that their truth is entirely illusory, "deviating from reason, full of error and remote from natural principles." A third group have souls that vacillate from opinion to opinion and from "will to wills; as those who suddenly believe a thing and will the same, without any Ground at all of Reason; but a little after that, another thing...and another." Men who condemn the science are condemned by it; those who believe in alchemy but remain slaves to money are equally unsuccessful although it is reasonable that they should approve of the science (pp.27-28).

THE ALCHEMICAL TREATISE

Although the ritual qualities of the alchemical experiment substantiate the dual physical and spiritual purposes of the alchemists, that alchemy is both a "craft and a creed" composed of inner and outer works is most clearly seen in the alchemical treatises, which in their peculiar methods and conventions, make a distinct kind of literature. The treatise is written by the alchemist to reveal the secret to those who are

inspired to understand it and at the same time to baffle the unworthy.

Geber writes:

...This magistry needs not a speech occult or wholly manifest. Therefore we shall treat of it in such words as may not be hid from the wise; but to men of Capacity it will be most profound and Fools shall be absolutely debarr'd from entrance therein. (p.44)

Similarly, in the Turba Philosophorum, Diomedes says:

O seekers after this Science, happy are ye, if ye understand, but if not I have still performed by duty, and that briefly, so that if ye remain ignorant, it is God who hath concealed the truth from you! Blame not, therefore, the Wise, but yourselves, for if God knew that ye possessed a faithful mind, most certainly he would reveal unto you the truth. (p.98)

The most immediate characteristic of the treatise is its incomprehensibility. Part of the reason for the obscurity of the treatises is unintentional in that the alchemists use names that we no longer recognize. In addition, however, they not only call one element by several different names; they also call several things by a single name in an effort, presumably, to demonstrate the unity of the work. Similarly the reader is frustrated in his ability to understand the treatise because the alchemist is likely to see the entire work reflected in a single operation:

Join, therefore, that male, who is the son to the red slave, in marriage with his fragrant wife, which having been done, Art is produced between them; add no foreign matter unto these things.... How exceedingly precious is the nature of that red slave, without which the regimen cannot endure! Bascen saith: O Diomedes, thou hast publically revealed this disposition! He answereth: I will even shed more light upon it.

(Turba, pp.96-97)

The most upsetting thing about reading the alchemical treatise, of course, is its allegorical mode of expression. Bonus, seeing the making of the Stone in terms of the unity of all things, writes:

Our Stone, from its all-comprehensive nature, may be compared to all things in the world. In its origin and sublimation,

and in the conjunction of its elements, there are analogies to things heavenly, earthly, and infernal, to the corporeal and the incorporeal, to things corruptible and incorruptible, visible and invisible, to spirit, soul, and body, and their union and separation, to the creation of the world, its elements, and their qualities, to all animals, vegetables, and minerals, to generation and corruption, to life and death, to virtues and vices, to unity and multitude, to actuality and potentiality, to conception and birth, to male and female, to boy and old man, to the vigorous and the weak, to the victor and the vanquished, to peace and war, to white and red, and all colours, to the beauty of Paradise, to the terrors of the infernal abyss.

(pp.146-47)

Lynn Thorndike does not share Bonus' enthusiasm, and says of one of Arnaldus' treatises:

The treatise is a turgid mixture of mystic phraseology and practical instruction. In addition to the usual patter concerning soul and spirit and body, male and female, king and wife, death, resurrection, sperm and generation, the dragon who never dies without his brother, wife and sister, water with its dried vapour called venom; we hear of the boy from the east and the old man from the west, of our dog, wolf, camel, ship, and Narcissus.

(III, p.62)

Thorndike's description is a fairly accurate, if impressionistic, characterization of most alchemical treatises in the course of which alchemical writers seem to try their hand at almost all of the allegories possible. To review the various allegorical strands comprising even a single treatise is neither necessary nor desirable here even if they could be interpreted accurately. It is of interest, however, to examine one passage for the quality of its allegory. I have chosen a passage dealing with the "chemical wedding"--or more appropriately, perhaps, its consummation--from the Turba Philosophorum. The "chemical wedding" is the most characteristic of alchemy's allegories and in this passage it describes how "sulphur" reacts with "mercury":

In the same way that woman, fleeing from her own children, with whom she lives, although partly angry, yet does not brook being overcome, nor that her husband should possess her beauty, who

furiously loves her, and keeps awake contending with her, till he shall have carnal intercourse with her, and God perfect the foetus when he multiplies children to himself according to his pleasure. His beauty therefore is consumed by the fire who does not approach his wife except by reason of lust.

The allegory suddenly changes:

I also make known to you that the dragon never dies but the philosophers have put to death the woman who slays her spouses. For the belly of that woman is full of weapons and venom. Let, therefore, a sepulchre be dug for the dragon, and let that woman be burried with him, who being strongly joined with the woman, the more he clasps her and is entwined with her, the more his body, by the creation of female weapons in the body of the woman is cut up into parts.

(Turba, pp.178-79)

It would appear that the process being described involves the combination of the male and female principles, sulphur and mercury. Their being heated together causes a violent chemical reaction preceding distillation. The "fugitive wife," a vapour, escapes and is collected; it leaves behind a black putrefying mass represented by the dragon who is synonymous, I think, with the dead husband. The distillate is returned to the Vase where another violent reaction between the "dragon" and the "wife" takes place.

The combination of the two principles is seen by the writer as the domestic strife of the chemical couple; the wife will not submit to her husband who "furiously loves her" and eventually she kills him. From this description we get a good idea that the alchemist saw as significant not only the chemical result of what happened in the Vase, but also minute observations of what occurred during the reaction. If sulphur does eventually coagulate mercury it is not without what appears to the alchemist as a struggle.

An interesting feature of the language of the passage quoted above is that the fugitive woman at this stage will "not brook being overcome"

by her husband, a statement that relates the operation to the recurring triadic formula which forms the basis of the Turba's alchemical theory: "Nature rejoices in nature, Nature overcomes Nature, Nature contains Nature" (p.199). What this means is that the union of the two contraries begins with their being joined "like to like," (in other words, one thing mixes with another first through the qualities that they both share) and ends in their mutual transformation. In the words of the Turba: "by this regimen fugitive bodies become non-fugitive, spirits are turned into bodies, and both are connected together" (p.170).

Most important for our purposes here is not the interpretation of the event, however intriguing, but the quality of the allegorical expression of the treatise. While the entire passage seems to be treating a single operation, the allegory shifts abruptly from the love-making of the couple to the burial of the dragon. What links the two parts together is the figure of the fugitive and the venomous wife who murders her husband in the first part and is buried with the dragon in the second. Abrupt transitions from one allegorical expression to the next are common in alchemical literature. Such transitions are necessitated, I think, by the fact that any allegorical expression, alchemical or not, goes only so far in approximating the author's meaning before its usefulness as an approximation is exhausted and needs to be replaced by another: one allegory generates another in the alchemical treatise in seemingly endless succession.

A second quality of the allegory of the chemical marriage is that it is not limited to describing chemical states and reactions. The expression "and God perfect the foetus" reminds the alchemist that it is not he, but God who perfects the work. The expression "when he [God]

multiplies children to himself according to his pleasure" associates the work of alchemy with God's "work" in redemption: man gains salvation not for his worthiness but by God's grace, or "pleasure." Finally the sentence "His beauty, therefore, is consumed by fire who does not approach his wife except by reason of lust," expresses a chemical reaction at the same time it expresses a moral truism of the Middle Ages.

For all their obscurity, intentional and otherwise, the treatises are predictable in certain of their features. Because alchemy is a traditional art, passed down generation by generation by oral tradition and initiation, it is not surprising that the treatises, on the whole, are markedly conservative, a conservatism that has led Grennen to comment upon their "notorious lack of individuality."⁹⁸ This conservative character is reflected in the tendency of the treatises to be filled with quotations from other works, to discuss predictable topics and to have certain structural procedures by which alchemical theory and practice are expressed.

Through his use of quotations, the author assures his reader that he is following a long line of alchemical tradition that dates back to Hermes, and at the same time, shows that he understands what other revered authorities have written in a disguised form. This may seem somewhat trivial but makes good sense considering that the success of a treatise depends upon its ability to command authority. The author of the Aurora Consurgens, a mystical treatise of the mid Thirteenth century, quoted by Arnaldus, makes a special use of biblical and alchemical quotations in order to suggest a spiritual alchemy, the redemption of sinful man:

...What is composed of simple and pure essence, remaineth forever. As Senior saith: there is one thing, that never dieth, for it continueth by perpetual increase, when the body shall be glorified in the final resurrection of the dead, wherefore the Creed beareth witness to the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life after death. Then saith the Second Adam to the first and to his sons: Come, ye blessed of my father, possess you the eternal kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the work, and eat my bread and drink the wine which I have mingled for you.... He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what the spirit of the doctrine saith to the sons of the discipline concerning the Earthly and heavenly Adam, which the philosophers treat of in these words: When thou hast water from earth, air from water, fire from air, earth from fire, then thou shalt fully and perfectly possess (our) art....⁹⁹

Traditionally the treatises have a characteristic order: they begin with a promise to reveal the secret and to hold nothing back. One of the most elaborate openings of this kind appears in the New Pearl of Great Price, where, in the Nuncupatory Discourse, "Bonus" and Lacinius discuss the keeping of the secret:

Lacinius: Why then do our masters follow in the footsteps of the ancients and predict ruin to mankind from the profanation of this mystery? John de Rupescissa conjures his readers not to make the art known to the wicked and unbelieving, as such a course would ruin the Christian faith.

Bonus: Do you imagine that the faith of Jesus Christ the Son of God, can be overthrown by these means?... Christ Himself has given us a sovereign rule for our guidance in this matter: "Freely ye have received, freely give. What is the use of... hidden treasure to the world?" (p.16)

It may seem from Bonus' statements that he has thrown caution to the wind and, equating the alchemical secret with the mysteries of Christianity and Salvation, he is determined to spread the doctrine as far as he is able. Bonus is actually keeping his secret, however, the same way that Diomedes does in the Turba (see p.56 above). God will inspire the meaning to those whom he wills, those whom Bonus equates with the saved, and to no others.

As a balance to its opening, the ending of the treatise generally

makes reference to the secrets having been revealed, and offers final advice to the Sons of the Doctrine:

This much concerning the revelation of our Stone is, we doubt not, enough for the Sons of the Doctrine. The strength thereof shall never become corrupted, but the same, when it is placed in the fire, shall be increased.... Do not be deceived by the multiplicity of names, but rest assured that it is one thing, into which nothing alien is added. Investigate the place thereof, and add nothing that is foreign...

(Turba, pp.206-07)

Frequently along with this final advice to the Sons of the Doctrine the alchemist ends his treatise with a warning to those who are unworthy of the art:

Cease Laymen, cease, be not in follie ever;
Lewdnes to leave is better late than never.¹⁰⁰

(Norton, p.106)

What falls in between the introduction and the conclusion of the treatise is structurally influenced by the alchemist's warning that the treatise is deliberately disordered because "if it had been delivered in a continued Series of Speech, the just Man, as well as him that is evil, might have usurped it unworthily."¹⁰¹

While the outer form of the treatise can take many shapes its contents is almost entirely determined by a discussion of alchemical theory and the practical operations by which the theory is applied. The treatise is often divided into two parts characterized by Joseph Grennen as having:

...A first part, filled with an enormous mélange of directions and ingredients, and a second part which dissolves into mystic mummerly and allegory when it purports to describe the actual transmutation.

("Mass," p.547)

According to Grennen the treatise's practical part is expressed in allegory. While this is the case in the Aurora Consurgens and Trismosin's Splendor Solis (1582) both of which follow the theoretical

discussions with parables describing the operations of the opus,¹⁰² the second part is not necessarily any more allegorical than the first part, and some treatises, those of Canon Ripley and Geber, for example, discuss the theory and the practice of each operation instead of having two distinct parts.

The treatises accredited to Arnaldus of Villanova and Ramon Lull, numbering about a hundred between the two of them, display the two part structure and each of them is divided into theoretical and practical parts, "although," says Muthlaf, "the division is rather meaningless in any modern sense of these terms."¹⁰³ In the theoretical section of his Rosary (The Treasure of Treasures, Rosary of the Philosophers, Greatest Secret of All Secrets) Arnaldus discusses the sulphur-mercury theory placing emphasis upon the role of quicksilver (mercury) as is common in the Fourteenth century. Like Bonus, Arnold believes that it is unnecessary to reduce metals to first matter (materia prima), their "proximate sources," (the "sulphur" and the "mercury") being sufficient. In this section Arnaldus also criticizes the modern alchemists for ending the work in failure at the point at which they should have begun it. In the practical section of the Rosary Arnaldus discusses the regimen of subliming, dissolving and purifying mercury and three other regimens that involve separation into four elements. While the regimen involving mercury is difficult and expensive, the other methods, Arnaldus says, are even more so and should be attempted only by the wealthy.¹⁰⁴

Few people today would be willing to say that they are able to interpret alchemical treatises. But could the Son of the Doctrine, who was able to read treatises in their "higher senses," understand them? Hopkins believes there was a good deal of confusion among the

adepts and Bonus seems to affirm this suspicion when he says that the philosophers only seem to contradict one another but are actually in agreement.¹⁰⁵ No doubt there were discrepancies and contradictions, yet, it seems to me that the adept had an advantage over the modern reader of knowing the materials and the methods of alchemical experimentation and, knowing them, he would have been able to make a good deal of sense of even so confusing a treatise as the Turba Philosophorum. Unlike the modern reader, the adept had a physical basis for understanding the symbolic and allegorical language in which the treatises are written.

ATTITUDES TO ALCHEMY IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

The popular opinion of alchemy does not correspond to the alchemist's conception of the art as being a way of perfection and the general population, (whom the alchemists call the "vulgar") whether or not they believe in the possibility of transmutation, think alchemy to be a gold-making process performed for materialistic reasons. The difference between the alchemists' or the "esoteric" conception of the art and that of the "vulgar" is best demonstrated by the Nuncupatory Discourse:

Lacinius: Alas! Is it, then, a profane pursuit?

Bonus: That is the opinion of the vulgar. But the art is sacred and all its adepts are sanctified and pure...

Lacinius: That is not the opinion of the present age. People say that this art is unbecoming not only a godly, but even an honest man.

Bonus: And do you echo the ignorant babble of the vulgar?

Lacinius: Would it were of the vulgar only. But I know that it is the opinion of all classes...

Bonus: Can it be true? Surely they must be thinking of those sophisticated imposters who are such a disgrace to our science. Such men are not philosophers but thieves and robbers; between us and them there is all the difference between day and night, good and evil, God and mammon. But nevertheless, by their wicked and shameless practises, they have succeeded in making our Blessed art a byword among the vulgar.

(Lacinius, pp.11-12)

Lacinius has caught in this passage, the essential aspects of the difference between how the alchemist conceives of his art and how the general population conceives of it. According to "Bonus" alchemy is not profane but rather it is blessed. It only appears to be profane because of the wicked practices of the sophisticated imposters whom all classes take to represent alchemy. Similar terms are used to describe the popular view of alchemy in the Fourteenth century by Edgar H. Duncan:

The stereotype of alchemy and alchemists advertised...in the Fourteenth century assumes definite and clear lines: Alchemy in practise always fails and may be impossible. It both deludes its practitioners, whose motivating force is avarice, by wasting their goods and making them deceivers, and is also the cause of scandalous dangers to others who are drawn into its sphere of activity. Its secrecy and addiction to enigmatic language are dangerous because based on ignorance or vicious because intended to deceive. Therefore...alchemy should not be practised in any way.¹⁰⁶

("Alchemy," p.638)

Duncan assumes, apparently, that all of society shared this stereotype of alchemy and alchemists but, even so he later qualifies his statement when he says that many people still believed that it was a true art and a possible one.

While alchemy cannot be said to be heralded by the general population as being the next best thing to redemption itself, neither did the general population believe that the art was entirely a swindle and a deceit. Alchemy's status was controversial during the Fourteenth century receiving support from some sectors of the population and attack from others. It was during the Fourteenth century that alchemy reached

its highest point of development in the west. In theory and in practice it had broken away from its Moslem bases and, in the works of Arnaldus, Bonus, Dastin, and Lull, shows a new kind of theory emphasizing the importance of the philosophical mercury which was believed to contain its own sulphur.¹⁰⁷ It was also during the Fourteenth century that alchemy reached its greatest popularity and, therefore, its status was most controversial.

The practise of alchemy seems to have particularly interested churchmen and members of religious orders perhaps because these men not only were literate but also could afford the practise. By the end of the Thirteenth century and continuing into the Fourteenth, so widespread was the practice of alchemy that it was severely condemned eight times by the Mendicant Orders between 1272 and 1313, apparently without much success as is suggested by the increasing severity of the prohibitions. In 1273 the Pest General Chapter prohibited the Dominicans from studying, teaching or practising alchemy:

This prohibition was confirmed at Bordeaux (1287), where severe penalties were threatened to offenders. Metz General Chapter (1313), recognizing the danger of alchemical researches, went so far as threatening excommunication as the penalty for offenders; the Barcelona General Chapter, also, expressed itself similarly (1323). Likewise the Cistercian Order in 1317 aligned itself with this solid front of official condemnation.¹⁰⁸

The Act of Metz (1313), printed in translation by Duncan, shows official concern in the face of the increasing incidence of alchemical research:

Since the art called alchemy has been in many General Chapters strictly and on the pain of serious punishment prohibited, and from that time up to the present scandalous dangers have arisen in many places belonging to the Order, the Master of the Order enjoins upon all Bretheren...that none shall study or be instructed in the said art, or practise it or cause it to be practised, that they will keep none of the writings if they have any, but

within the space of eight days...shall destroy or burn them. Against those who do otherwise he has passed written sentence of excommunication...and Sentences henceforth to detention in prison those also whose guilt shall be legally established.

("Alchemy," p.635)

The Church's opinion of alchemy was formally expressed in a Papal decretal issued by Pope John XXII. This bull was the result of a conference to which John "assembled as many natural scientists and alchemists as he could to determine whether the art had any basis in nature."¹⁰⁹ The Decretal, declaring that "no such thing [as alchemy exists] in nature" and condemning the persistent alchemist who knowingly uses alchemical gold to "perpetual infamy," reads as follows:

Poor themselves, the alchemists promise riches which are not forthcoming; wise also in their own conceit, they fall into the ditch which they themselves have digged. For there is no doubt that the professors of this art of alchemy make fun of each other because, conscious of their own ignorance, they are surprized at those who say anything of this kind about themselves; when the truth sought does not come to them they fix on a day for their experiment and exhaust all their arts; then they dissimulate their failure so that finally, though there is no such thing in nature, they pretend to make genuine gold and silver by a sophistic transmutation; to such an extent does their damned and damnable temerity go that they stamp upon the base metal the characters of public money for believing eyes as it is only in this way that they deceive the ignorant populace as to the alchemic fire of their furnace.¹¹⁰

There are several interesting features of the popular understanding shown in this decretal. Most important is that while the pope speaks of the "damned and damnable temerity" of the alchemists, unlike the alchemists quoted above, he considers the work of alchemy damnable not because alchemy contains an inner work which can operate in the reverse, but because such men who are damned through alchemy are damned by their persistent disobedience to Church authority.

John XXII sees alchemy only as being a way of gold-making as is consistent with the popular point of view, and he considers it to be an

art that works contrary to the works of nature. He portrays the alchemist as one who begins by deceiving himself into believing in the possibility of the art, losing his money through unsuccessful experimentation and then deliberately deceiving the "ignorant populace" presumably in a final effort to become rich. Whether or not the alchemist uses this money to re-invest in further experimentation the decretal does not say, but as the alchemists "fall into the ditch which they themselves have dugged," it is possible that this is suggested. In any case the decretal shows the same pattern of self-deluding that leads to the deluding of the public that Chaucer uses in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and is also the basis of the attacks from the alchemists themselves, so that this progression must be seen as part of what Duncan has called the "orthodox" opinion of alchemy in the Fourteenth century ("Alchemy," p.642). John's real interest in the decretal though, an interest he shares with Dante, as we will see below, and what is most offensive about alchemists finally to the popular opinion, is that they are counterfeiters who debase currency.

While alchemy is strongly attacked by the papal bull Throndike believes that it "should not be taken too seriously as an evidence of complete skepticism as to the possibility of transmutation":

Indeed, its implication that the alchemists were able to pass off their product as coinage was almost an indiscreet admission that they were attaining a measure of success. Still less should the decretal be interpreted as a sweeping condemnation of other activities of the alchemists.

(Thorndike, III, pp.33-34)

Thorndike discredits the legend of John's leaving a treasury containing 29,000,000 ducats of gold, mostly of alchemical origin, and the attribution of the treatise to him. However, the pope did commission his physician to make "a certain secret work," which, says Thorndike,

"sounds very much like an elixir of life, if not an attempt to make gold" (p.34). In any case the decretal, which may be spurious (p.33), seems to have had little effect on the practise of alchemy as is indicated by the number of manuscripts that were written and copied,¹¹¹ and it is never mentioned by the jurists of the period.

The legal opinion of alchemy held by the Jurists at the time of the decretal and immediately following is characterized by Thorndike as being "far more lenient, not to say favourable" (Thorndike, III, p.48). Oldrado da Ponte, consitorial advocate in the papal curia, considered the legality of alchemy in his Seventy-fourth Consillium, entitled "Whether an Alchemist is a Sinner," giving arguments first for the art and then arguments against it. In the end, however, it is not so much that alchemists are public benefactors that justifies and commends alchemy, but two legalistic arguments:

(i) Alchemy wants to imitate Nature in order to produce gold: this is not illegal, as is proved by the laws on adoption where artificial paternity imitates the natural one; (ii) The sanctions fixed by ancient laws against utterers of false metals have not been very severe: therefore, if alchemists sometimes incur this offence, this must not be considered a too gross one.¹¹²

Another jurist, John Andrea (d.1348), added to Oldrado's argument that Arnaldus of Villanova, "a great physician and theologian" was also a great alchemist "whose gold he willingly allowed to be subjected to every test." Andrea de Rampinis of Isernia (d.1353) and others, held that if alchemical gold was pure then it could be coined, subject to the prince's approval. Amberico da Roscite of Bergamo (d.1354) says the same and characterizes pure gold as having "properities such as gladdening the heart or benefitting certain infirmities."¹¹³

Fourteenth century records, particularly in England, show a considerable, if entirely pragmatic interest in alchemy and its promise

of treasure. At a time when the theoretical possibility of transmutation was justified and widespread, kings and rulers were hardly superstitious when they frequently summoned alchemists to the court. The king's interest was sufficiently keen in the experiments so long as results seemed to be forthcoming. Should the experiments not produce gold, however, as likely as not the alchemist would be imprisoned. In 1329 Edward III summoned Johannes de Rous and Willielmus de Dalby to court. These men, believed "to know how to make silver metal and previously to have made metal of this kind" were instructed to bring all of the instruments and objects necessary to their art in order to demonstrate it for the king. If they came willingly they were to be given a good escort and great honour; if they refused they would be treated as prisoners. The outcome of the incident is not recorded."¹¹⁴

An apocryphal story in Abbot Cremer's Testament tells of King Edward's dealings with the famous Ramon Lull. Cremer, who had studied alchemy without success for thirty years, met Lull in Italy "by Divine providence," and brought him back to England where Lull instructed him in alchemy's secrets. Lull was "most worthily received and kindly entertained" by the king and promised "by the sufferance of God" to make gold for him:

upon this only condition that the king in his own person should fight against the Turk, the enemies of God, and that he should bestow somewhat of the house of our Lord, and nothing at all in pride or warring against Christians.¹¹⁵

Lull made the gold for the king from which, tradition (falsely) says, Edward struck rose nobles (coins first minted c.1465) inscribed with the words "As Jesus passed invisible and in most secret manner by the midst of the Pharasees, so that gold was made by invisible and secret Art amidst the Ignorant."¹¹⁶

Not nearly so interested in the Turk as he was in the French, Edward broke his promise. According to one of the versions of the Testament,¹¹⁷ the "holy man was sore afflicted in spirit, apparently reproaching the faithless one so vehemently that he found himself 'clapt in the Tower',"¹¹⁸ from which he escaped to France.

There is no record showing that Abbot Cremer of Westminster ever existed; and the real Ramon Lull, who died twelve years before the incident could have taken place,¹¹⁹ did not believe in the possibility of transmutation. The story is important, however, because the treatises attributed to Lull were most influential in England and this tradition establishes him there. The story also illustrates the dangers the alchemist is likely to encounter from the heads of state whose interest in alchemy is profane.

In 1336, however, an alchemist appealed to Edward for protection from a man who had accused him of false debts and had put him in prison while keeping possession of the alchemist's equipment and the elixir. He appealed so well that his case was brought before the Great Council, for which he demonstrated his art.¹²⁰

An act of 1350 reports that an alchemist had taken more than five hundred gold pieces and twenty pounds of silver of the king's own money "to be used in his art in the king's interest." Ganzenmüller shows, however, that "visibly, the result of his work was not satisfactory because...he was imprisoned for 'only seven and a half years in the Tower'."¹²¹ In 1374 the Plea Rolls of Edward III show that William de Brumley was apprehended with four counterfeit gold pieces that he had made by alchemy in his possession when he had tried to sell them to the keeper of the King's money "if they appeared of any

value."¹²² De Brumley, a chaplain, was released after warning, under bond when two separate juries determined that the pieces had a value of thirty-five shillings whereas if they had been pure gold they would have been worth eighty-six shillings and eight pence. De Brumley learned his craft from William Shuchirch, the "said Canon of Windsor." Nothing is directly known of Shuchirch but it has been hypothesized by H. G. Richardson and J. M. Manly that had Shurchirch continued his experimenting at Windsor until 1390, when Chaucer was charged with overseeing the repairs to the Royal Chapel there, the poet would probably have known him and may even have been victimized by him.¹²³

Ganzenmüller suggests that it was the increasing number of falsifications of metal and counterfeiting that led to the prohibition against the practise of alchemy by Henry IV in 1403 (p.96). The Prohibition is as follows:

It is ordained and stablished, that none from henceforth shall use to multiply Gold or Silver nor use the Craft of Multiplication: And if any the same do, and be thereof attaint, that he incur the pain of Felony in this case.¹²⁴

The Statute, promising death and forfeiture of goods to the offender, was renewed under Henry VI, but Henry, whom Duncan describes as "money-needing," ("Alchemy," 634) issued licences to more than twenty people to practise alchemy. The first of these appeared in 1445 and shows no disbelief in the art when it is practised truly and in a way that does not offend the law:

Know that since William Hurteles, Alexander Worsley, Thos. Bolton and George Hornby have signified to us that inasmuch as they wish to work by the art of philosophy on certain materials, namely to transform the imperfect metals from their own nature, and then by the said art to transubstantiate them into perfect gold and silver according to every kind of test and examination, just as

any gold and silver in its ore is to be waited for as it grows and is to be hardened, they say nevertheless that certain malevolent and malignant persons suppose them to be operating by an illicit art, so that they are able to hinder and disturb them by their disapproval of the said art, We considering the aforesaid matters and wishing to know the conclusion of the said work, of our special grace have granted and given licence to the same [men]...that they may work on and test the aforesaid art without hinderance from us or any of our officers whomsoever. Provided always that to do so does not offend against our Law.¹²⁵

These alchemists had succeeded in convincing the king that a true alchemy did exist although it was badly mis-represented by its enemies. The king's "special grace," however, was probably moved more by his interest in "knowing the conclusion" of the work than by his desire to protect these men from "certain malevolent and malignant persons." That gold could be made by the true artist was commonly believed; where alchemy got into trouble from the religious and secular authorities was when its practitioners started counterfeiting.

It was the very fact of counterfeiting that made Dante place alchemists in the tenth Bowge of Nether Hell for the sins of simple fraud or malice, an abuse of the faculty of reason.¹²⁶ The alchemists in hell are described by Dante as being "leprous shades" (1.125), who are "blotched from head to foot with scabs and blains" (1.75) just as base metals are described as being leprous by the alchemists. Dante's attitude to alchemy, that it is evil, is shared by William Langland in Piers Plowman whose Dame Study warns Will against "alconomy" which she associates with the diabolical:

Experimenis of alconomye, of Alberdes makyng,
Nigromancye and perimancie, the pouke to Rise maketh.¹²⁷
(A xi, pp.157-58)

On the other hand alchemy is defended in varying degrees by the French Jean de Meun in the Romance of the Rose, John Gower in the Confessio Amantis, and by John Lydgate¹²⁸ who began to translate the

Secreta Secretorum, the apocryphal treatise on alchemy that Aristotle sent to King Alexander (Alexander the Great) revealing the secret to him. As Lydgate's poem belongs to alchemical literature rather than the popular opinion concerning alchemy it will not be discussed here. Along with Gower's and Chaucer's works concerning alchemy, however, it appears in the Theatrum Chemicum Brittanicum.

In the Romance of the Rose Jean de Meun gives an ambiguous account of alchemy in his discussion of how art strives to imitate nature. Art succeeds only in reproducing nature he says; but it can never create life:

Though Art so much of Alchemy should learn
That he all metals could with colours tint,
Though he should work himself to death, he ne'er
One species could transmute to other kind.
The best that he can do is to reduce
Each to its constitution primitive.
He'll ne'er attain to Nature's subtlety...
(78:47-54)

This seems to be a clear statement that alchemy cannot succeed in transmutation because metals belong to different species. Supporting this reservation is de Meun's further statement that metals only seem to be of different species once they have lost their primitive aspect (78:74-75). But de Meun also says that alchemy is "veritably an art, and one will find/Great marvels in it if he practises/With wisdom" (66-68) and that:

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

What de Meun seems to be suggesting is that through his art the alchemist is actively able to reduce the metal to its primitive constitution and

he is also able to prepare spirits which enter bodies to purify them (98-104). But the artist is passive to the rest of the process, which is the operation of the spirits, the work of nature and not the work of art. Alchemy, then, is a true art for de Meun, but it is one that sets nature to work to produce the final results. While de Meun says that "those who have mastery of the alchemist's art" will be successful, he cautions that sophisters can never accomplish it because "they never can attain to Nature's skill" (115).

Like de Meun, Gower believes that alchemy is an art that is entirely possible for "hem that whilome were wise"--that is the true philosophers, especially the ancients. Modern alchemists in his opinion, an opinion commonly held by alchemists and the general population alike, talk as if they knew how to make the Elixer but they cannot perform the alchemical work (p.371) and their efforts lead them into debt:

For alway thei fynde a lette,
Which bringeth in poverttee and Dette;
To hem that wiche were to fore,
The Losse is had the Lucre lore:
To gette a pound they spenden five,
I know not how such a Craft shall thrive:
In the manner as it is used,
It were better be refused,
Then for to worchen upon wene,
In thinge which stant not as thei wene...

(Gower, p.372)

By and large the Fourteenth century believed in the possibility of the transmutation of base metals into precious metals and that alchemy employed through art the processes that nature used to do the same thing. The belief in the possibility of transmutation was founded upon good authority: Vincent of Beauvais, Albertus Magnus (the "Alberd" to whom Dame Study refers), Roger Bacon and Thomas Aquinas all believed

that some alchemy was possible while they are at the same time aware of its fraudulent practice.¹²⁹ What distinguishes the attitudes of the alchemist from others, however, is that the popular understanding of alchemy is characterized by its practical and utilitarian conception of the results of the art. Roger Bacon distinguishes between Speculative (philosophical) and Operative (practical) alchemy. Operative alchemy, he says, is a science:

greater than all those preceding because it produces greater utilities. For not only can it yield wealth and very many other things for the public good, but also it teaches how to discover such things as are capable of prolonging human life."¹³⁰

Thomas Aquinas similarly sees alchemy as a practical art:

The chief function of the alchemist is to transmute metals, that is to say, the imperfect ones, in a true manner and not fraudulently.¹³¹

The suspicion in which the art was held is largely due to the existence of alchemical swindlers, those who transmute fraudulently. The alchemist that men would be likely to encounter would be a swindler and, whereas the true alchemist would stay as far away from kings and courts as possible, the swindler was attracted by them.

Literature concerning alchemy is full of charlatan stories and the best fictional account of the swindler in Middle English is the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. A true case, however, is recorded by Thomas Walshingham chronicler of the Abbey of St. Albans near London in 1319:

[A Prior] greedy above measure, hunting after money as eagerly as he wasted it lavishly...contracted a familiar friendship with a certain mendicant Friar, who promised to multiply his moneys beyond all computation by the art which men call alchemy, if only the Prior spared none of the needful expenses at the beginning of his art. To whose words the Prior lent too credulous an ear, and lavished such sums of gold and silver as might have brought even the richest to poverty. Yet even so he learned not to beware of the perils of the false friar; for having lost once, he continued even onto the third time,

pouring such plenty of gold and silver into this unprofitable work, that now scarce anything was left of the whole substance of his cell, wherewith he might have made a fourth contribution. Wherefore it came about that...nothing more was left in the house to supply the monks' necessities. So this William, slipping into apostasy, fled hastily to the court of Rome.¹³²

Holmyard records several such stories of alchemical imposters. One of them, my favourite, deals with the adventures of an Italian peasant, Manuel Caetano, who passed himself off as a count in Germany and Austria in the early Eighteenth century.

Because of his demonstrations of alchemy in Madrid, Caetano was invited to Brussels to perform his art for Maximilian Emanuel of Bavaria. After the emperor had advanced him 60,000 guilden Caetano tried to leave the court and was imprisoned for six years until he escaped on his second attempt. He set up shop in Vienna with Leopold I and convinced the whole court of his abilities. Next he went to Berlin and promised to make a large quantity of the Philosophers' Stone within sixty days for King Frederick I who had given Caetano "many valuable gifts and had appointed him to lucrative offices." The Stone was not prepared by the end of the sixty days:

the king grew restive and Caetano fled to Hamburg; but his freedom was short-lived and he was arrested and conveyed to the fortress at Kustrin (Kostrzyn). Protesting that he could not work in prison, he was taken to Berlin, whence he escaped to Frankfurt-am Main, only to be re-arrested and sent back to Kustrin. It had now become clear that he was an imposter, and in August 1709, dressed in a cloak covered with glittering tinsel, he was hanged from a gilded gallows. It seems only poetic justice that a medal was struck to commemorate the occasion.

(Holmyard, p.132)

THE CANON'S YEOMAN'S TALE

CHAPTER II

Chaucer's use of the popular conception of alchemy in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is immediately apparent. Not so apparent, however, is his use of the alchemist's conception of the art. It is the purpose of this chapter to show that not only did Chaucer embody the popular conception of alchemy in the tale but that the meaning and structure of the poem are informed by the understanding of true alchemists.

The popular understanding of alchemy is easy to see in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale: if there is such a thing as an authentic alchemist then he is something of a magician. But most alchemists are swindlers using sleight-of-hand tricks. The tale shows that in reality alchemy is exactly the opposite of what it seems to be. Instead of making men rich through the multiplication of gold, it is an expensive art that brings them into poverty and debt. While alchemy seems to be glorious, it is in fact hard work from which all that results are foul smells and further expense. Alchemy is said to be a secret art but its only real secret is the one that the Yeoman tells: that there is no secret. That alchemy does not work is evidenced by the shabby and tattered appearance of the alchemists--no one who could turn a road into silver or gold would dress as alchemists do; nor would he live in alleys among thieves, and the alchemists' claim that they do so for their own protection is merely a verbal ploy necessary to hoodwink innocent victims. In fact, all of the alchemist's language, especially his "clergial and queynte" (p.752)¹ terminology, which seems to be gibberish (a word

derived from Jabir's name)² is gibberish, deluding the alchemist himself as much as his intended victim.

The conception of alchemy from the popular understanding forms the surface of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and on this level the poem is legitimately to be seen as a warning to an innocent public to beware of the alchemist. Seeing the work as a warning neatly explains, I think the function of the poem's dramatic Prologue. Not only does it show that the alchemical secret is nothing but a delusion; it also provides the reader with an exemplary method of conning the con-man.

That the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is an attack on alchemy--perhaps Chaucer's revenge for having been duped--is also the prevailing critical view of the poem because most critics see alchemy solely in terms of the popular understanding. To them, alchemy for Chaucer, is frankly "clap-trap."³

Most critics are agreed that Chaucer knew a "good deal" about alchemy, but having read treatises and other accounts of the subject, they generally see only that Chaucer knew some alchemical theory, many names of ingredients, pieces of apparatus, and processes by which the work is performed and placed them in poem for the sake of realism.⁴ Critics are mostly at a loss to see that alchemical conceptions shape the tale and it is Ben Jonson, not Chaucer, who receives the lion's share of praise for his creative use of alchemy in literature because it is evident in The Alchemist that human action is expressed in alchemical terminology.

What critics miss is just how much alchemy Chaucer used in the composition of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. They miss it because, like the Yeoman, they believe alchemy to be a practical art, a gold-making

process, a proto-chemistry. Along with the "exoteric" view of alchemy that forms the surface of the tale Chaucer also used the "esoteric" view held by the alchemists themselves--that alchemy is not simply a matter of gold-making but a way of perfection, the salvation of metals and of men through its outer and its inner works. Studying the poem from this alchemical point of view solves, besides the matter of the Yeoman, most of the difficulties of the tale: the identity of the two Canons, the confusing structure, the problem of the "philosophical postscript,"⁵ and the very presence of ambiguity in the work.

Central to the understanding of the poem is that the reader realizes that within the confines of the tale, alchemy does work although the Yeoman is not aware of it.⁶ The last lines of the poem introduce the philosophers, whose words show that some men do understand the "intention and speech" of alchemy. They have been inspired by Christ to the discovery of the true Stone. The tale, then, shows that at least some alchemy, true alchemy, is possible. On the surface it would seem that the Yeoman, who can be identified through the treatises as a sophisticated imposter, has not been successful in alchemy because he has worked contrary to the intentions of true alchemy. Examination of the tale shows, however, that the Yeoman's alchemy has worked both inwardly and outwardly, but exactly backwards to produce the opposite results of true alchemy because his purpose and his methods of pursuing the art are exactly opposite those of the philosophers. Through his practice of alchemy the Yeoman has been damned.

The following discussion of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale falls into four sections: the outer work of alchemy, which establishes the Yeoman's conception of the work and the "practical" aspects of alchemy as he

experiences it in failure and swindling; the inner work, which shows that it is the Yeoman who has been transmuted and that it is the inner work, not the outer work of alchemy, that is the true subject of this tale; a third section in which the Yeoman is established as a sophisticated impostor and the poem is interpreted as the dynamic experience of its fallible narrator; and finally, the structure of the tale, in which the structural division at line 1425 is discussed and the poem is shown to be in the form of an alchemical treatise.

THE OUTER WORK

The reader learns of alchemy in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale not directly through Chaucer but through the Yeoman; it is his conception of the art that controls the poem up until its final lines. As he begins his description of alchemy in the Prima Pars it is the Yeoman's opinion that the art is possible but, as practised by his Canon, it always works in reverse: instead of becoming rich through alchemy they are impoverished by it. This is the reality of alchemical practise to the Yeoman in one of his aspects. On the other hand, however, his account shows that he still believes that alchemy is possible and his complaints are the complaints of a believer. While he consciously attacks alchemy, punctuating his remarks with such comments as "our labour is in veyne" (777) and "in oure madnesse everemoore we rave" (959), he would also tell the pilgrims "al that longeth to that art" (716):

For it is ernest to me by my feith,
That feele I wel, what so any man seith.
(710-11)

To the Yeoman alchemy is a method of making gold, and while he recognizes that he and the Canon have not yet succeeded in making the Stone, he seems to think that when it is found, his lord really will be able to turn roads "up-so-down" and pave them "al of silver and of gold" (625-26). It is as a chemical operation that the Yeoman regards the work of the alchemical experiment. His concern in the Prima Pars is to show what substances are used at what time during the opus. He makes no reference to alchemical theory nor even the slightest reference to the purpose of the steps he tries to describe. The Yeoman's presentation of alchemy in the Prima Pars reflects his entirely practical, exoteric conception of the work and shows him to have no appreciation of any dimension of the art that transcends the physical preparation of the Stone.

While alchemy's secret is a "mystery" for the Yeoman, his hint to the pilgrims that it can be bought for a price indicates his belief that with luck, chemistry, and money, the Stone can be obtained. Alchemy's secret is a "mystery" to the Yeoman, then, but in a secular sense of the word and comparable to the contemporary "mystery" associated with the chemical formula by which Coca-Cola is manufactured. It is common knowledge that the recipe for making this soft drink is known only to a hand-full of men just as the alchemical secret was known to very few adepts. We know from reading the bottle cap that the essential ingredients of Coca-Cola are carbonated water, sugar, caramel colour, phosphoric acid, natural flavours and caffeine, just as the alchemists knew that sulphur and mercury constituted the chemical composition of the Stone. But, just as the bottle cap does not identify the proportion of the ingredients, nor the identity of the "natural flavours," neither

did the alchemists know the proportion nor the identity of what material was to be used to obtain materia prima. And just as we would be surprised (to say the least) to find out that the manufacture of Coca-Cola involves a spiritual dimension and that the formula is inspired by God, so would the Yeoman (as he is presented until the final lines of the poem) be surprised to find out that there is more to alchemy than the physical process he attempts to describe.

The Yeoman does, however, know something of alchemical theory as is revealed by his interpretation of philosophers at the end of the poem:

"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 sayn,
By the dragon, Mercurie, and noon oother
He understood, and brymstoon by his brother,
That out of Sol and Luna were ydrawe.
(1431-1440)

The unimportance of theory to the Yeoman is shown by the fact that he only remembers to discuss it at the end of the poem: the philosophers are an afterthought. Chaucer has included them in order to make their previous absence conspicuous. What the Yeoman is talking about, alchemically, in the lines above is that mercury must die with sulphur so that the Stone can be engendered: according to popular Fourteenth century alchemical philosophy first advanced by Dastin, philosophical sulphur and mercury are extracted or "drawn out" of gold and silver. As perfect bodies, they would produce the purest quantities of their respective elements.⁷

Critics have considered that because the Yeoman refers to the

necessity of killing Sol and Luna to engender the Stone, he is speaking out of character,⁸ but this interpretation is unnecessary: even the Yeoman would have heard of this alchemical commonplace. That he has parroted it here shows that, while he has heard and can repeat by rote what the alchemists have said, he has no conception of their "entencioun;" he cannot apply this theory to what he experiences in the laboratory.

In their treatises the alchemists are forever warning their readers against literal-mindedness. What they say is figurative and disguised deliberately to prevent the vulgar from discovering their secret. Yet literal-mindedness is one of the most distinguishing features of the Yeoman and his conception of alchemy. Has the Yeoman recognized that what he is working with should have been "our" mercury? While just about everything else in the tale is "philosophical"--"oure orpyment" (774), "oure grounden litarge" (775), "oure yngottes" (818), "oure lampes" (802), "oure urinales" (792), "oure walles" (909), and "oure madnesse" (959)--it would seem that the mercury that is used in the Canon's experiments is not. While we must be careful not to over-interpret the Yeoman's expression, it is tempting, in the lines above, to see evidence of his literal understanding of the art in his statement that what Hermes meant by the dragon is mercury "and noon oother."

A clear example, however, of the Yeoman's literal-mindedness is seen in his description of the ingredients with which they work:

Ther is also ful many another thyng
That is unto oure craft apertenyng.
Though I by ordre hem nat reherce kan,
By cause that I am a lewed man,
Yet wol I telle hem as they come to mynde,
Thogh I ne kan nat sette hem in hir kynde:
As boole armonyak, verdegrees, boras,
And sondry vessels maad of erthe and glas,
Oure urynales and oure descensories,
Violes, crosletz, and sublymatories...

Watres rubifyng, and boles galle,
Arsenyk, sal armonyak, and brymstoon;
And herbes koude I telle eek many oon,
As egremoyne, valerian, and lunarie,
And othere swiche, if that me liste tarie;...
Unslekked lym, chalk, and gleyre of an ey,
Poudres diverse, asshes, donge, pisse, and cley,
Cered pokkets, sal peter, vitriole,
And diverse fires maad of wode and cole.

(784-809)

Alchemists insisted that metals are generated only from their own "kynde" and that other substances, such as the Yeoman has described above, are useless in the creation of the Stone. The Canon has fallen into error by taking the alchemists' metaphoric expressions literally, and has used herbs and excrement in his efforts to make the Stone. That he uses substances that are not metallic shows literally why his experiments never work.

The Yeoman's narration of the experiment in the Prima Pars reveals how little he knows of the process by which the Stone is made. In the lines quoted above he flits from subject to subject mixing his discussion of the apparatus, the substances and the steps of the process together in a meaningless tangle of words "as they come to mind." While the Yeoman is describing--or trying to describe--the making of the Stone, the stages of the experiment cannot be determined and it is evident that he has not the first idea of what happens during the opus.

But the blurred picture of the experiment in which the pieces of apparatus, the ingredients and materials fly past with an almost unrecognizable haste in the Yeoman's account does accurately describe the blurred way in which the experiments must have appeared to him as he "blows the fire until his heart faints" (753) as the rest of the work is being performed. The priest, too, is "bejaped and beguiled" (1385) because he, who also blows the fire, cannot see what the alchemist is

doing. In this description of the making of the Stone the reader is able to see only the later stages of the work because the Yeoman, too, would have been able to see them. With the Yeoman the reader focuses upon the alchemist who attempts to temper (or fix) the soul and the spirit of the Stone to its body. The real danger of the tempering that arises from the volatility of the substances conflicts with the anticipated successful completion of the alchemical process, and the Canon initially appears to the reader, as he does to the Yeoman, to be somewhat awesome as he calmly performs his mysterious rite upon matter:

Er that the pot be on the fir ydo,
Of metals with a certeyn quantitee,
My lord hem tempreth, and no man but he--
Now he is goon, I dar seyn boldely--
For, as men seyn, he kan doon craftily.

(899-903)

The Yeoman's awe of the Canon is shown in this speech: the alchemist alone tempers the metals and he really can work "craftily." But, if for the Yeoman this part of the work is emotionally loaded by the conflict of danger and anticipation, the reader is allowed no suspense: he has known from the beginning that the experiments are never successful. The Yeoman, who relives the experience as he tells it, immediately explains that the explosion was caused by a cracked pot that could not stand the extreme heat:

And wite ye how? 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 resistance,
But if they weren wroght of lym and stoon;
They percen so, and thurgh the wal they goon.
And somme of hem synken into the ground--
Thus han we lost by tymes many a pound--
And somme are scatered al the floor aboute;
Somme lepe into the roof.

(906-15)

The scene which began with anticipated success of the tempering and the production of the Stone ends with concern for the metals which are irretrievable when they have been driven into the ground. This scene should have ended in the discovery of the Philosophers' Stone, with the Canon's skillful tempering of the volatile spiritual soul back into the body. Instead, it ends in explosion because the work is performed by a sophisticated imposter, who, Bonus says, can perform the first parts of the experiment, but cannot fix the elements because this is the spiritual part of alchemy against which the sophist's materialism works.⁹

The result of the opus is discovered in the garbage:

The mullok on an heep ysweped was,
And on the floor ycast a canevas,
And al this mullok in a syve ythrowe,
And sifted, and ypiked many a throwe.
"Pardee," quod oon, "somwhat of oure metal
Yet is ther heere, though that we han nat al.
Although this thyng myshapped have as now,
Another tyme it may be well ynow.

(938-45)

This is the Stone that these alchemists have created: their experiment has reversed the true alchemical opus by diminishing, not "multiplying" existing metals. True alchemists work to bring metal to its perfection by curing it of disease, but these alchemists have further contributed to the diseased state of metal in their work. That they will use this mangled piece of "mullok" again shows on a literal level why these alchemists must always "fail of their desires."

Through the Yeoman, then, Chaucer has presented an incorrect notion of alchemy as a solely practical method of preparing the Stone which is made in the equally practical pursuit of earthly wealth. Chaucer has shown the process to have worked in reverse in the Prima Pars of the tale: the experiment has mangled the metal, the Yeoman has

ended in poverty.

The Yeoman's purpose in alchemy, however, is to make gold, and having shown how with the Canon he failed to make it through "real" alchemy, he proceeds to show in the Pars Secunda how they make gold through the performance of confidence tricks. The Prologue reveals that the Yeoman cannot clearly distinguish between the failure of the "real" experiment and the success of the "pretend" one. Both of them, to the Yeoman, are aspects of "alchemy" as he knows it:

We blondren evere and pouren in the fir,
And for al that we faille of oure desir,
For evere we lakken oure conclusioun.
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.
Yet is it fals, but ay we han good hope
It for to doon, and after it we grope.
(670-79)

That he feels compelled to tell Harry Bailley that the confidence trick is "fals" alchemy (as if Bailley needed telling), reveals the Yeoman's own realization that this is not alchemy in which he is involved. Nevertheless he does see success in the ability to extort large sums of money from the people they swindle: to the Yeoman this is a form of multiplication as is suggested by the growth of the original one pound to "many sommes mo." His last statement, that they ever hope to multiply, shows that the Yeoman believes that this is what alchemy will be like when the Stone is found.

Because of the Yeoman's confusion between real and false alchemy, the sleight-of-hand tricks of the Pars Secunda are part of his description of how alchemists make gold, but they, too, end in explosion. Whenever the Yeoman discusses something he knows about his narration becomes

infinitely easier to follow and he has the ability, at such times, to describe a scene down to its last detail. Although he knew nothing of alchemical procedure, he knew everything about sweeping the floor and only stopped short of telling his audience how to hold the broom. But it is in the working of the sleight-of-hand tricks that the Yeoman excels and he is able to tell the pilgrims the operation of the Canon's three experiments in minute detail. The Yeoman's expertise is conveyed through his close narration: with him the reader suspiciously watches the Canon's every move just as one watches a magician. And, like someone who has caught a magician with something up his sleeve, the Yeoman revels in explaining the operation of the deception:

And while he bisy was, this feendly wrecche,
This false chanoun--the foule feend hym fecche!--
Out of his bosom took a bechen cole,
In which ful subtilly was maad an hole,
And therinne put was of silver lemaille
An ounce, and stopped was, withouten faille,
This hole with wex, to kepe the lemaille in.
And understondeth that this false gyn
Was nat maad ther, but it was maad bifore;
And othere thynges I shal tellen moore
Herafterward, whiche that he with hym broghte.
(1159-68)

The tale that the Yeoman tells is a complete analysis of the techniques by which a successful swindle is to be performed. The alchemist of the tale is an exemplary charlatan and, for the Yeoman, he is an exemplary alchemist. For his pains he receives forty pounds (the equivalent of three thousand dollars in 1967).¹⁰ In telling the tale of false alchemy, just as much as in his discussion of real alchemy, the Yeoman explains to the pilgrims from his exoteric point of view "How Alchemists Make Gold."

THE INNER WORK

Initially Chaucer has presented, through the Yeoman, alchemy from a popular point of view as a method by which base metal can be made into gold in order to obtain earthly prosperity. In the last lines of the tale, through the philosophers, this popular view of alchemy is corrected: it is to be seen not only as a work upon matter but also as a work involving spiritual dimensions. The reader learns quickly of alchemy's opposite effects so far as the outer work is concerned from the Yeoman's obsession with his poverty and his debts. But it is only in the final lines of the poem that he learns that these alchemists, who practise alchemy without inspiration, work against God's will and have made themselves God's enemies. Rather than becoming spiritualized human beings fixed to God's will, by working against it they have made themselves "spiritual lead." Having begun with materialistic and sophistic intentions, the perversions of alchemy's spiritual purpose, these alchemists have reversed the inner work of alchemy and have "materialized" themselves, become "perfect" in matter.¹¹ Because, although the Yeoman does not know it, alchemy works in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, these alchemists have received the opposite rewards for their efforts than those they would have received had they been true alchemists. Instead of being redeemed through alchemy they have become damned through it.

By showing that these alchemists have made themselves God's adversaries, that alchemy is not merely a chemical procedure but a work involving an inner spiritual dimension complementary to the outer, material dimension, and that the secret is not just a recipe (presumably a chemical formula) but something given by Christ, Chaucer corrects the

Yeoman's portrayal of alchemy. Ultimately the subject of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is alchemy's inner work as it is performed and perverted by the Canon and his assistants.

The poem's last lines, then, establish the concept of alchemy's inner work in the Yeoman's Tale and show that when practised by sophisticated imposters its results are opposite those of true alchemy. With this information, the reader sees that the Prima Pars shows the successful, but reverse creation of the Stone within the alchemists and that the Canon, a "feend," successfully tempers the volatile elements of the inner Stone though outwardly it appears that he is not able to do so. The Pars Secunda shows the "multiplied" and infinitely more powerful evil Canon project this Stone upon the priest. In the Pars Secunda the alchemist makes no effort to work upon actual metals: his base "metal" is the priest, who, at the end of the experiment, has become spiritual lead.

That the two parts of the tale together describe the operation of a single alchemical experiment justifies the order in which the parts are placed. From another perspective, however, their logical sequence is inverted because the second part shows how men enter alchemy while the first part shows how they remain in alchemy. Inasmuch as the Yeoman is intended to be a human being and not a voice that exemplifies spiritual leadenness, theoretically he could still reach out for Grace and be saved. The Prima Pars, however, shows how, having become fixed in matter, it will be impossible for him to do so. Having fixed themselves in matter, the alchemists cannot see beyond it. While the Prima Pars, then, tells the reader "How We Remain Damned," the Pars Secunda tells him "How We Become Damned." The subject of the tale is the transmutation of the priest into one, who, like the evil Canon, will corrupt

"Cristes peple" (1072).

As with the presentation of the outer work, the stages of the experiment cannot be followed in the Prima Pars until the volatile soul is ready to be tempered to the body. While the Canon is not successful in the tempering of the outer Stone so that the explosion results in the mangled metal, he is successful in tempering the volatile natures of the alchemists. Corresponding to the violence of the exploding pot is the human confusion of the alchemists themselves as each of them blames the others for the failure of the experiment:

Whan that oure pot is broke, as I have sayd,
Every man chit, and halt hym yvele apayd.
Somme seyde it was long on the fir makyng;
Somme seyde nay, it was on the blowyng,--
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."
"Nay," quod the fourthe, "stynt and herkne me.
By cause oure fir ne was nat maad of beech,
That is the cause, and oother noon, so thee'ch!"
I kan nat telle wheron it was long,
But wel I woot greet strif is us among.

(920-31)

The confusion, anger, and strife reproduce on the human level, the explosion that takes place in the alchemical vessel. Although the Canon cannot temper the metal, he calmly takes the volatile assistants and fixes them once more in their pursuit of alchemy:

"What," quod my lord, "ther is namoore to doone;
Of these perils I wol be war eftsoone.
I am right siker that the pot was crased.
Be as be may, be ye no thyng amased;
As usage is, lat swepe the floor as swithe,
Plukke up youre hertes, and beeth glad and blithe."

(932-37)

The alchemists do as they are told, and shortly after, the Stone is found (938-45) by one of the assistants, symbolizing the completion of the Canon's alchemy. Following the discovery of the outer Stone the

assistants are seen to have been fixed in their purpose as is evidenced by their rationalizing their anger and deciding to remain with the Canon in further attempts. One assistant suggests that:

Us moste putte oure good in aventure.
A marchant, pardee, may nat ay endure,
Trusteth me wel, in his prosperitee.
Somtyme his good is drowned in the see,
And somtyme comth it sauf unto the londe."
(946-50)

The alchemist has "fixed" the volatile natures of his assistants into their materialistic purpose of transmuting base metal into gold; the inner Stone has been successfully tempered. But as these alchemists have fixed themselves in matter rather than in the spirit, the redeemed state is inverted. Instead of exhibiting any virtue, they display viciousness in blaming each other for the failure of the experiment. The "other," who insists that the fire was over-hot, holds to his opinion even after the fixing (955): it is an essential part of the inner work of this alchemy, of the nature of the Envious Stone¹² they engender within themselves, that rebelliousness and loyalty to one's self are the results. While the Canon, as alchemist, has tempered the confusion of his assistants once more into a unity of purpose, it is the nature of the Stone that has been created to be the perfection of self desire. This self desire, or envy, contrasts to the loyalty of the true alchemist for his master and his desire to perform God's will through the opus.

The process of multiplication is not shown in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale;¹³ yet, at the beginning of the Pars Secunda, the reader meets the Second Canon, whose "subtiltee" is one hundred times that of the Yeoman's Canon:

As ferforth as that my konnyng wol strecche.
This chanon 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.
He hath bitrayed folkes many tyme;
(1088-92)

The Yeoman is to be believed: the man of whom he speaks is not his lord. While, as we will see below, the Yeoman is not in any sense an admirable character, he is truthful insofar as his literal-mindedness permits him understanding. That he denies that this Canon is his lord serves to show the similarity between the two men in his own mind. Through the Yeoman's denial Chaucer has assured that the connection between the two characters will be seen by the reader. Sufficient evidence from the Yeoman's discussion of alchemy, as his lord practises it, shows that while the Yeoman's tale is about a fictional Canon, it might just as well have been about the Yeoman's Canon, who, the Yeoman says, performs similar confidence tricks.¹⁴ Moreover, the Yeoman's bitter tone when he speaks of this fictional canon is hardly justified unless he sees that the two men are essentially the same. The Yeoman, I believe, tells a fictional tale that he has heard before: he identifies the Canon with his Canon and this identification accounts for his commentary throughout the tale.

Structurally the tale is a continuation of the experiment begun in the Prima Pars. The Second Canon, through multiplication, is infinitely more powerful and subtle in his ability to transmute than the first. Alchemically, the tale shows only the process of projection of the Envious Stone which results in the transmutation of the priest. The subject is the inner work of alchemy, as is shown by the lines:

Wherefore, to go to the conclusion,
That refereth to thy confusion,
Unhappy man, anon I wol me hye
To tellen thyn unwit and thy folye,
And eek the falsnesse of that oother wrecche. (1082-86)

It is here that we can see the difference between Chaucer's purpose and the Yeoman's in the tale. Whereas the Yeoman is telling the pilgrims about the "falsness of that oother wrecche" and his "willy wrenches" from which the priest "ne mayst nat flee" (1081), Chaucer's concern is the inner work of alchemy. The Canon, the Envious Stone, is about to transmute his own species into its "perfection" in corruption, for the Stone can only be created from, and operate upon its own species. As this Canon began for corrupt purposes and became perfected in sin to the point that he is the "roote of al trecherie," so the material upon which he works is corruption. The priest is a worthy choice, for he is already well corrupted as his skill in extorting silver from the wyf, to whom he is "so pleasaund and so servysable" (104), demonstrates.

According to Ripley, projection¹⁵ involves many of the steps that were taken in the production of the Stone. It is essential that the metal upon which the Stone is projected be purified before the Stone is applied. The Canon prepares his raw materials by cleansing the priest of any doubts of his honesty and his ability to transmute by returning the gold coins that he had borrowed and in offering to show the priest his "maistrie" as a reward:

And sire," quod he, "now of my pryvetee,
Syn ye so goodlich han been unto me,
And kithed to me so greet gentillesse,
Somwhat to quyte with youre kyndenesse
I wol yow shewe, and if yow list to leere,
I wol yow teche pleynly the manere
How I kan werken in philosophie.
Taket good heede, ye shul wel seen at ye
That I wol doon a maistrie er I go."
(1052-60)

Corresponding to the impurities of base metal from this inverted view of alchemy in the Yeoman's tale are the priest's possible skepticism regarding the Canon's ability to multiply and any accompanying sales

resistance that he may have. The alchemist reduces the priest's "impurities" to obtain his "first principles"--greed, first, by returning the gold, an act by which he shows himself to have been "trewe" when he had the opportunity to be false; and, second, by his offer to show the priest his "maistry" in which he is careful not to mention that he would sell the recipe, so that the man hopes to get something for nothing.

"Cleansed" of all those impurities that prevent him from being entirely controlled by his greedy impulses, the priest is now ready to be transmuted into spiritual lead. To finish the work the Canon ensures that this greed impresses itself entirely upon the priest's soul. He does this through the experiments in which the priest is made to contribute to his own beguiling. Knowing that the harder one has to work for his results, the greater he will value them,¹⁶ the Canon makes the priest feel privileged to be allowed to do all the "dirty work" of the experiment. Having "bisily couched the coles," the priest begins to sweat and the Canon says to him:

"Now lat me medle therwith but a while,
For of yow have I pitee, by Seint Gile!
Ye been right hoot; I se wel how ye swete.
Have heere a clooth, and wipe away the wete."
(1184-87)

The "heating" (1186), "sweating" (1186), "wiping away the wet" (1187), along with the "drinking" (1198), "sitting" (1195), "rising up" (1205) and "standing here by me" (1205), describe the transmutation of the priest in language strongly suggestive of the operations of the alchemical opus and shows that the priest is the matter upon which the alchemist operates. At the end of the experiment the Canon's projection is completed. Without knowing the method of projection upon which Chaucer based the passage, it would only be conjecture to say more about the

meaning suggested by these terms than that it seems to involve such commonplace alchemical procedures as calcination (the reducing of a body to an ash by heat) in the "sweating"; dissolution and coagulation in the "drinking" and "wiping away the wet," as well as the up and down motion of the volatilization and fixation of spirits in the "rising" and "sitting."

The perfection of greed within the priest's soul is shown by his growing desire to possess the recipe after each of the experiments. After the first the priest offers the Canon his esteem and asks to be taught the method of the work:

"Goddess blessing, and his moodress also,
And alle halwes, have ye, sire chanoun,"
Seyde the preest, "and I hir malisoun,
But, and ye vouche-sauf to techen me
This noble craft and this subtilitee,
I wol be youre in al that evere I may."
(1243-48)

Following the second experiment the priest is more fascinated and offers the Canon "body and good" (1289). After the third experiment the silver is assayed and the priest exults in the prospect of having the recipe. The perversity of his love for gold is suggested by the lyric singing of his heart:

This sotted preest, who was gladder than he?
Was nevere brid gladder agayn the day,
Ne nyghtyngale, in the sesoun of May,
Was nevere noon that luste bet to synge;
Ne lady lustier in carolynges,
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.
(1341-49)

The backwardsness of this alchemy is suggested by the priest's comments, which begin, after the first experiment, in a religious tone and end, after the third, confirmed and exulting in the secular. The perversity

of his spiritual leadenness is suggested in the ludicrousness of his love lyric.

The transmutation is complete when the priest begs to buy the secret; "bejaped and beguiled," and perfected in matter, he begs for his own damnation:

"For love of God, that for us alle deyde,
And as I may deserve it unto yow,
What shal this receite coste? telleth now!"
(1351-53)

The priest's religious oaths underline his substitution of the Canon for God. He swears his allegiance to the Canon, promising to keep the recipe secret so as to protect his new lord from injury:

Yet hadde I levere spenden al the good
Which that I have, and elles wexe I wood,
Than that ye sholden falle in swich mescheef."
(1376-78)

The Yeoman concludes the tale saying that this is only the beginning of the priest's alchemical career:

Thus maketh he his introduccioun,
To bringen folk to hir destruccioun.
(1386-87)

Ending as spiritual lead and fixed to his new allegiance, through each of the further experiments he performs, the priest becomes more "subtiliated" in his greed until, in his desire to see others in "peyne and disease" (747), he will project his envious charity upon new victims.

The inner work of alchemy is shown in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale to be exactly the opposite of what it should have been had the alchemists the right conception of their work. The inner work has taken place successfully with the transmutation of the alchemists into spiritual lead; it has perfected their original, corrupted motives and has fixed them to the pursuit of a profane art from which there is no escape.

After seven years' experience with the art, the Yeoman is also the reverse product of the inner work of his sophistical science. In fact, it is especially through the Yeoman that Chaucer shows that alchemy's inner work has reversed itself, transmuting him into a "material fixed body": spiritual lead. The Yeoman's face, which was "fresshe and reede" when he began to study alchemy, now is "wan and of a leden hewe" (727-28). Speaking literally, as usual, the Yeoman explains to the pilgrims that the fumes from the fire have burnt his face:

...for fumes diverse
Of metals, whiche ye han herd me reherce,
Consumed and wasted han my reednesse.
(1098-1100)

He has no idea that the entire way in which he practises alchemy is responsible for the state of his complexion and, beyond that, the state of his soul. A man's complexion, says Ascanius in the Turba Philosophorum, is formed out of a soul and a body,¹⁷ and since this is the case, the Yeoman's "leden hewe" is an external description of his interior spiritual condition. The Yeoman has perfected himself in matter, and because the results of alchemy are irreversible, his is a permanent condition. Fixed by the fire as spiritual lead, he cannot change, cannot leave alchemy, even though he tells the pilgrims that he blushes for shame, a reaction that could symbolize his immanent regeneration, if it were true:

Of his falsnesse it dulleth me to ryme.
Evere whan that I speke of his falshede,
For shame of hym my chekes wexen rede.
Algates they bigynnen for to glowe,
For reednesse have I noon, right wel I knowe,
In my visage.

(1093-98)

In these lines the Yeoman is trying to convince the pilgrims that the sort of swindling that the Second Canon performs offends him¹⁸ and that

he finds such alchemy boring. To register that his delicate sensibility is offended by the swindlers, the Yeoman says that he is beginning to blush for shame. While through these lines Chaucer indicates the shame that the Yeoman does not feel, (for as spiritual lead the Yeoman cannot blush), dramatically they can only indicate the Yeoman's preoccupation with his physical appearance¹⁹ which is as physically wasted through alchemy as it is spiritually. He no more blushes than he finds telling the pilgrims about the Canon's "falsnesse" boring, even though he says he only does so for their benefit:

It weerieth me to telle of his falsnesse,
And nathelees yet wol I it expresse,
To th'entente that men may be war therby,
And for noon oother cause, trewely.
(1304-07)

That the Yeoman has been transmuted into spiritual lead indicates that Chaucer means the reader to see that alchemy's inner work has taken place in reverse.²⁰ That what he means by spiritual leadenness is damnation is indicated by the description of those who work in alchemy against God's will as his adversaries.

But, while this meaning is ultimately spelled out for the reader, throughout the poem Chaucer has suggested that alchemy is a way to damnation by suggesting, allegorically, that the Canon (including the Second Canon) is the devil, that the laboratory is hell, that the experiment by which the priest is transmuted is a black mass, and that the Yeoman is a minor demon of the fire-blowing variety. The Canon is described in terms that equate him with the devil: he is called the "roote of al trecherie" (1069), a "verray feend" (984). The Yeoman tells the pilgrims that the Canon was "evere feendly in werke and thought" (1303).²¹ In describing to the pilgrims how they might identify an alchemist, the

Yeoman describes a devil, who, in the comic tradition, smells of brimstone:

And everemoore, where that evere they goon,
Men may hem knowe by smel of brymstoon.
For al the world they stynken as a goot;
Hir savour is so rammyssh and so hoot
That though a man from hem a mile be,
The savour wole infecte hym, trusteth me.
(884-89)

He compares the laboratory with hell:

Withouten doute,
Though that the feend noght in oure sighte hym shewe,
I trowe he with us be, that ilke shrewe!
In helle, where that he lord is and sire,
Nis ther moore wo, ne moore rancour ne ire.
(915-19)

While the Yeoman cannot see the fiend, from his description of the alchemist, the reader sees that it would fit the Canon well.

The work of alchemy, the Yeoman says, is diabolical: even the reciting of the names of the equipment and ingredients becomes an incantation:

Of alle these names now wol I me reste.
For, as I trowe, I have yow toold ynowe
To reyse a feend, al looke he never so rowe.
(859-61)

Similarly, the tale of the Pars Secunda, as Grennen has suggested,²² is seen as a black mass. The priest, who celebrates the mass that leads man to redemption, has changed masters. In accepting the Canon as his lord, and mammon as his god, the priest has rejected Christ without realizing it. The defection of the priest from Christ to Satan is suggested by the use of religious oaths which, smacking of Christian meaning, underline the diabolical nature of what the priest is doing:

"For in tokenyng I thee love,"
Quod this chanoun, "thyne owene handes two
Shul werche al thyng which that shal heer be do."
"Graunt mercy," quod the preest, and was ful glad,
And couched coles as that the chanoun bad.
(1153-57)

As a token of his love for man the devil will allow him to shovel the coal in hell. By the end of the experiments the priest has rejected Christ for silver, an act reminiscent of Judas' betrayal of Christ, to which the Yeoman refers as he begins the tale.

The Yeoman and the priest are fire-blowers: allegorically, the fire that they are blowing is the fire of hell, an allusion which is clarified in the last lines of the poem as we will see below. On the literal level it is amusing that the priest would think himself fortunate to be allowed to do all the dirty work of the experiment. This humour is compounded by the allegorical suggestion that he feels so privileged to be allowed to blow hell's fires in damnation.

This allegory, as I have already suggested, is essentially comic in its presentation of the infinite powers of the fiend. Against the satanic Canon, the Yeoman would tell us, no one has a chance, especially the innocent:

For in his termes he wol hym so wynde,
Whanne he commune shal with any wight,
That he wol make hym doten anonright,
But it a feend be, as hymselfen is.

(980-84)

The Canon has the power to infect entire towns, he says, - Rome, Alexandria, Nineva and others. The Yeoman's idea of the infinite corrupting powers of the devil is based upon his assumption of the working of sin within the individual: innocence is weak and one must be experienced in order to withstand temptation. Only another fiend could withstand the Second Canon. While the Yeoman believes that he is an innocent just as he believes that the fictional priest is innocent, this does not mean, however, that he does not recognize the priest's greedy motives. He is aware that it is the priest's greed that will be the cause of his

"confusion" (1083):

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.
God kepe us from his false dissymulynge!

Noght wiste this preest with whom that he delte,
Ne of his harm comynge he no thyng felte.
O sely preest! o sely innocent!
With covetise anon thou shalt be blent!
O gracelees, ful blynd is thy conceite,
No thyng ne artow war of the deceite
Which that this fox yshapen hath to thee!
His wily wrenches thou ne mayst nat flee.
(1069-81)

As this quotation shows, the Yeoman does recognize the priest's "covetise"; but at the same time, he does not believe that the priest is anything more than a tragic figure (in the Medieval definition of tragedy) about to fall from fortune's graces. That he does not see the priest to be responsible for his actions is shown by the fact that he is going to tell the pilgrims about the "foxes wily wrenches" from which the priest is not able to escape.

The Yeoman's allegory complements his self-deceiving conception of himself, and while he tells it with the intention of convincing the pilgrims that he has given up alchemy and that he hates it, the reader sees, when the tale is finished, that alchemy really is the devil's work when it is practised contrary to God's will. The Yeoman's theme, that the fiend has infinite corrupting power, is contrary to the standard Christian interpretation of temptation: that no man can be tempted beyond his endurance to withstand. This idea, prevalent throughout the Middle Ages, is expressed by Chaucer in the Friar's Tale:

But for to kepe us fro that cursed place,
Waketh and preyeth Jhesu for his grace
So kepe us fro the temptour Sathanas.
Herketh this word! beth war, as in this cas:
"The leoun sit in his awayt alway
To sle the innocent, if that he may."

Disposeth ay youre hertes to withstonde
The feend, that yow wolde make thral and bonde.
He may nat tempte yow over youre myght,
For Crist wol by youre champion and knyght.

(III(D) 1653-62)

As is usual with the Yeoman, his allegory of the powers of the fiend is inverted: Chaucer's interest is in the responsibility of the individual to withstand the temptation the Canon offers. That is why the Canon's Yeoman's Tale begins with a dramatic scene in which the Canon's temptation is not overcome by miraculous powers or cunning insight, but by common sense. Chaucer has used this comic allegory in which the devil smells of sulphur and the damned blow the fire to suggest the diabolical nature of their search for gold before he reveals in the last lines that they are God's adversaries.

THE YEOMAN

There are two basically different critical approaches to the Yeoman's character and his role in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, both centering on the intelligence of the narrator. The first view is that Chaucer exposes alchemy through the Yeoman, who, long the dupe of gibberish, either leaves his lord when he has the first chance, or finally comes to reject the art at the end of the tale after having vacillated throughout.²³ The Yeoman is a man of few intellectual gifts and that he who is stupid, was attracted to alchemy shows the folly of involvement in the art as does his realization of that folly. Critics who support this reading tend to see the poem as being primarily concerned with alchemy; the Yeoman is simply Chaucer's device to attack it. Kemp Malone, for instance, thought the Yeoman to be next to superfluous:

The character of the Yeoman remains throughout a matter of incidental interest only. The words put in the Yeoman's mouth have for their whole point and purpose the exposure of alchemy for what it is: a fraud and a delusion. Of this tale least of all can one say with Kitteridge, that it exists for its speaker.²⁴

Because these critics emphasize alchemy over the Yeoman, they have difficulty with the "philosophical post-script" in which Chaucer seems to let the Yeoman's character slip in favour of providing the right ending to the poem. Herz's attitude is representative:

At the end the Yeoman achieves a social resolution. Within the Canterbury fellowship, or perhaps at the Martyr's shrine, he finds community. With his fellow pilgrims, the Yeoman may yet achieve the good life he seems to believe in in his solemn outbursts on the folly of men, the goodness of God.

Or perhaps not. There is no sharp concluding image in The Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Indeed, the last lines are set in so radically different a key from all the preceding that one doubts if the same character is speaking them. The voice is serious and educated. The tone changes. No longer does it arise from a degraded world where all is trickery.... The voice here is more serious and abstract and abstraction was a quality the Yeoman never possessed.²⁵

The strength of such criticism is that it sees alchemy as being central to the poem; its weakness is that it emphasizes Chaucer's interest in the art at the expense of his creation of the Yeoman's character. While the poem is very definitely concerned with alchemy, it should be recognized that in the last lines it moves beyond alchemy to show that such is the progress of those who "werken any thyng in contrarie/of [God's] will" (1477-78).

Or is the Yeoman stupid after all? Does he not, rather, pretend to be stupid to demonstrate the "thinned wits" of alchemy so as to boil the charlatans in their own pudding? The second group of critics who support this interpretation, point out that the Yeoman knows alchemical theory and practice well enough to make fun of it in the Prima Pars while showing at the end of the tale that he knows precisely that what

is wrong with alchemy is that it works against God's will. Critics who adopt this interpretation have a tendency to see little importance in alchemy, although with the others, they believe it to be (in Grennen's words) "clap-trap." Olmert writes:

S. Foster Damon suggests that Chaucer "placed in the most prominent part of his tale--the very end--a last section of fifty-four lines sympathizing with real alchemy." This could be true if you consider "real alchemy" as being anagogical--which, by the way Damon does not. At any rate the subject of the tale does not seem to be alchemy, as Damon, Duncan, Manly, or others would have it. Neither does Root's assertion appear to be accurate, that "the only use Chaucer made of Alchemy was/in transmuting the base metal of human greed and folly into the finer gold of humor." We have seen again and again that the Yeoman continually goes beyond the literal value of alchemy to emphasize its moral, tropological, and finally its anagogical significance. All the evidence suggests that the story is the antithesis of salvation, a view of the road to damnation.²⁶

While, of course, I would agree that alchemy is presented in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale as being a "road to damnation," at least as it is practised by the Canon and his Yeoman, I arrive at it by showing that as practised by the adept, the art is "anagogical."

In Olmert's quotation, we see evidence of the weakness of this second kind of criticism when he states that it is the Yeoman, not Chaucer, who refers to the traditional method of allegorical interpretation. Without entering into a discussion as to whether or not the Yeoman's Tale either can or should be read in the light of this method, there is no basis in the poem to assume that the Yeoman is familiar with it: if the tale is so constructed that it needs interpretation of this order, then Chaucer, not the Yeoman, is responsible for it. Nor is allegorical interpretation the only literary ability accredited to the Yeoman: David Harrington argues that he makes careful use of several rhetorical devices:

...I believe one can recognize in the Yeoman, though he is very discursive and certainly guilty of foolishness in the past, a

person who is informative and at least sensible, if not intelligent, in his recitation. There is no denying his garrulousness and tendency to digress; it is, however, misinterpreting the essence of his character to label him stupid or lacking in self-knowledge. Instead, one should see that he gives us a full picture of the traps one can fall into while studying alchemy, with just as much humor as bitterness in his account; that the narrator makes careful use of formal rhetorical devices, including occupatio, irony, understatement, and deliberate transitions; and that he analyzes clearly, with some repetition for emphasis, the exact relationship between greed and false alchemy. He seems to have a control of sorts over his material....²⁷

These critics do recognize legitimate aspects of the poem and its meaning, but in assuming the Yeoman to be intelligent they fail to recognize that it is Chaucer who writes the poem, not the Yeoman. The use of rhetoric is Chaucer's, and if alchemy is satirized through the Yeoman's account of the alchemical experiment, then it is Chaucer who satirizes it through his fallible narrator. The Yeoman is made to discuss things of which he has no real knowledge; in the process he reveals significance both concerning himself and what he discusses.

By attributing a good deal of intelligence to the Yeoman these critics are forced to read large portions of the poem ironically: the Yeoman speaks sarcastically when he speaks well of the Canon, especially in the Prologue. He is not out of control when he lists the apparatus and the ingredients of alchemy; rather (as Harrington argues) he deliberately disorders his material to demonstrate the "chaos and ignorance that underlies alchemy."²⁸ The last lines of the poem, which state that the secret is Christ's, becomes the greatest irony of all. Grennen argues:

If we must think of the Yeoman as humanly motivated then his earlier "stupidity" is merely a role assumed for the purpose of illustrating the charge of "thinned wits" which he has brought against alchemy.... The epilogue is itself a *mélange* of alchemical clichés...the most absurd and yet the most impudent of which--the claim that the secret of transmutation could not be revealed because it was so "lief and deere" to Christ--is reserved for the climactic position at the end. This reference

to Christ as the repository of alchemical wisdom is an image ludicrously at odds with the observable results of the science as the entire tale has presented them, and it leads smoothly to the Yeoman's conclusion and the crowning irony of the poem. [Grennen quotes lines 1472-81.] It is at this point that irony dissolves in a profound feeling that we have finally emerged into the light of sanity with the Yeoman's absolute rejection as a work that makes God one's adversary.²⁹

Seeing the Yeoman as being intelligent and as shaping the poem that Chaucer composes gets critics into difficulties because eventually there is nothing left but irony. Grennen realizes that the poem's last lines provide the standard by which it is to be judged and so it is at this (unspecified) point that irony dissolves, while at the same time he contradicts himself saying that the lines are also the poem's crowning irony.

In a poem that uses a fallible narrator the poet must show the nature and the extent of the character's limitations. In the Canon's Yeoman's Tale Chaucer does this entirely through the Yeoman's character first by introducing the philosophers who, through the Yeoman's own words, show him for the fraud that he is, and secondly by unobtrusively placing "stage directions" in the Yeoman's speeches to direct the reader. As the Yeoman launches off onto his discussion of "our art" he virtually promises the pilgrims that he will tell them all that there is to be known about alchemy when he says: "Al that I kan anon now wol I telle" (704). "Al that I kan" is undercut almost immediately when the Yeoman says he wishes that: "...my wit myghte suffise/To tellen al that longeth to that art!/But natheleess yow wol I tellen part" (715-17). From "al" to "part" of all that belongs to alchemy is further diminished when the Yeoman finally resolves to tell "Swich thyng as I knowe" (719). If the reader initially had good hopes of hearing what alchemists actually do in their experiments from the Yeoman's exoteric point of view, by the

end of the Prologue, he is prepared for what little the Yeoman is able to offer.

Thus, critics who recognize the dynamic qualities of Chaucer's characterization of the Yeoman, mistake Chaucer's subtlety in characterization for the Yeoman's subtlety in narration. In doing so they have missed what Chaucer intended by the character. Basically the Yeoman is a type character, having his origins in the alchemical treatises as a sophisticated imposter, the inversion of the true alchemist. As we saw in the first chapter, what characterizes the sophisticated imposter is that he works in alchemy without knowing the secret. God, in fact, keeps it from him, punishing him with error, misery and perpetual infelicity because he works only for the material wealth that alchemy produces. While his efforts always end in failure, he "dissimulates" his losses and makes others believe he possesses the art. Having deceived himself, he deliberately leads others to alchemy in a "damned and damnable" fashion by swindling them, selling them a recipe that they know to be useless. Most important is that the sophister lacks any idea of alchemy's inner work, but he works to his own destruction in any case, in his experimentation.

These characteristics apply to the Yeoman and his Canon: they lack alchemy's secret and are motivated to study the art for its promise of earthly success. The end of the tale shows that the secret is God's "to deffende" (1470) from such men who work against his will. Instead of being purified through their misery and suffering, the Canon and the Yeoman cling to their materialistic aspirations and deliberately swindle people, leading their victims to believe "that of a pound we koude make tweye" (677). Finally, by working in alchemy for materialistic reasons,

its inner work has taken place within them, leading them to their spiritual destruction.

Not only do these general characteristics suggest that the Yeoman and his Canon, of whom he is the image, reflect their identity as sophisticated imposters, they are further identified by more specific details: the Yeoman, like the sophist, is distinctly literal-minded and cannot understand the treatises, which are written in their confusing form for the very purpose of preventing the sophisticated imposter from understanding them. The alchemy that the Yeoman describes shows that the Canon, like the sophister, uses non-metallic substances in the creation of the Stone. Moreover, the Canon is unable to fix the elements of the Stone, which, Bonus says, is impossible for the sophister because that is the divine part of the work. Geber says that alchemy "withdraws itself" from those unworthy of it, and in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, alchemy, which "slit away so faste" (682), is responsible for the unexplained speed at which the Canon and the Yeoman ride when they meet the pilgrims.

It could be objected, however, that the Yeoman is only a servant, not an alchemist at all; that his errors in his presentation are due to his ignorance of what the Canon is doing. Alternately, Duncan has suggested that it is the Yeoman, not his lord, who is the sophist, and that the Canon, whom the Yeoman accuses of reading his books all the time, is a true Son of the Doctrine, who has not yet received the secret.³⁰ But whose offspring the Canon might be, he is not a Son of the Doctrine, nor will he ever receive the secret as Duncan supposes, if, as the Yeoman tells the pilgrims, he swindles people. On the other hand, it is the Canon who first brought the Yeoman "unto that game" (708) and, "swich thyng" as the Yeoman knows he has been taught by the Canon.

Like the priest of the experiment, the Yeoman has entered into the initial stages of sophistic alchemy's corruption. At the moment he is only deluded; later, he will bring people to their destruction. The later stages of alchemy's reversed inner work are shown respectively by the Yeoman's Canon and the fictional Second Canon. What distinguishes them from each other and from the Yeoman and the priest is simply a matter of degree.

The Yeoman, then, embodies the attributes of a sophistical imposter, and although essentially a type character, he is no less complex as a result. Chaucer has created him as a series of unreconciled opposites so that he has two sets of extreme opinions that are nowhere integrated within him:

Ascaunce that craft is so light to leere?
Nay, nay, God woot, al be he monk or frere,
Preest or chanoun, or any oother wyght,
Though he sitte at his book bothe day and nyght
In lerning of this elvysshe nyce loore,
Al is in veyn, and parde! muchel moore.
To lerne a lewed man this subtiltee--
Fy! speke nat therof, for it wol nat bee;
And konne he letture, or konne he noon,
As in effect, he shal fynde it al oon.

(838-46)

On one hand, the Yeoman believes that no one, no matter how intelligent he is, can understand alchemy; on the other hand he claims that a "lewed" man certainly can never do it.

Similarly, as one would expect of one who deludes himself, what the Yeoman is, and how he sees himself, are at variance. If he is stupid, then he believes himself to be more intelligent than his lord; if he has accepted sophistry, then he believes it to be wisdom; if he has an entirely materialistic conception of the work, then he considers that materialism is everything. He pretends to be ashamed of his

involvement in alchemy, yet his interest is apparent; he thinks he has given it up, but at the end of the tale, it is to alchemy he returns. He curses the Canon when he departs, yet continues to call him "my lord."

The Poem as the Yeoman's Experience

We saw above that the logical order of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is reversed so that, from one point of view, by reading the poem in reverse order, we see in the Pars Secunda an objective picture of alchemy as the Yeoman has experienced it. Pars Secunda, while literally a tale that the Yeoman tells, also identifies him, and others like him, as entering into alchemy for greedy reasons and shows that they deceive themselves into thinking that they really have purchased the alchemical secret. The Prima Pars shows how, once caught by alchemy, they remain experimenting and are unable to leave it. The Prologue confirms what the Yeoman says both at the beginning of the Prima Pars and at the end of the Pars Secunda: that the alchemist first deceives himself, then others (742-47, 1385-87). While initially the sophist continues to experiment in the belief that he has the true recipe, he goes out to swindle other people with worthless recipes (the Second Canon's Stone is "nat worth a flye") (1150). The Prologue, in which the Canon and his Yeoman attempt to swindle the pilgrims, is then, in one sense, the logical conclusion to the tale, rather than its beginning. In another sense, however, it is the proper beginning because of the tale's alchemical structure. By reading the poem in its proper order we find that through alchemy's inner work, the dupe becomes the charlatan. Each stage involves a further "subtiliation" of the Envious Stone within the individual. Thus, at his present stage the Yeoman, who is merely spiritual lead, can only dupe himself, while the Canon can transmute "his own

weight"--his assistants, and the Second Canon can transmute entire towns. This does not mean, however, that at any stage these men are less culpable for their crimes. The Yeoman tells his tale to expose his lord; the Canon swindles people making no attempt to let the dupes in on his own secret any more than the Second Canon does. While the Yeoman's Canon still practises alchemy sincerely, whereas the Second Canon apparently does not, he is not only equally culpable; he, and the Yeoman with him, are on their way to this final stage of materialization.

This, I think, explains why it is the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and not The Yeoman's Canon's: while, it could seem that Chaucer has provided his reader with a "second best" alchemist in the Yeoman, the final lines of the poem establish the dupe as being the exemplary alchemist. It is at the Yeoman's stage of materialization that spiritual leadenness is most capable of dramatic presentation, and most clearly the experience of the dupe.

Beyond identifying the Yeoman and the nature of his practise of alchemy, read in its proper order, the tale shows its fallible narrator involved in a dramatic situation through which Chaucer effects his satire against alchemy as most men conceive of it, showing in most of the tale, that such alchemists make gold only by swindling, and supplementing this attack at the end of the poem by showing that it is also a sin. Dramatically, throughout the tale, in resolving a personal crisis, the Yeoman leads the reader to the poem's final understanding when he realizes, however briefly, that alchemy really is the swindle he says it is. What causes the crisis is the unexpected departure of his lord.

The following interpretation of the dynamics of the Yeoman's experience in the poem attempts an account of its several ambiguities to show,

the Yeoman's opinion to the contrary, that he loves his participation in alchemy, is impressed by the misty speech of the treatises and respects his lord. Moreover, fixed by alchemy's inner work as spiritual lead, the poem indicates that he does not finally reject the art, but finds, in the philosophers, new masters to replace his lost lord. Although some critics, Baldwin in particular, would account for the Yeoman's betrayal of his lord as being planned in advance,³¹ and that he speaks ironically of the Canon to the pilgrims, it is these speeches that characterize the Yeoman's conception of the art. He really believes that some day his lord will be able to transmute in spite of the fact that he criticizes him along with other aspects of the art.

When they meet the pilgrims the Canon and the Yeoman attempt to swindle them. Initially the plan seems to go well. When Harry Bailley expresses interest in the Canon's mirth, the Yeoman successfully steers the conversation to the Canon's other abilities, hinting at his "greet emprise" (605). The Canon can work marvels and it is possible to learn the tricks from him (605-09). Gradually it emerges that the Canon can make gold (611-26).

But after this point the Yeoman's sales trick suddenly reverses itself and, instead of gulling the pilgrims through Bailley, the Yeoman is manipulated by the Host and he blurts out the Canon's alchemical secret, that he is a fake. What makes the Yeoman tell? Obviously, he must do so if there is to be any tale at all; but, beyond that, I think, his motivation can be explained by his attitude towards alchemy, his lord, and the very nature of the swindling trick. Added to this is Bailley's manipulation of the Yeoman, which is partly responsible for the Yeoman's confession:

Why...wherto axe ye me?
God helpe me so for he shal nevere thee!

(But I wol nat avowe that I seye,
And therefore keepe it secree, I yow preye.)
(640-42)

When he has said this much, the Yeoman has told the only real alchemical secret he knows; the rest of his tale, his discussion of the techniques of alchemy and swindling, are elaborations. Both the tale and the Yeoman's comments show that alchemy, as he experiences it, is characterized both by "sorwe," which almost drives the alchemists mad (869), and by "that good hope [that] crepeth in oure herte" (870). Alchemy to the Yeoman, is a "bittre-swete" experience; he alternately loves and hates it. While what immediately drives the Canon and his assistants to swindling is, of course, their financial need, more than that, I think, what drives them to swindling is the need to be successful, to believe that they really are alchemists. It is only during the confidence tricks that they are able to relieve the sorrow of their repeated failures by convincing themselves in convincing others that they can work "wel and craftily...and that in sondry wise" (603-04). Thus the Yeoman's statement:

To muchel folk we doon illusioun...
And make hem wenen at the leeste weye,
That of a pound we koude make tweye.
Yet is is fals, but ay we han good hope
It for to doon...

(673-79)

The Yeoman's love/hatred of alchemy extends to his attitudes towards his lord. On one hand his lord "kan doon craftily" (903); on the other hand:

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.
Wherefore in that I holde hym lewed and nyce.
For whan a man hath over-greet a wit,
Ful oft hym happeth to mysusen it.

(644-49)

It is his lord's inability to make the Stone and the riches he desires that are responsible for his poverty and disfigured face, and the Yeoman blames him for it. Nevertheless the Yeoman is entirely impressed by his lord, and strives to be like him in his narration of his ill-fated attempts to sound sophistic when he tries to explain alchemy's work:

I wol yow telle, as was taught to me also,
The foure spirites and the bodies sevene,
By ordre, as ofte I herde my lord hem nevene.
(819-21)

When the Yeoman meets the pilgrims, then, he has two unreconciled attitudes to alchemy and his lord. When Bailley challenges the Canon's ability and criticizes his neglected worship (627-38), the Yeoman perceives the Host to have greater authority than his lord; the product of the Envious Stone, he is loyal only to his own desires. If he is going to have the success which is the very reason for the confidence tricks, then he must adopt Bailley's point of view and attack alchemy. While in doing so he ruins what chances they had for a successful swindle that morning and causes his lord's departure, he has no intention of deserting the Canon. Later he even tries to ingratiate himself with the Canon: "In feith," quod he, "namoore I do but lyte" (699). And it is only because Harry Bailley has told him to "tell on.../Of al his thretyng rekke nat a myte" (679-98), that he admits that much. Rather, his own needs and desires for success, along with his respect of authority figures and his already established hostility to the Canon, make him reveal the secret.

While the Yeoman has told the Canon's secret and ruined the confidence trick when he tells Bailley that his lord will never thrive, he has given none of its details in his remarks. He is very willing to do so, however, as is indicated by "I kan yow sey namoore" (651) in

which he suggests that there is a good deal more that he could say but for his discretion. Having given up on the idea of swindling Bailley, the Yeoman takes him into his confidence not out of his professed concern for his lord, but in order to impress Bailley with his sophistication. If he does not reveal the details of the Canon's alchemical secret at once, it is only because he wants Bailley to wring the confession from him. The Host, however, manipulates the Yeoman by refusing to recognize that he is willing to tell more about his lord. Apparently respecting the Yeoman's sentiments, Bailley changes the subject, but approaches the same information from another angle in asking where they live:

"Ther-of no fors, good Yeman," quod oure Hoost;
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?"
(652-56)

The change of subjects from the lord's neglected worship to the alchemist's dwellings frustrates the Yeoman, who, ready to tell all he knows, gives more information than is necessary to answer the question, when he tells the Host that they dare not show their faces in the street for fear of "thise robbours and thise theves" (659). When asked about his face, the appearance of which distresses his vanity, he can no longer contain the "secret." In an effort to revenge himself upon the man who has been responsible for this insult, he bursts forth with a full explanation of their failure:

"Peter!" quod he, "God yeve it harde grace,
I am so used in the fyr to blowe
That it hath chaunged my colour, I trowe.
I am nat wont in no mirour to prie,
But swynke soore and lerne multiplie.
We blondren evere and pouren in the fir,
And for al that we faille of oure desir,
For evere we lakken oure conclusioun.
To muchel folk we doon illusioun...
(665-73)

Confronted by the Canon, whose suspicions are confirmed by Bailley's urging that the Yeoman tell even more, the Yeoman tries to assure his lord that he has said nothing of importance. The Canon leaves, realizing that he has been betrayed and the Yeoman is left with the pilgrims: his break with the Canon is hardly intentional.

The Canon's departure produces mixed feelings within the Yeoman and he is initially both pleased and defiant:

"A!" quod the Yeman, "heere shal arise game;
Al that I kan anon now wol I telle.
Syn he is goon, the foule feend hym quelle!
For nevere heerafter wol I with hym 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!
(703-09)

Telling the pilgrims that he will never meet the Canon again, even for money, the Yeoman implies, first of all, that it is not he who was deserted, but that he wanted the Canon to leave. He also implies that the Canon will want him back but that he will refuse. The quality of the Yeoman's initial reaction to the Canon's departure is registered by the curse he bestows upon the man; in revenge, he tells the pilgrims that since his lord is gone, he will tell all that he knows. The tale that follows, then, is the Yeoman's attempt to make sure that the Canon really does experience every "sorwe and shame" before he dies. The tale is told from the Yeoman's double motivation to retain his position of authority and his revenge at being deserted.

The Yeoman, however, is more upset by the Canon's departure than he can appreciate, and a few lines after first telling the pilgrims that he will tell them what he knows of alchemy, he repeats his plan to tell "al that longeth to that art" (716) affirming that he does so because

the Canon is gone:

Now wolde God my wit myghte suffise
To tellen al that longeth to that art!
But 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.

(715-19)

Implied in this statement is, first, that the Yeoman would have told the pilgrims the secrets from the outset but that the Canon's presence prevented his telling them. At the same time, his statement indirectly places blame upon the Canon for making him (the Yeoman) reveal the secrets by deserting him. In thinking this way, of course, the Yeoman overlooks that the Canon left after his secrets had been divulged.

More than anything else, however, the Yeoman's second statement concerning his lord's departure indicates the impact of the event upon him. The rest of the poem can be seen, from this point of view, as the Yeoman's attempt to resolve the stress it causes him.

Just before the explosion sequence the Yeoman is again reminded that his master has deserted him (902); but this time, in contrast to the others, we see that he remembers that his lord has gone just as he is about to tell the pilgrims how crafty the Canon really is. These lines show the respect that the Yeoman actually has for the Canon and for alchemy, even though in his narration he elsewhere assumes a deliberately ironic stance. The Yeoman is a conscious narrator and in his effort to retain his position of authority, he has adapted his point of view to suit the hostile attitude of his audience. But the Yeoman becomes caught up in his narrative along the way and when it comes to describing the tempering of the metals, he is for once content to stay out of the picture,³² a picture initially dominated by the Canon and the

operations he performs. The Yeoman's fascination is indicated by his comment:

My lord hem tempreth, and no man but he--
Now he is goon, I dar seyn boldely--
For, as men seyn, he kan doon craftily.
Algate I woot wel he hath swich a name,
And yet ful ofte he renneth in a blame.
And wite ye how? Ful ofte it happeth so,
The pot tobreketh, and farewel, al is go!
(901-07)

In these lines the Yeoman rationalizes his former respect for the Canon: he really can work wonders. And this is not just his opinion, other men also say that he can work "craftily." The Yeoman's interest, even awe of the alchemist is suggested in the lines surrounding this passage by his calling the man "my lord" each time he is mentioned (901, 932, 951): it is as if the Canon had not deserted him. His esteem is further demonstrated by the fact that he defends the Canon's abilities and accepts his excuse that the pot was to blame for the ruined experiments. He never does say, as we might have expected, that the Canon is an incompetent alchemist.

The Yeoman's interest is held all the way through the explosion and the subsequent confusion and consolidation of the alchemists; he resumes his ranting only when the one assistant suggests that the blowing was defective (955). The Yeoman has previously said that he was afraid when the fire was blamed (924-26) and, if conjecture is permitted, it is probably not without significance that he should resume his former ironic stance at this point.

The Envious Stone is renewed within the Yeoman as he describes the experiment and he sets out on his path of revenge once more saying that by the time he is through he will have shown that the "trewest" man is

a thief (969). His purpose in the tale, then, is to expose the alchemist as a fraud and to explain the working of his "illusiouns" (673). As the inner work is renewed within him, we must see that not only the Canon, but the Yeoman, too, has become a hundred times more subtle in the methods of his revenge as he begins his tale. Having begun his account of alchemy blatantly cursing the Canon, in this second part the Yeoman insists too often to be believed (1093-95, 1172, 1304-06) that it bores him to talk about the Canon's swindling, and what is really revenge he tries to disguise as a public service to the pilgrims and to innocence in general.

The tale that the Yeoman tells is not intentionally thinly disguised autobiography, but a tale that he has heard before. In the past when he heard it, this tale of the swindling alchemist has served as the fictionalized account of an exemplary swindler and the techniques he employs. What The Courtier and The Governor are to the gentleman of the Sixteenth Century, this tale is to the charlatan alchemist, although, perhaps it may be more accurately described as an alchemist's locker-room story. When he heard the tale before the Yeoman would have associated himself with the Canon who "koude his service beede" (1065) so convincingly. With the other alchemists he would have been delighted and impressed by this alchemist's techniques while this "sotted preest" (1341) of course, would be the object of universal scorn.

That the tale is to be seen as fiction and not autobiography, I believe, is evidenced by the Yeoman's interruptions into the narrative and by the tale's double point of view: while on one hand it reveals the techniques of the swindler, on the other hand, it tells of the folly of the "innocent" transmuted into spiritual lead through alchemy's inner

work. Initially the Yeoman sets the tale as being purely fictional, but as it progresses, he interrupts the narrative with increasing frequency. It is through these interruptions that the reader sees that the purely fictional tale takes on a personal relevance for the Yeoman. He is well into his tale when he denies that this man is the same Canon who has just left them, and it is during the second experiment that he comments that the Canon was "evere fals in thoght and dede" (1275). Later still, and with growing distress, the Yeoman says that the Canon "semed freendly to hem that knewe hym noght,/But he was feendly bothe in werk and thoght" (1302-03). By the end of the tale the Canon, who is initially the more important of the two characters, has fallen into the background and the priest is the subject of the Yeoman's concern.

Whereas at the beginning, the story concerned the Canon's sleight-of-hand tricks, finally it is about the betrayal of the "innocent" priest. It is a sadder Yeoman, I believe, who tells the pilgrims:

He wente his wey, and never the preest hym sy
After that day; and whan that this preest shoold
Maken assay, at swich tyme as he wolde,
Of this receit, farwel! it wolde nat be.
Lo, thus byjaped and bigiled was he!
(1381-85)

Following this statement the Yeoman rather desperately urges men to give up alchemy. Something, then, has happened to the Yeoman while he tells his tale. What has happened, I think, is that the Yeoman, who at the beginning of the tale associated himself with the alchemist, has seen, at the end of his story, that his fate is the same as the gulled priest's.

When he begins his story it is with certain pride that the Yeoman reveals the techniques of the swindling alchemist. In fact, it seems that the Yeoman rather fancies himself to be the alchemist as he tells his tale. Geoffrey of Vinsauf says in his Poetria Nova that a good

narrator makes appropriate gestures as he speaks:³³ it is difficult to imagine that the Yeoman, who is so fond of being the centre of attention, would be an exception. True to form, he delights in making the priest couch the coals while he, with mastery and finesse, artfully slips the imaginary ounce of silver from beneath his sleeve. Having assumed the role of the alchemist, he even condescends, from his superior position, to show the priest how the blowing ought to be done:

And whiles the preest couched bisily
The coles, as I tolde yow er this,
This chanoun seyde, "Freend, ye doon amys.
This is nat couched as it oghte be;
But soone I shal amenden it," quod he.
"Now lat me medle therwith but a while,
For of yow have I pitee, by Seint Gile!
(1179-85)

It is with the fire-blowing that the Yeoman begins to see himself as being like the priest. Previously he has identified the priest as an "innocent" (1076) and it is as an innocent that the Yeoman portrays himself. As he places all the responsibility for the beguiling of the priest on the Canon's shoulders, so he curses his own Canon in the belief that the misfortune he has suffered is entirely the alchemist's fault. But it is not until the end of the tale, when he tells of the Canon's desertion, that the Yeoman finally sees that he too has been swindled and deserted by one in whom he had placed his trust.

In previous tellings of this alchemists' locker-room story, the Yeoman has always associated himself with the winning side. This time, now that he is deserted by his lord, he is on the other side and he realizes that he, too, has been "bejaped and beguiled" by a swindling alchemist. By associating himself with the innocent priest, one of "Cristes peple" (1072), he realizes that eventually alchemy really is a swindle, and that even the fraternity he found in the misery of the

alchemists is uncertain. Through his telling of a fictional tale, the Yeoman has come to a deeper understanding of the price that he has paid for something he will never receive.

The Yeoman's involvement in alchemy has been his source of pride up until this point despite the fact that he thinks he has given it up. Having come to the realization that he has been betrayed both by alchemy and the lord he esteemed, the Yeoman tells other men to give up their pursuit of the art in his conclusion (1388-1425). But the Yeoman's rejection of alchemy is short-lived, and by the time he has finished his account, he has moved in the direction that will lead him back to the laboratory.

Having finished telling his fictional tale of the swindling of the priest, his vision of alchemy has truly failed, and while, in the Prima Pars, he spoke honestly of the sorrow and the grief that almost drove him and his companions mad, his complaints and criticisms were those of a man who really loves the art and his own involvement in it. The Yeoman remained with the alchemists because of the fraternity he found there, a fraternity whose members also lived in the vain hope that one day they would hit upon the right chemical combination and live in prosperity. But now, impoverished, miserable and, above all, deserted, the Yeoman's hopes for success vanish as he sees that his fate has not been the exception to the rule. In his conclusion the Yeoman is looking for consolation; like the Wanderer of the Old English poem, he is looking for a lord to replace the one he lost. He receives his consolation and finds his lord, not in God and in the realization that seeking material wealth is nothing, but in alchemy and the philosophers who offer a higher authority than his lord. Plato tells his disciple that he will not reveal

the secret because it is Christ's to give to men as he pleases, or to keep from them:

The philosophres sworn were everychoon
That they sholden discovere it unto noon,
Ne in no book it write in no manere.
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."
(1464-71)

From this statement the Yeoman further concludes that since God will not let the secret be known and that those who try to make gold without inspiration are working against God's will, it is best not to study alchemy:

Thanne conclude I thus, sith that God of hevene
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.
For whoso maketh God his adversarie,
As for to werken any thyng in contrarie
Of his wil, certes, never shal he thryve,
Thogh that he multiplie terme of his lyve.
And there a poynt; for ended is my tale.
God sende every trewe man boote of his bale!
(1472-81)

There is a difference between saying that Christ gives the secret or prevents it from being found and saying that those who work in alchemy without inspiration are God's enemies. The Yeoman's conclusion clarifies the meaning of what Plato's statement implies. But the development is Chaucer's, not the Yeoman's. That he has parroted the philosophers is shown by the structural similarity of the speeches: Plato began by saying that the philosophers were forbidden to tell the secret, and it is with this statement that the Yeoman, too, begins. The Yeoman ends his tale saying: "and there a poynt, for ended is my tale," just as Plato ended his speech saying: "Lo, this is the ende."

The Yeoman, then, has agreed with the philosophers without understanding that it is he who is God's adversary, in telling others, who, unlike himself, are uninspired, to give up the search. That he believes that he is inspired can be seen in his commentary on what the philosophers mean by the dragon and his brother, and also by the fact that he believes that he is the "trewe" man of the last line whose misery should be relieved. The Yeoman, no doubt, believes that he has found God, but he has really found the philosophers. No insight has come from his quoting, and in believing that he is an innocent while others who cannot discover the secret are God's adversaries, he has shown that the suffering he has brought upon himself through the profaning of a spiritual art is not about to be relieved. At the end of his tale the Yeoman believes that he qualifies as the "trewe" man because anything wrong with alchemy was the Canon's fault, not his. Besides that, he has given it up. Moreover, he believes that he has manifested his innocence by telling the pilgrims of the techniques used by charlatans even though it was painful and boring for him to do so. But, as we have seen, the Yeoman has told the tale out of revenge upon his lord for having deserted him and out of his desire to be an authority, not out of the penitance piety he professes.

The Yeoman's experience in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, then, is to learn of the greater price that he has paid in his search for gold and to experience a sorrow greater than he had previously felt in the realization that he has been swindled and betrayed. But, in searching for consolation, instead of understanding the alchemists whom he quotes, whose "entencioun and speche" he cannot understand, he is comforted only by the fact that they are alchemists. Rather than giving up

alchemy, he has found another way of choosing it. The Yeoman's experience in the tale, then, dramatically shows how "of this art [men] cannot wexen sadde" (877).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

In much of the recent criticism of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale critics have been concerned with the problem of the poem's structural unity: the relationship of the first and second parts of the tale to each other and the relationship of the parts of the tale to the Prologue and the "Epilogue." Muscatine finds that the poem is symbolic and that the Yeoman and his Canon represent "faith in earth" which is contrasted to "faith in God" at the end of the tale. Herz finds unity in the developing character of the Yeoman but believes his fate is not sharply defined and that the poem is flawed as a result. Baldwin argues that the work is unified by the fact that the Yeoman's tale is thinly disguised autobiographical confession, and that through it he tells how he personally became involved in alchemy.³⁴

That Chaucer linked Part One, which tells of "real" alchemy with Part Two, which tells of false alchemy presents no problems to the poem's structure when it is remembered that the narrator cannot clearly distinguish between the two, and that according to popular opinion, (as seen in Pope John XXII's Decretal) alchemists first delude themselves and then they delude others. In the language of the Yeoman:

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.

(742-45)

While there is thus no difficulty in Chaucer's uniting real and false alchemy through the Yeoman, the form of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale remains problematic.

Grennen's approach to the poem's unity is through his understanding of alchemy. The tale is not unified through the Yeoman, he says, but rather its two parts are to be seen in light of the alchemical treatise's two part structure: the Prima Pars of the Yeoman's tale is his theoretical discussion of alchemy and the Pars Secunda is his discussion of the practical aspects of the art.³⁵ The form of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is, I agree, that of the alchemical treatise, but I would structure it differently.

At first it would seem that Grennen's structuring of the poem has much to recommend it. Certainly several of the topics that the Yeoman discusses in the Prima Pars--the alchemist (885-91), the fires (768), the apparatus (791-95), the Stone (862-79) and the chemicals (796-818)--are found in the philosophical discussion of alchemy in the treatises. And, in all probability, in composing those lines, Chaucer relied heavily upon that part of the treatise. That the theoretical precedes the practical part of the treatise would also seem to support Grennen's idea that the first part of the tale is the Yeoman's theoretical discussion.

But, I believe, consistent with his portrayal of inverted alchemy, Chaucer has also inverted the order and the emphasis of the two parts of the alchemical treatise in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. I take the first and second parts of the tale to be the practical section of the treatise, while the theoretical section, which consists of some fifty lines, is limited to the Yeoman's quoting of the philosophers. Characteristic of the Yeoman's confusion and his understanding of alchemy, he

has misplaced the sections in his discussion of the art and has included the philosophy at all only because he happened to think of it at the time.

Seeing the structure of the tale in this way better describes the poem, not only because it is more suitable to the confused speaker, but also because the Prima Pars and the Pars Secunda together describe a single alchemical experiment. The Prima Pars describes the making of the Stone in the alchemist's laboratory, the Pars Secunda, the Stone's projection. Grennen's structure finds no place for the explosion sequence but it fits in appropriately if we see both sections as part of a single experiment. From the beginning the First Part is set in the laboratory and is seen to be the beginning of an experiment. The Yeoman says:

Of that no charge, I wol speke of oure werk,
Whan we been there as we shul exercise
Oure elvysshe craft, we semen wonder wise,
Oure termes been so clergial and so queynte.
I blowe the fir til that myn herte feynte.
(749-53)

Set within the laboratory, the Yeoman has already started to blow the fire for the experiment, the processes of which are described in a manner incomprehensible to the reader. The Pars Secunda is to be seen as the projection of the Envious Stone because the Canon, now the Second Canon, uses a "poudre" (1133) represented by him to be the Stone. He tells the priest:

I have a poudre here, that coste me deere,
Shal make al good, for it is cause of al
My konnyng, which that I yow shewen shal.
(1133-35)

From an alchemical point of view there is no difficulty with the problem of the two Canons: through the inner work the Yeoman's Canon has been

"multiplied" in envious charity becoming the Second Canon. "Infinite" in his "falsnesse" (976), he has the ability to corrupt others.

While Grennen's structuring of the poem does not account for the Yeoman's quoting of the philosophers when his tale is finished, to include it as a continuation of the tale is to disregard its difference in tone and content. It is only with the quoting of the philosophers that the reader hears anything even vaguely resembling alchemical theory in the abstract discussion of the "mortifying of the dragon" and the composition of Magnesia. One of the amusing ironies of the poem is that the Yeoman's practical, exoteric approach to alchemy ends up as being as confusing as the "mystical" terminology of any alchemical treatise could be, although, like all alchemists, the Yeoman promises to reveal all secrets (704ff.). While he has often told the pilgrims that the treatises are incomprehensible and quotes them to prove it, when the real alchemists are given a chance to speak for themselves, their meaning is easily apparent: "Don't study alchemy."

The last lines of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, (1388-1481) the "philosophical post-script," have caused critics many of their difficulties with the poem's unity. Having considered the problem of the speaker of these lines and generally agreeing that Chaucer provides the right conclusion to the poem at the speaker's expense,³⁶ they have missed the essential function of these lines, which is to provide a fitting conclusion to the Yeoman's limited practical approach to the subject. In the philosophers, they provide a standard by which the Yeoman is shown to be a sophisticated imposter and suggest through alchemy's true nature, a basis for the interpretation of the Tale's meaning. These last lines do not form a single structural unit as is generally believed.

The poem, as presented by the Yeoman, ends at line 1425. This much of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale forms a self-contained unit, which is supplemented and corrected by what follows. As the Yeoman represents a practical understanding of alchemy, so his criticism of it has been practical; his position is summed up in lines 1388-1425, his conclusion:

If that youre eyen kan nat seen aright,
Looke that youre mynde lakke noght his sight.
For though he looken never so brode and stare,
Ye shul nothyng wynne on that chaffare,
But wasten al that ye may rape and renne.
Withdraweth the fir, lest it to faste brenne;
Medleth namoore with that art, I mene,
For if ye doon, youre thrift is goon ful clene.
(1418-25)

In other words: "Don't study alchemy or you'll lose your shirt."

It is with these lines that the Yeoman's contribution to the poem ends. Up to this point it has seemed to be entirely an attack upon alchemy shaped by the popular understanding whose mouth-piece is the Yeoman. From line 1426 to the end of the tale (1481) the Yeoman is replaced as the alchemical authority by the philosophers whom he quotes. The philosophers, who understand the treatises, have performed the alchemical opus and have been given the secret by God, offer an entirely different understanding of the art, an understanding that embodies that of true alchemists. Alchemy is more than chemistry for the philosophers, who discuss the spiritual effects of the work when it is practised by those from whom God withholds the secret. As alchemy is an art concerned with the spirit, the secret of which is God-given, it involves an inner work. Because the philosophers perceive alchemy to have a spiritual basis, in telling those who cannot understand the "entencioun and speche" (1443) of the treatises to leave the science, they show that those who study it without the prerequisite inspiration receive spiritual

punishment by making themselves God's adversaries. For such men, alchemy leads to damnation instead of salvation.

While, when the philosophers' quotations are finished, the Yeoman is made to agree with them repeating what they have said with new emphasis, it is no longer his poem; nor does he offer his own understanding of alchemy in his final conclusion. He merely agrees with the authorities as he has agreed with the clerk (748) and with the men who say his lord works craftily (902-3). He has quoted the philosophers with the same gravity with which he quoted the proverbs at the end of the first part of his tale:

But al thyng which that shineth as the gold
Nis nat gold, as that I have herd it told;
Ne every appul that is fair at eye
Ne is nat good, what so men clappe or crye.
Right so, lo, fareth it amonges us:
He that semeth the wiseste, by Jhesus!
Is moost fool, whan it cometh to the preef;
And he that semeth trewest is a theef.
That shul ye knowe, er that I fro yow wende,
By that I of my tale have maad an ende.
(962-71)

Through the Yeoman's quoting of the philosophers the reader becomes aware that what is wrong with this alchemy is that by pursuing the "effects of their desires," (1261) these alchemists have cut themselves off from God. What has seemed up to line 1425 to be a realistic tale, topical in its content and practical in its approach, has turned out to have had symbolic meaning. While showing how alchemy is practised by sophisticated imposters, Chaucer has all along been showing how seeking material rewards as an end in itself functions within man's soul.

The importance of the philosophers is that they identify the Yeoman as being God's adversary just as they show that all alchemy does not end in failure. Throughout the tale, as we have already seen, alchemical

activities have been linked with images suggestive of hell. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Yeoman's conclusion. Advising men to give up alchemy, the Yeoman depicts the alchemist as one who blows the fire to the point of explosion (1423-24) and is unable to escape it (1407-08). While in using these images the Yeoman is describing his own former position in the alchemical experiments with his Canon, he is unaware that in generalizing from his own experiences he has objectified the essential characteristics of the exemplary alchemist in terms suggestive of damnation.

Still thinking in practical terms, the Yeoman has no understanding of the deeper implications of the images he uses: that alchemy is a curse (1405); that the alchemist is one who cannot help but be burnt by the fire that he is compelled to blow; that it is best to give up alchemy, for "nevere to thryve were to long a date" (1411). While all of these images have meaning derived from the tale, assembled together, they also suggest damnation. The curse that men buy, means to the Yeoman, only that the recipe has brought poverty and misery; symbolically, however, it is to be seen as the curse of damnation. To the Yeoman, the fire is the fire of the laboratory, while the reader sees that the fire that the alchemist blows is the fire of hell. To the Yeoman the dimensions of "nevere" are contained within a life-time, whereas to the reader "nevere to thryve" suggests eternity. But while damnation is suggested in these images just as it is also suggested in the association of the Canon with the fiend, it is the philosophers who, in showing that God prevents some men from attaining the secret, have diagnosed the Yeoman's spiritual condition as God's adversary. Just as the Yeoman's character is objectified as the exemplary dupe of alchemy in his conclusion, so he is identified

spiritually by the philosophers. The view of alchemy held by true alchemists, then, informs and judges the popular conception of the art in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale showing the Canon and his Yeoman to be sophisticated imposters, and why, in ultimate terms, they must always "fail of their desires."

The "philosophical post-script," then, is not to be read as a single structural unit although its two sections are linked by the same narrator. Structurally the two sections are composed to balance each other so that the philosophers' statements reply to the complaints of the Yeoman's conclusion. The Yeoman complains that no one can understand the treatises; Arnaldus responds by quoting Hermes to tell those who cannot understand the intention and speech of alchemy not to "bisye hym this art for to seche" (1442). The Yeoman further complains of his material reversals through alchemy; Senior responds by quoting Plato to indicate that the imposter's reversals through alchemy will be not only material, but spiritual as well.

The separation of the two sections is emphasized by Chaucer's placing of images from the Prologue in the Yeoman's conclusion so that the reader expects the end of the poem. The Yeoman, of course, does not know that in using the image of the "grete and hevye purses" (1404) emptied by alchemy he recalls the "male tweyfoold" (566) of the Prologue, any more than in saying that men studying alchemy are like Bayard the Blynde he recalls the sweating horses upon which he and the Canon galloped to meet the pilgrims. By repeating, in the Yeoman's conclusion, images from the Prologue, Chaucer unifies his poem structurally and draws attention to the contrast between the attitude that the Yeoman had of alchemy at the beginning of the work when he attempted to bring the

pilgrims to share its "subtiltee" (620) and his attitude at the end of his tale when he urges men to leave the art. Chaucer has led his reader to expect the end of the poem in order to emphasize the abruptness of the Yeoman's sudden turning to the philosophers, a change indicating that he has not yet really given up his involvement in that art.

Chaucer has "ended" his poem only to begin it again; the Yeoman's conclusion is actually a false coda that plots the abrupt transition of the poem from the Yeoman's to the philosophers' control. Herz has complained of the ending of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale that the Yeoman's

vision is transcended, not simply transformed, and unlike the Troilus there is no cosmic apparatus to sustain the shift. The conclusion, instead of deriving from the centre of the experience within the tale, is imposed from without.³⁷

But the very abruptness of the change from the world of the sophisticated imposters to that of true alchemists, I think, does provide the equivalent of the "cosmic apparatus" for which she calls. While the philosophers are "brought from without" to show what is wrong with the Yeoman and the alchemy he practises, by keeping the Yeoman as narrator, and by making the philosophers respond to his complaints, Chaucer has made the transition proceed naturally from the poem even though it is deliberately separated from it. The unexpectedness of the transition and the addition of new material corresponds to the shift from earthly to heavenly perspective in Troilus and Criseyde. In both cases the abrupt shift functions so that the last lines of each of the poems provides the basis for their symbolic meanings.

Chaucer, however, does not repeat images of the Prologue at the end of the Yeoman's Tale without developing them. Through these images he conveys meaning beyond that which is offered by his fallible narrator. We have already seen one network of images working beneath the

surface of the poem to suggest that the work of alchemy is the labour of hell; another network expresses the futility of the experimentation practised by these alchemists in their exhausting, compulsive and endless chase after "that slydyng science" (732). The Yeoman tells the pilgrims:

Yet it is fals, but ay we han good hope
It for to doon, and after it we grope.
But that science is so fer us biforn,
We mowen nat, although we hadden it sworn,
It overtake, it slit away so faste.
It wole us maken beggers atte laste.
(678-83)

The Yeoman, or rather Chaucer through him, depicts the sophisticated imposters' experience with alchemy as a hopeless chase. They grope after a science that slides away so quickly that they will never overtake it. Relative to the speed with which alchemy travels, the Canon and his assistant are almost at a standstill, even though they push themselves past their endurance;

His hakeney, that was al pomely grys,
So swatte that it wonder was to see;
It semed as he had priked miles three.
The hors eek that his yeman rood upon
So swatte that unnethe myghte it gon.
Aboute the peytrel stood the foom ful hye;
He was of foom al flekked as a pye....
.....
His hat heeng at his bak down by a laas,
For he hadde riden moore than trot or paas;
He hadde ay priked lik as he were wood.
(559-76)

The Canon's frantic ride is emblematic of his bootless search for the Philosophers' Stone. Although he has exerted himself totally, has given "al that evere [he] hadde" (876), his spent energy is futile because, in practising alchemy for corrupt reasons--a corruption shown by his former swindling--he has worked "in contrarie" of God's will. Because the Canon's ride is deliberately emblematic of the quality of his involvement in alchemy, it is neither realistically motivated nor

explained in the poem. The lack of realistic motivation concerning the Canon's dramatic arrival has led critics to invent it: Baldwin rejects one wild suggestion in the following passage to suggest an even wilder solution:

...The Canon's statement that he has ridden fast in order to overtake the pilgrims is obviously incomplete. Since the Yeoman saw them leave the inn that morning, and informed his master of the fact, why delay so long that they were required to gallop at least three of the five miles, especially since most readers consider the meeting carefully planned? Why all this haste to catch up to a slow-moving group that had travelled only a short distance? Most important of all, why does Chaucer make so much of their haste? R. K. Root is to my knowledge, the only reader who has remarked upon Chaucer's emphasis, and he does so only in passing, offering the suggestion that the pair may have feared the robbers of Blean Forest. A more tempting conjecture would be that the two have just perpetrated a fraud on the lines of that described in Part II.³⁸

The meaning of the Canon's frantic ride is revealed at the end of the poem in Bayard "the blynde" who "blondreth forth and peril casteth noon" (1414): blind haste without direction is what characterizes the sophisticated imposter.

Images of haste pervade the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. The Canon, a "passyng"³⁹ man (914), departs from the pilgrims as suddenly as he arrived; the Second Canon is "heere and there;/He is so variaunt, he abit nowhere" (1174-75). Herz has commented upon the haste of the Yeoman's narration: "...he does not question or explore significances, but rushes headlong through his narration, speaking in long, breathless sentences, as if afraid of omitting something important."⁴⁰ But the haste, the striving and the tale itself come to a "poynt" (1480), a full stop, as well as the crux of an argument, only when God, and man's relationship to him, is recognized--if not by the Yeoman, then by the philosophers--as being central to the practice of alchemy.

THE SECOND NUN'S TALE

CHAPTER III

Although the modern reader finds the Canon's Yeoman's Tale difficult because of the complexity of alchemy and the unresolved elements of the plot, he understands and appreciates it better--superficially at least, than the Second Nun's Tale which he initially finds to be guileless or distasteful. He finds it guileless because he mistakes its straightforwardness for a simple-minded display of the martyr's faith in God, a faith all Christians should ideally share. This view has caused the poem to be examined, if at all, not as a poem but as an assemblage of common Medieval topics so that its use of patristics and its date of composition have proven more interesting to critics than the poem itself.¹ Critics have felt that the tale is self-explanatory and that their job is done when Chaucer's sources have been discussed and his borrowings from Dante neatly labelled.² In short, the Second Nun's Tale seems to be exactly what one would expect of the Middle Ages, the age of faith: it is tempting to say of it that this kind of story was popular then and to leave it at that.

On the other hand, the poem seems distasteful to the modern reader who lingers over it past a first reading. Not predisposed to believe uncritically in Christian values (as he would have the Medieval reader), he probably begins to have a nagging feeling that, beneath the angels, pleasant odours and winter blossoms that form its sugar-coated surface, this poem is heartless. To praise faith in God and rewards in heaven is all very well; but the poet, in his religious fervour, could very

well be accused of glossing over the very real and earthly problems of death and suffering in favour of the Church's teaching of the transcendence of heaven over earth. While mawkishly sentimental saints are distasteful, the hideousness of Cecile's apparent enthusiasm for the martyrdom of her husband and her brother-in-law is matched in literature only by Regan's enthusiasm for Gloucester's blinding. The self-righteous pride that Cecile demonstrates during her trial, as she grinds Almachius into the dust, is surely for the modern reader, a poor representation of "conscience and good faith unfeigned" (434), "innocence" (452), "steadfastness" (474) and humility--the Christian values that, as a saint, she ought to exemplify.

In fact, Cecile's behaviour at her trial may well make the modern reader wonder how she is even representative as a Christian, let alone a saint, whose life should reflect Christ's.³ Christ, unlike Cecile, did not answer his judges and Cecile's behaviour at her trial seems to be almost exactly contrary to his example. The trial scene then, may appear to the modern reader as demonstrating what Nietzsche referred to as a Christian revenge instance.⁴ In short, not deceived by the poem's saccharine surface, he could dismiss the poem as a nasty piece of militant Christianity.

By doing so, however, the modern reader would show that the realistic standards that he uses to interpret contemporary literature lead him to misunderstand this symbolic kind of work. The Lyf of Cecile makes a poor biography and, in realistic terms, this saint does not emerge as much of a character. The most personal thing we know about her is that she is reluctant to marry Valerian. But Chaucer's purpose in the tale is not to explore the make-up of the saintly personality--

at least in strictly biographical terms; rather, his purpose is to present Cecile as an exemplary, if exceptional, Christian. Thus we know of her that she says her prayers three times a day, that she wears a hair shirt beneath her dress, and that she wants to retain her virginity. Her behaviour at her wedding is not bizarre, but shows her as having perfect Christian love:

And whil the organs maden melodie,
To God allone in herte thus sang she:
"O Lord, my soule and eek my body gye
Unwemmed, lest that it confounded be."
(134-37)

Cecile has first married God and, through him, Valerian, just as the Christian soul is first to love God, who is perfect, and then to love mankind for its participation in Godliness. The Second Nun's Tale is not to be read as a biography, a mode which implies realism, but as an exemplary and symbolic saints legend, a hagiographic romance as it is defined by the Catholic Encyclopedia. Discussing the Life of Saint Cecilia in its various forms, the Encyclopedia writes: "The whole story has no historical value; it is a pious romance like so many others completed in the Fifth and Sixth centuries."⁵ Robert Hoyt writes that the Vitae Sanctorum in the fifth and sixth centuries were written for the "edification of the faithful, the inculcation of Christian ideals and conduct among simple folk who could neither read nor understand the metaphysical or mystical writings of the Fathers":

To attract and hold attention, to emphasize the virtue of the saint, and to exemplify various points of Christian ethics, the Vitae Sanctorum were replete with tense situations, hairbreath escapes, miraculous events (i.e. inexplicable in terms of ordinary human experience), and happy endings....

In this literature for popular consumption there rapidly grew up a huge number of legends, some of them attached to more than one saint. A new Christian mythology replaced the old pagan mythology.⁶

These romances were also used, Hoyt says, by novices in the monasteries in preparation for the more difficult patristic literature.⁷

The saint's life, then, except that it has as its subject matter the life of a saint or martyr, is to be seen as a form of romance.

Romance is a kind of literature superficially characterized by its conventions: the flat and exemplary characters, contrived plot, and happy ending. It is often considered unrealistic due to the prevalence of supernatural or miraculous elements. Although it is traditionally classified by subject⁹--the three great "matters" of Britain, France and Rome--romance, is actually a mode,¹⁰ not a genre. What characterizes it better than its conventions is its closeness to myth as Northrop Frye has demonstrated.¹¹

The purpose of myth is to explain or to interpret things or events; and, for that reason, the characters are symbolic fragments of qualities for or against the successful resolution of the myth. The actions that they perform not only define the qualities that the characters symbolize; they also define the idea that is being explained.

Because myth exists to explain something, whether it be the fall of man or why the sea is salt, it is necessarily conventional and unrealistic; and, while all fiction is at some a level mythic if only because it has a plot, romance is least removed from myth. What distinguishes the two, I think, is the amount of realism that romance allows since the more realism a literary mode accommodates the farther away from myth it becomes. The characters of romance, unlike those of myth, do have some personality but, although the amount of realism depends upon the individual romance, any realism present is finally subordinated to the poem's theme.

Unlike the epic, a realistic mode that attempts to portray an entire society from its social stratification to its economic and political activities and the reasons for its rise and fall; romance, like the scientific experiment, attempts to measure the effects and the functioning of a single aspect of behaviour or experience. What characterizes it best as a mode is not the portrayal of life in its totality, but the subordination of all other elements to its purpose. Because the purpose of romance is its most important aspect, the same story can be used to demonstrate different themes. The legend of Saint Cecilia, for example, according to Mary Giffin, may have "chastity," "martyrdom," or "bisynesse" as its theme:

The choice of [the] central theme [of besynesse] is an admirable one for a lay poet, more suitable than the themes of chastity and martyrdom usually central to the life of Cecile.¹²

"Bisyness," however, is not the central theme of the Second Nun's Tale. Throughout the Prologue and the Tale Chaucer stresses the combination of faith and "werkes" that procede from that faith. In the Invocatio Ad Miriam the narrator, confessing his¹³ unworthiness, asks the Virgin to accept his "bileve" (62) but because faith alone is not enough, he asks Mary for "wit and space so for to werken" (65): "feith is deed withouten werkes" (64). The "bisynesse" theme, then, associated with Cecile's "werkes," accounts for only part of the discussion of Christian virtues in the tale.

Grennen, too, believes that "bisynesse" is not the Second Nun's Tale's central theme, but, that along with "charity" and "martyrdom," it is only part of the "controlling theme of 'unity and integrity'":

'Besynesse' is only one aspect of the central theme of 'Integrity,' for it is the incessency of good work, the wholeness of perseverance, the constant undiminishing flame of charity the poet insists upon. These are separate qualities, but in Cecilia they act in

concert, just as the distinguishable heavenly bodies make up a single unified cosmos.¹⁴

Quoting the last two stanzas of the Prologue (107-19) in which Cecile's name is interpreted by a simile associating her with heavenly bodies, lines which he sees to "clearly epitomize the significance we are to see in the saint's life," Grennen comments:

These lines bring together the various aspects of meaning which the prologue has thus far suggested, but they do not emphasize 'werkes' more than faith or wisdom. What is significant is that the several virtues which contribute to sainthood exist in Cecilia as a total habitus or condition of personality and thus reflect in a human way the mystery of a triune God.¹⁵

Grennen is correct in stressing the importance of the integrity of Saint Cecilia's virtue: whereas saints mediate between God and man "within their own limits,"¹⁶ Cecile, who is called the Virgin's maiden (33), is portrayed as "a smaller figure"¹⁷ of Mary, who is the true "habitus" of virtue, the one mediator.¹⁸

But the Second Nun's Tale is not so much a discussion of saintly virtue as it is an examination of perfected mankind and the process leading to his perfecting. From perfection results the wholeness of personality to which Grennen refers. The "Integrity" of Cecile's personality is the result of a process by which mankind is spiritualized and led to salvation. It is the process and the effects of salvation that are the subjects of the Second Nun's Tale just as they are parodied through the alchemical symbolism in the Canon's Yeoman's.

The poem's major theme, then, is the perfecting of mankind by his rejection of mutable terrestrial values for the immutable, perfect and perfecting values of heaven. This theme is best expressed in Saint Ambrose's quotation of Cecilia that is taken from the Feast of Saint Cecilia:¹⁹

Seint Ambrose in his preface list to seye;
Solempnely this noble doctour deere
Commendeth it, and seith in this manere:

"The palm of martirdom for to receyve,
Seinte Cecile, fulfild of Goddes yifte,
The world and eek hire chambre gan she weyve;
Witnesse Tyburces and Valerians shrifte,
To whiche God of his bountee wolde shifte
Corones two of floures wel smellynge,
And make his angel hem the corones brynge.

The mayde hath broght thise men to blisse above..."

(271-81)

While most of the Second Nun's Tale has been translated by Chaucer, it is significant that the Legenda Aurea, the presumed source material for this section of the poem, does not quote Saint Ambrose.²⁰ These lines, added by Chaucer, embody the significance that he sees in the legend: Cecile, filled with Grace, "Goddes yifte," set the world aside for heaven and has led others, Valerian and Tyburce, with her. Cecile has been perfected and through her love of heavenly perfection has not only secured salvation for herself, but, through her influence, has also brought others to salvation. To be perfected on earth secures salvation after death.

We see, then, that Chaucer finds a significance in this tale, a significance that transcends the literal level of the plot. The guileless tale is really a symbolic study of the process and the effects of salvation which are precisely those violated by the gold-seeking of perverted alchemy in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. But, because of its symbolic nature, the Nun's Tale is easily misunderstood by the naive reader in spite of its deliberately simple style. Symbolic interpretation of the tale, then, is necessary; but how is it to proceed?

One approach to the symbolic interpretation of Saints Lives has been suggested by Alvin Lee, who, in his book The Guest-hall of Eden, discusses the Old English Lives of Saints. Lee uses Northrop Frye's

formulation of romance to interpret the Saint's Life as a kind of spiritual quest in which the saint is tested, perfected, and then proved in the aspect of faith in which he is weak. Three distinct stages are discernable: the agon, pathos, and anagnorisis. We see Lee's ideas at work in his discussion of Andreas:

Structurally, as well as in the mode of its imagining, Andreas is a romance and has much in common with narrative romances of other periods of literature. Despite the disruptions of time and space because of heavenly and hellish influences, its dominant organizing principle is sequential, and its plot involves a series of adventures leading up to a major one in which the hero almost dies, followed by his recognition as an agent of heaven and his success in converting the Mermedonians. Using Frye's terms, we can recognize the basic pattern of the successful quest divided into three main stages. First there is the agon; then the major struggle and near death of the protagonist, the pathos; and finally the recognition or anagnorisis of the hero.²¹

Lee's approach works well with certain of the Saints' Lives such as Andreas²² in which Andreas, an aspect of Matthew, must be proved and strengthened in his faith to the point at which this fragmented personality can be integrated when Andreas rescues Matthew from jail. Once the personality is integrated the cannibals can be converted to Christianity. In this legend the saint, Andreas, who symbolizes that aspect of Matthew that is imprisoned by spiritual blindness, needs perfecting, and, because the character must be perfected in faith, the quest is an appropriate form for Andreas. But, unlike the saints of Andreas, Cecile, in the Second Nun's Tale, is already perfect at the beginning of the poem and her character does not develop throughout the work. The form of the tale is not so much a quest as it is a debate between the understandings of earth and heaven, the saved and the damned, just as the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, nominally a debate between the sophisticated imposters and the true philosophers, is finally a debate between earth and

heaven, the damned and the saved.

In romance literature a character's symbolic value is determined by his function: and Cecile, as we have seen, leads men to God. On a literal level she symbolizes the perfected Christian; on a symbolic level she represents heaven on earth as can be seen from the etymologies of her name in which she is called "hevenes lilie" (87) in the first etymology and "hevene of peple" (104) in the last:

For "leos" "peple" in Englissh is to seye,
And right as men may in the hevene see
The sonne and moone and sterres every weye
Right so men goostly in this mayden free
Seyen of feith the magnanymtee,
And eek the cleernesse hool of sapience,
And sondry werkes, brighte of excellence.
And right so as these philosophres write
That hevene is swift and round and eek brennynge,
Right so was faire Cecilie the white
Ful swift and bisy evere in good werkyng,
And round and hool in good perseveryng,
And brennyng evere in charite ful brighte.
(106-118)

Cecile symbolizes what men on earth can see, can experience, of heaven, which, like the brightness of the sun, moon and stars, is only a dim reflection of the brightness of heaven. For this reason in the third etymology Cecile is called "the weye to the blynde" (92).

Cecile, then, functions symbolically as that which leads men's love from earth to God. But this is not to say that she is to be regarded as an allegorical figure representing Grace. First and foremost she is a saint, an example of perfect Christianity, and, while she generally functions as Grace, she does not do so in every detail. Grace, for example, could not be said to be boiled and carved to death:

But half deed, with hir nekke ycorven there,
He lefte hir lye, and on his wey is went.
The Cristen folk, which that aboute hire were,
With sheetes han the blood ful faire yhent.

Thre dayes lyved she in this torment,
And nevere cessed hem the feith to teche
That she hadde fostred; hem she gan to preche.
(533-39)

Here the poet is attempting to evoke pity for Cecile's human suffering and an admiration for her "perserverynge" in the love of God and man despite her torment.

In most scenes, however, Cecile does function symbolically as Grace. Good people, like Valerian and Tyburce, respond to her with love while bad people, like Almachius whose nobility²³ has "erred" (459), hate her. Her symbolic role as Grace is most evident in the scene of the brothers martyrdom:

Cecile cam, whan it was woxen nyght,
With preestes that hem cristned alle yfeere;
And afterward, whan day was woxen light,
Cecile hem seyde with a full stedefast cheere,
"Now, Cristes owene knyghtes leeve and deere,
Cast alle away the werkes of derknesse,
And armeth yow in armure of brightnesse.
"Ye han for sothe ydoon a greet bataille,
Youre cours is doon, youre feith han ye conserved.
Gooth to the corone of lif that may nat faille;
The rightful Juge, which that ye han served,
Shal yeve it yow, as ye han it deserved."
(379-90)

Cecile is not ghoulishly anxious to speed the brothers on their way from their earthly lives. Night, in these lines suggests an interior quality within the brothers (the fear of death, perhaps,) that is dispersed in them at dawn by the coming of Grace so that they die with "humble herte and sad devicioun" (397). Cecile's speech symbolizes the arming of the brothers in the armour of Christianity (Ephesians 6:11-17).

One of the most striking aspects of the poem, the Lyf of Cecile, is the smallness of Cecile's role. While she is present in almost every scene, most of the attention in the work is placed on the other characters. During the conversion and martyrdom scenes the reader's

attention is fixed on Valerian, then Tyburce, and, finally, Maximus. We have an impression of Cecile's character during her trial but even then the scene is stolen by Almachius' "wooden dissymulyng" (466-67). This displacement of attention from the central to the minor characters underlines Cecile's symbolic role--it is almost as if she is not to be seen in human terms at all: the displacement of attention from Cecile to the others is a technique necessitated by the very perfection of her character.

Perfect characters are traditionally almost impossible to portray effectively because as soon as their personalities take on dimensions or they begin to perform actions, they seem to be less than perfect. For that reason authors generally allow the perfect character to do and say little.²⁴ As Cecile's perfection is impossible to portray dramatically, aspects of her virtue are defined by the various characters with whom she comes into contact and perfects. Since perfect characters, like Cecile, often seem cold-bloodedly inhuman, the humanly emotional, if wrong-headed responses of the minor characters keep the poem from entirely chilling the reader. Thus, to control an unwarranted, yet present, emotionality in the martyrdom scene, Cecile spouts edifying theology, while Maximus watches the execution with "pitous teeris" (401). Whereas it would have been thematically impossible for Cecile to have registered any emotion that would have made her seem concupiscent of life on earth, Maximus is understandable in his grief.

Thus, in the Second Nun's Tale, the reader learns more of Cecile through the minor characters who define aspects of her virtue than he does from Cecile herself. Her role is almost strictly symbolic.

With these aspects of the tale before us, we will now turn to a

discussion of the symbolic meaning of the poem so that in the next chapter we can see how it functions as a spiritual standard for the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and how the concept of salvation--the perfection of man--creates the unity of the Eighth Fragment of the Canterbury Tales.

For its full meaning the Second Nun's Tale must be read, I believe, as having exterior and interior symbolic actions. By exterior action I mean the historical setting in which the work is placed, its account of the growth of Christianity in pagan Rome and, on another level, the symbolic confrontation of heaven and earth. By interior action I mean how the poem shows the contrast between the harmonious integration of the personality through faith in God and its fragmentation through the "dysfunctioning" intellect, (the deterioration of the natural action of the intellect), and the process by which men become perfected. While these levels of symbolic action described below roughly correspond to the traditional levels of the four-fold allegorical readings of biblical and other literature during the Middle Ages, I do not believe it was Chaucer's or Voraigue's purpose (as apparently it was Dante's²⁵) to deliberately construct such levels of meaning; I have separated them here only for the convenience of discussion. At the same time, however, Chaucer's awareness of levels of significance is indicated by his use of the word "figuryng" (96) in the fourth etymology of Cecile's name and by his use of Saint Ambrose's quotation which embodies the meaning he sees in the tale.

Exterior Action

On a historical level the Lyf of Cecile describes the growing power of Christianity. Beginning as a kind of secret sect made up of certain members of the nobility, Christianity is symbolized by the

Whereas, at the beginning of the tale Cecile had been Christian in the peace and anonymity of her home, and, apparently, reluctant to extend it beyond herself, now, through Valerian and Tyburce, she has spread that faith. Christianity has gained a certain amount of power so that Almachius is motivated to suppress the religion. While, at this stage Almachius, who knows "al hire [the Christians'] entente" (363), is familiar with Christianity and the threat it poses to idolatry, the generality of his speech "whoso wol nat sacrificise" (365) indicates that he has made a blind sweep to catch any Christians. He has not yet identified Cecile as the source of the Christian threat. His inability to specify Cecile, in turn, shows that Christianity, at this point in the tale, has not yet emerged as a power strong enough to warrant undue concern. At the end of the tale, however, when Almachius directly summons Cecile, the symbol of Christianity, the Church has grown to be a power of equal and opposite force to that of paganism.

Thus, historically, Christianity begins, in this tale, as an anonymous and totally personal force symbolized by Cecile who only later begins to "weyve...the world and eek hire chambre" (276). Throughout the poem the new faith emerges as a dynamic and vital force not only within individuals but temporally as well.

Underlining this growth and spread of Christianity is the changing focus of the reader's attention from Cecile down to the general population upon which we have already commented, and the rapid pace of the poem, which as it accelerates in the number of conversions, demonstrates the growing momentum of the Church.

The Second Nun's Tale as a Debate
Between Heaven and Earth

The pace of the Second Nun's Tale accelerates to the point at which Almachius summons Cecile to his court reflecting the growing momentum of the Christian religion. During the trial the pace is markedly relaxed for this, the confrontation of Christianity and paganism, is the central scene in the poem.

Cecile's trial is a symbolic debate between celestial and terrestrial values and understandings; it is a debate between heaven and earth. It forms a second level of exterior symbolic action in the Second Nun's Tale and corresponds to the traditional anagogical level of biblical exegesis because it describes, out of time and space, the conditions of the souls of the saved and the damned.

Cecile, of course, in her perfection, symbolizes heavenly understanding, and ultimately, heaven itself. Almachius, her earthly judge, and representative of the secular power of Rome, symbolizes the earth and ultimately hell; the City of Men, having cut itself off from Grace, is damned. Thus the appropriateness of the narrator's statement in the Prologue:

And thow that flour of virgines art alle
.
. do me endite
Thy maydens deeth, that wan through hire merite
The eterneel lyf, and of the feend victorie.
(29-34)

Cecile, for her merit, won eternal life in heaven and won victory over the fiend. On one level, Cecile's victory over the fiend lies in her membership in the church. But the sense of these lines suggests that Cecile's is a personal victory over the "fiend" Almachius. Through the mock trial he would make her reject her Christian truth for idol-worship,

the transcendent reality of heaven and celestial bliss for the mutable comforts that earth can provide.

In this debate scene two things are immediately apparent: first, that Cecile does not convert Almachius, and, in fact makes no effort to convert him. This says nothing of her ability or her charity but, rather, it defines the spiritual quality of Almachius. Once more, it is not Cecile, but a minor character who carries the narrative load; in this scene, as in others, Cecile is indirectly defined. Secondly, Cecile effectively reverses the tables on Almachius putting his "feith" and his "bileeve" to trial, revealing it, finally, to be faith in stones and that his "philosophy," like his power, is "ful litel to dreed":

For every mortal mannes power nys
But lyk a bladdre ful of wynd, ywys
For with a nedles poynt, whan it is blowe,
May al the boost of it be leyd ful lowe.

(438-41)

Thematically, the purpose of this scene is to underline the virtue and the strength of Christianity, faith in the transcendent God, by contrasting it to its pagan opposite: faith in earth. The scene shows not only that the Christian has gained an after-life in heaven through his membership in the church, but has gained advantage in this world. Against faith such as Cecile's, earthly values and earthly suffering are powerless.

In this second part of the poem Christianity is symbolized in Cecile, and because the religion has been defined by the minor characters in the first part of the poem, the arguments that Cecile uses in her debate with Almachius and her "celestial" position have already been established. Heaven is the only reality and what seems real on earth is actually illusory:

Tiburce answerde, "Seistow this to me
In soothnesse, or in dreem I herkne this?"
"In dremes," quod Valerian, "han we be
Unto this tyme, brother myn, ywis.
But now at erst in trouthe oure dwellyng is."
(260-64)

The celestial life is superior to the present earthly one:

"Men myghten dreden wel and skilfully
This lyf to lese, myn owene deere brother,
If this were lyvyng oonly and noon oother.
"But ther is better lif in oother place,
That nevere shal be lost.
(320-24)

There is one God, a Trinity:

Right as a man hath sapiences three,
Memorie, engyn, and intellect also,
So in a beyng of divinitee,
Thre persones may ther right wel bee.
(337-41)

Through Almachius' arguments in the trial scene we see the position of earth and earthly understanding attempting to refute Cecile's arguments and to assert the validity of its own position. In Almachius, Tyburce's arguments are re-introduced into the poem, but, in contrast to Tyburce, who gave up his earthly position for Christianity, Almachius has become fixated in his earthly position. In what turns out to be his trial, he argues from the understanding that there is no power surpassing that of the Roman princes. Unable to believe that Cecile has dismissed "mortal mannes power" (438) so lightly as a "bladdre ful of wynd" (439), Almachius shows his supreme belief in the terrestrial power of his princes when he tells Cecile: "And yet in wrong is thy perseveraunce" (443) and asks her:

Wostow nat how oure myghty princes free
Han thus comanded and maad ordinaunce,
That every Cristen wight shal han penaunce
But if that he his Cristendom withseye?
(444-47)

Similarly, Almachius reveals his own fear of death, which shows that he has no hopes for a "bette lyf in oother place" when he tells Cecile that he has power over life and death:

"Han nocht oure myghty princes to me yiven,
Ye, bothe power and auctoritee
To maken folk to dyen or to lyven?
Why spekestow so proudly thanne to me?"
(470-73)

Finally, Almachius believes in many gods, all of whom are on and of the earth, and Cecile ridicules him for putting his faith in a "stoon":

That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle.
I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle,
And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde.
(501-03)

Most characteristic of the difference between Cecile and Almachius is that while Cecile everywhere objects to Almachius' ideas, she does so not out of her desire for a personal victory but out of her desire to give testimony of a power greater than her own. Almachius, on the other hand, convinced of his own strength vainly tries to impress upon Cecile not only that he has a greater power than God's but that he is worthy of respect because he is a "philosophre." Having placed his entire faith in himself and the material earth. Almachius has only one argument: that it is he who has power. Initially confident of victory over Cecile, he is almost immediately put on the defensive when she takes exception to his first question, retorting that he expects two responses from a single question. In contrast to the simple logic that Cecile displays in her refusal to do anything contrary to the dictates of her religion, Almachius quickly abandons all but the pretense of logic in his effort to make her conform to his will, demanding that she "Cheesoon of these two:/Do sacrifice, or Cristendom reneye" (458-59) and that she "...sacrifice to oure goddes, er thou go:" (488). Throughout the

debate Almachius goes from initial confidence to surprise at Cecile's lack of fear, through confusion and anger when she smiles at his demand that she deny Christianity. Finally he is moved to rage when, in an effort to demonstrate to her that he really does have power, he orders her execution. Refusing to accept any power beyond that which the earth offers, Almachius has chosen and become fixed in mutable worldly values, which, like his gods and his earthly justice, cannot support him because they are devoid of virtue.

Interior Action

In terms of interior action, action within man's soul, the Second Nun's Tale can be interpreted as symbolizing the operation of virtue and vice within the personality. Whereas virtue ennobles man by creating a harmony, wholeness, or integrity of the personality, vice operates as a divisive force within man causing a splitting of his personality. In reading the Nun's Tale to symbolize the functions of virtue and vice within mankind we find that the thesis that man has a natural inclination towards the good is operative.²⁶ But the reason, when it is fallen, in mistaking itself for ultimate authority, dysfunctions and, acting passionately, maintains man's fallen condition.

In most romance literature all characters eventually become symbolic of one character: mankind.²⁷ Those who marry or form some sort of bond are seen as aspects of mankind that become integrated into a harmoniously functioning personality which embodies the criterion value of the romance. Those characters who are killed or in some way rejected are aspects of mankind that have impeded the integrating of the personality from achieving the criterion value.²⁸ Interpreting characters to be fragments of a single character works especially well with romances

like Andreas that have the quest as their basis. But the Second Nun's Tale because of its debate structure must be seen as having two symbolic characters: Cecile and Almachius.

From the beginning of the poem Cecile is presented as being perfect but, because the totality of her virtue cannot be dramatically depicted, what she represents is defined by Valerian whom she marries and Tyburce whom she accepts as her "allay" (292). That the two men are brothers, suggests, in romance, more than a genetic kinship: they represent two aspects of the self that are to be integrated. The aspect that each of them represents is determined by how he functions in the poem. In the Second Nun's Tale the brothers' symbolic values are revealed by the nature of their conversions.

Valerian's conversion is characterized by its testing and intellectual nature which shows him to represent the reason. When Cecile tells him that an angel loves her and will protect her chastity, Valerian replies:

"If I shal trusten thee,
Lat me that aungel se, and hym biholde;
And if that it a verray angel bee,
Thanne wol I doon as thou hast prayed me;
And if thou love another man, for sothe
Right with this swerd thanne wol I sle yow bothe."
(163-68)

Whereas Valerian could have tried to force Cecile, he will neither accept nor reject what she has said without proof. That he will not make a decision until he can test the validity of her statement reveals his rational nature. The golden book, the instrument of Valerian's conversion, requires an acceptance of Christianity by knowledge; there is only one God, not many. Valerian's role as reason is emphasized by the words he uses in his rejection of idolatry for Christianity:

"I leeve al this thyng," quod Valerian,
"For sother thyng than this, I dar wel say,
Under the hevене no wight thynke may."
(213-15)

Complementary to the rational nature of Valerian's conversion is the passionate way in which Tyburce accepts the new religion. His role as passion is indicated by his first encounter with Christianity through his senses:

And whan that he the savour undernoom,
Which that the roses and the lilies caste,
Withinne his herte he gan to wondre faste.
(243-45)

Smelling, in the hierarchy of the senses, is one of the lower external senses, much below sight and hearing (although above taste--the sense that would prove to Almachius that his is not a god).²⁹ His having approached Christianity through one of the lower senses underlines the more basic level at which Tyburce is attracted to virtue.

Unlike Valerian's intellectual conversion Tyburce's is one of the "herte" (251); and in contrast to Valerian's use of words indicative of his intellectual capacity, Tyburce uses vocabulary that suggests his role as passion in his initial acceptance of Christianity when he tells Cecile: "Whoso troweth nat this, a beest he is" (287). As "trowe" (think, believe) corresponds to a less rational activity than does Valerian's "thynke," so the image of the "beest" associates him with passion as the angel associates Valerian with reason. Just as Valerian's acceptance of the truth of the angel's book shows that he has rejected what he formerly accepted as truth, so Tyburce's rejection of those who do not believe what he has just heard shows his denial of what he has formerly believed.

With Tyburce's conversion the symbolic personality is integrated:

from this point in the poem the brothers are indistinguishable one from the other. They act together in unity experiencing the benefits which reveal their perfection: reason and passion are reconciled into a harmonious state that characterizes the integrity of Cecile's personality.

The second symbolic character, Almachius, as evil as Cecile is good, shows the operation of vice in the personality. Vice is defined in him by Maximus as his passions and by the ministers as his reason. Even though they become members of the church, Maximus and the ministers are to be classified with Almachius rather than with Cecile because they are acting as extensions of Almachius when they are converted.

As with Cecile's character, this second symbolic character is made up of passionate and rational components: Maximus corresponds to Tyburce and in his intuitive acceptance of Christianity, he, like Tyburce, shows that man has a natural inclination towards the good. The situation that leads to Maximus' conversion, while passionate, is directly opposite the sweetness, the hint of heaven, that Tyburce experienced in smelling the heaven-sent flowers. Responsible for carrying out the execution of the martyrs, Maximus feels "pitee" for the brothers: he accepts Christianity without the occurrence of miracles and without instruction in the Christian religion. He feels compassion for men in whom he senses the strength of virtue:

Anon this martirs that I yow devyse,
Oon Maximus, that was an officer
Of the prefectes, and his corniculer,
Hem hente, and whan he forth the seintes ladde,
Hymself he weep for pitee that he hadde.

(367-71)

Maximus symbolizes the passions of Almachius: that aspect of the prefect that recognizes and accepts the virtue of Christianity at a natural and instinctual level. It is he who has seen the souls of the martyrs ascend

to heaven and yet it is this "conversion of the heart" within the prefect that is rejected and killed in Almachius:

This Maximus that saugh this thyng [the execution] bityde,
With pitous teeris told it anonright,
.
And with his word converted many a wight;
For which Almachius dide hym tobete
With whippe of leed, til he his lif gan lete.
(400-406)

The conversion of the ministers is not shown in the tale because the emphasis, at this point, is not so much on the new converts as it is on Almachius' rejecting the council of his own ministers. Yet the council that the ministers offer Almachius shows their rejection of idols for the one Christian God and echoes the knowledge that Valerian had when he saw the golden book:

"Crist, Goddes Sone, withouten difference,
Is verray God--this is al oure sentence."
(417-18)

Underlining their symbolic role as reason, the poem says that the ministres were converted by Cecile's "wise loore" (414). The ministres, then, represent the true reason that is rejected by Almachius.

Having killed within himself the passions that would have led him to truth and having rejected right reason, Almachius represents the perverted intelligence that acts without the benefit of the passions. Whereas in Cecile the reason and passions are integrated, in Almachius they are divided. Symbolic of perverted reason, Almachius corresponds to Valerian but in contrast to Valerian's virtuous nobility, Almachius' has erred. The functional similarity between the two is strongly suggested in Almachius' demand that Cecile:

"Chees oon of thise two:
Do sacrifice, or Cristendom reneye,
That thou mowe now escapen by that weye,"
(458-60)

which inverts the old man's insistence that Valerian accept or reject the Christian truth revealed to him in the golden book: "'Leevestow this thyng or no? Sey ye ye or ne'" (212). Whereas, in Valerian's case, the intellect was asked to accept or reject divine truth, with Almachius, the intellect assumes divine privilege and presents divinity (represented by Cecile) with an ultimatum to do its will or suffer the consequences.

In Almachius, then, is reason, but it is a reason that dysfunctions when it seeks to assert its own will and mistakes itself for ultimate authority. When the intellect attempts to be the entire man it dysfunctions and quickly degenerates into passion: unlike Valerian who tested the validity of what Cecile told him of her angelic lover, Almachius has already determined his judgement, and seeks to perform it regardless of evidence that should alter his position. Seeking to perform his own desires Almachius, the perverted reason, cannot recognize a truth greater than his own without trying to destroy it.

Expressed as interior action of the functioning of virtue and vice in mankind, the two symbolic characters, Cecile and Almachius, contrast to each other: in Cecile the passions and reason are restored to harmony; in Almachius they are divided and the division is maintained by the perverted reason. Although man has a natural inclination towards the good, in Almachius this inclination is destroyed by the tyrannical fallen reason. In rejecting true counsel and in attempting to be the entire man, the fallen reason is responsible for sin. Thus, from the point of view of the interior man it becomes clear how:

Goddes sone in this world was withholde
To doon mankynde pleyn remission
That was ybounde in synne and cares coold.

(345-47)

While, through Christ's passion, redemption is available to all mankind, Christ could not give "pleyn remission" of sin because of man's free will: to be redeemed man must choose redemption through Christianity. The properly functioning intellect, represented by Valerian, immediately accepts Christianity because the religion offers a truth superior to the truth that the reason has already. But the perverted intellect perceives this superior truth and rejects it because its superiority threatens the dominion of the tyrannical fallen reason.

The Incarnation of Christ Within Man
in the Second Nun's Tale

In interpreting the Second Nun's Tale as a debate between heaven and earth we have so far considered the poem as having an exterior action revealing the qualities of the redeemed and the damned and an interior action showing the operation of virtue as an integrating force and vice as a divisive force within the personality. These two interpretations present the qualities of salvation and damnation only in their final states and in a last level of symbolic interpretation we will examine the poem for its account of the process within the individual by which they occur.

While the focus of the Second Nun's Tale is on mankind, who is perfected by choosing perfection, all action in the tale is initiated by God and continued by the godly. And, while the tale deals historically within the set period of time in which Cecile was on earth, it contains within it an account, not only of man's activities within history, but also the activities of the deity: the creation and man's fall, the redemption of man through the incarnation and passion of Christ, and the final judgement. These events, interlaced within the Nun's Prologue

and Tale, show human action within time in its relation to the eternity of God's purpose.

According to Christian history man was made by God to go to heaven, to be translated from the earth by degrees so that, unlike Lucifer and the fallen angels who had sought glory for themselves, man would be eternally grateful for the love that God extended to him, a love that man would freely return.³⁰ But, tempted by Satan, man disobeyed God's will in his attempt to become a deity, lost Eden and forfeited his privilege to heaven. Because man fell away from God's will, Satan won the earth and the destiny of mankind.³¹ Man could only be restored to his former position if he could be sufficiently virtuous to overcome the effects of original sin. To do so was virtually impossible because if man had managed to sin in Eden, then it was infinitely easier to sin in his fallen condition. Yet the earth would remain in Satan's possession until it could be won back from him by a man as it had been lost by a man.

To meet this condition God in his love for mankind was incarnated as a man in the person of Christ. Through his death he not only escaped hell but also redeemed the souls of the damned through Grace. At the end of time Christ, as lord of the earth, will return as the judge of men. Through the incarnation God won the earth back from Satan, and, at the same time, provided an example of virtuous living for men to follow. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ, which restores man to God, is thus the central moment of time towards which all previous events look forward and to which all later events return.³²

In considering divine action upon man, the Second Nun's Tale is not, on the whole, interested in the events of the passion and suffering

of Christ, nor in the harrowing of hell and resurrection. Rather it regards redemption coming to man primarily through the incarnation of Christ both historically in the actual birth of Christ by the Virgin Mary, a theme which dominates the Prologue, and figuratively within man, as it is shown in the tale itself.

Historically, before the incarnation, through the effects of sin man was necessarily damned: "ybounde in syn and carres coold" (347). Most of the blame for the loss of heaven was placed by Medieval man upon Eve who, in her disobedience to God by eating the apple, brought death and suffering to mankind. But, according to Christianity, what mankind lost through a woman he regained through a woman.³³ Mary, through her obedience to God restored man to God's purpose through the incarnation. For this reason Mary is known as the second Eve just as Christ is known to Christians as the second Adam.³⁴

Mary's association with Eve is based upon the biblical text:

And I will put enmity between thee [the serpent] and the woman,
and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head,
and thou shalt bruise his heel. (Genesis 3:15, King James)

In the Middle Ages, the word "it," referring to the seed of the woman, was mistranslated in the Vulgate as "she."³⁵ For that reason it was believed that the "she" referred directly to Mary. Today Roman Catholic theologians no longer accept that this passage refers directly to the Virgin, but because of the Messianic content of the passage, they accept that the seed to which "it" refers is Christ. As Christ is the seed of Mary, she is indirectly referred to through him. During the Middle Ages Eve's association with Mary was an integral part of Marian devotion and the Invocation of the Second Nun's Prologue is based upon a latent comparison between the two figures through the narrator's calling himself

an "unworthy sone of Eve" (62). If Eve brought man to the disease of sin and is characteristically depicted in Hell, Mary is the "synful soules cure" and the "Sone of excellence." On earth Mary is the perfection of mankind, chosen by God to be the Mother of God and of man's redemption through him:

Thow Mayde and Mooder, doghter of thy Sone,
Thow welle of mercy, synful soules cure,
In whom that God for bountee chees to wone,
Thow humble, and heigh over every creature,
Thow nobledest so ferforth oure nature,
That no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde
His Sone in blood and flessh to clothe and wynde.
(36-42)

Through the incarnation, Mary, too, is reborn in Christ as is expressed in the epithet "daughter of thy Sone" of the Prologue. So completely is she reborn that she has been raised to heaven and crowned its queen. Because she was and remains fully human, even in heaven, Mary's interest is in mankind. From heaven she acts as a mediator between God and man:

...Thou, that art the sonne of excellence
Nat oonly helpest hem that preyen thee,
But often tyme, of thy benygnytee,
Ful frely, er that men thyn help biseche,
Thou goost biforn, and art hir lyves leche.
(52-56)

The Invocation to Mary, then, because it deals with the perfecting and exalting of mankind through the incarnation of Christ, is an integral part of the Second Nun's Tale. Historically and spiritually it introduces the poem's major theme: by aspiring to the perfect the spiritualized soul is cured of sin and man is restored to God's plan of bringing him to heaven.

Turning to the tale itself we find that on a human level Cecile, because of her perfection and her association with Mary (33), represents

the end result of what constitutes a Christian, one in whom the process of spiritualization has been completed. Because she leads others to spiritual rebirth she is the standard by which the reader knows the perfecting of Valerian, Tyburce and Maximus. Figuratively, however, as she is associated most frequently with heaven in the etymologies, Cecile symbolizes the memory of heaven within man, the memory that leads him to the acceptance of truth. She is a materialization of the kingdom of heaven within man with which each character is brought into contact. More simply, Cecile, like the celestial flowers, is what can be perceived on earth of heaven and Grace, a hint of celestial beatitude.

It is on this level of symbolic action that we see the perfecting of men through their rejection of the world and their spiritualization. The process by which this occurs is somewhat differently described for each of the martyrs, but an underlying pattern of either explicit or implicit phases can be perceived.

For each of the martyrs there is an initial stage of confrontation and acceptance of Christianity either through Cecile herself or through one of her "allies." When confronted with her beliefs Valerian accepts them only when he has "proof"; Tyburce is led to Cecile miraculously through Valerian's wish: his initial experience of Christianity is one of sweetness, of celestial bliss:

The swete smel that in myn herte I fynde
Hath chaunged me al in another kynde.
(251-52)

By contrast, Maximus' first encounter with Christianity as he leads the martyrs to their execution, is as unpleasant as Tyburce's is pleasant:

Oon Maximus, that was an officer
Of the prefetes, and his corniculer,
Hem hente, and whan he forth the seintes ladde,
Hymself he weep for pitee that he hadde. (368-71)

Maximus' "pitee" for his enemies and the tears that he sheds because these men are to be executed, show his implicit acceptance of Christianity.

Following the phase of confrontation and initial acceptance is one of instruction in the religion. Implied in this phase is a purification of sin through knowledge and a spiritual growth within the convert. When Maximus hears the "seintes loore" he frees them from their tormentors and shelters them in his house (372-73), an act which symbolizes a defection from Almachius' power. Inviting them to his house implies an acceptance of holiness within him. Because of his greater intellectual capacity Valerian is confronted directly by the celestial old man; reading the golden book he learns the transcendence and the unity of God. Tyburce's confrontation is most interesting, however, because the perfecting of his learning receives the poet's greatest attention and provides the reader with the greatest amount of Christian teaching.

Tyburce has been led to an initial acceptance of Christianity through the smell of roses and it is for the "roses," the superficial felicities that it offers him, as he initially understands them, that he agrees to become Christian. Cecile instructs Tyburce of the folly of idolatry and when he has heard her arguments he willingly accepts them and, in turn, is accepted as her "allye" (284-91). While he has given up the pagan religion, Tyburce expects that the acceptance of Christianity brings only felicity. Expecting to retain his earthly pleasures, he does not easily give them up. He is afraid to associate himself with the "undesirable" Pope Urban, who, in Tyburce's opinion, dares not show his face for fear of execution. To associate himself with the pope and, through him, the church, would bring him earthly

censure. At this point Tyburce has not yet understood what Valerian told him when he said "'In dremes...han we be/Unto this tyme, brother myn, ywis./But now at erst in trouthe oure dwelling is'" (261-64). To see the celestial perfection of the flowers Tyburce must himself be perfected. And to do so he must, like Valerian and Maximus, give up earthly values and desires.

Tyburce's reluctance to die for a "divinitee/That is yhid in hevne pryvely" (316-17) symbolizes those who would accept Christianity lightly, with neither personal change nor responsibility, the "ydel" of the Prologue. The point that the poet makes through Tyburce's doubt is that a trivial acceptance of Christian belief is little help to man. To be Christian requires a profound change. When, through Cecile's further teachings, Tyburce has rejected terrestrial loves, he is ready for baptism.

Following the phase of purification is ritual death, the death of the old self by which, the martyrs are shown to have accepted heavenly values. This ritual death actually takes place during baptism when the catechumen, with Christ's help, successfully battles Leviathan. Having personally defeated Satan's power over him, he has overcome the effects of original sin.³⁶

Within the Second Nun's Tale, however, the ritual death of baptism has been displaced for dramatic purposes so that the characters' rejection of the earth can be portrayed. Ritual death is most apparent in Valerian's conversion:

An oold man, clad in white clothes cleere,
That hadde a book with lettre of gold in honde,
And gan bifore Valerian to stonde.

Valerian as deed fil doun for drede
Whan he hym saugh, and he up hente hym tho,
And on his book right thus he gan to rede:
"O Lord, o feith, o God, withouten mo,
O Cristendom, and Fader of alle also,
Aboven alle and over alle everywhere."
These wordes al with gold ywritten were.
(201-210)

Smitten by a flash of truth in the appearance of the old man, Valerian falls as one dead. The renunciation of the terrestrial orientation precedes spiritualization and, through his "death," Valerian has transcended the level of nature and now belongs to the level of Grace.

In Valerian's conversion there is an emphasis on the refining spiritualization that follows the renunciation of the world. But in Tyburce's conversion the poet is concerned with the initial phases by which the martyr is led to this renunciation. These we have already discussed and our concern here is to show that Tyburce's fear of dying for a "hidden god" is, in fact, a form of ritual death just as his overcoming of that fear is a spiritual rebirth. Following his objection he is instructed by Cecile to an understanding of God and heaven that suggests his growing spiritualization whereas before the objection his instruction concerned only the vanity of idols and idolatry:

Tho shewed hym Cecile al open and pleyn
That alle ydoles nys but a thyng in veyn,
For they been dombe, and therto they been deve,
And charged hym his ydoles for to leve.
(284-287)

Like Valerian, Tyburce is instructed in celestial mystery following ritual death. Through it he has transcended the level of nature to the level of Grace when his learning is made "parfit" by Pope Urban.

The ritual death by which Maximus rejects the world for Christianity is not immediately apparent in the poem. It would initially seem

that ritual death is passed over in his case because of the poet's greater interest in the martyrdom of the brothers whom Cecile comes to console:

[Maximus] ladde hem to his hous withoute moore,
And with hir prechyng, er that it were eve,
They gonnen fro the tormentours to reve,
And fro Maxime, and fro his folk echone,
The false feith, to trowe in God allone.

Cecile cam, whan it was woxen nyght,
With preestes that hem cristned alle yfeere;
And afterward, whan day was woxen light,
Cecile hem seyde with a ful stedefast cheere,
"Now, Cristes owene knyghtes leeve and deere,
Cast alle away the werkes of derknesse,
And armeth yow in armure of brightnesse.

"Ye han for sothe ydoon a greet bataille,
Youre cours is doon, youre feith han ye conserved.
(374-87)

But Cecile's speech, apparently addressed to the martyrs, applies with equal validity to the converts through the typological association of baptism and judgement³⁷ for which both martyrs and catechumens must spiritually prepare themselves. By associating Maximus' baptism with the martyrs' death, the poet diminishes the finality of physical death, giving emphasis instead to the rebirth that follows it. As Cecile, most simply, symbolizes Grace, her speech represents a simultaneous activity with Maximus, who faces ritual death in baptism by water and the brothers, who spiritually arm themselves against physical death and face judgement, a baptism by fire.

The scene in which the brothers refuse to sacrifice and are martyred is artistically flawed because of a double point of view that destroys the "pitious" quality of the events because the omniscient narration presents the beheading as a merely factual event:

But on hir knees they setten hem adoun
With humble herte and sad devocioun,

And losten bothe hir hevedes in the place.
Hir soules wenten to the Kyng of grace.
(396-99)

If the Second Nun's Tale were a film, then it would be filmed in lush colours and lyric photography. But in this stanza we suddenly have the grainy black and white realism of a newsreel. The lines:

This Maximus that saugh this thyng bityde,
With pitous teeris tolde it anonright,
(400-01)

indicate that Chaucer intends to create a justifiable sympathy for the brothers by viewing their execution through Maximus' eyes. Chaucer ineffectually tries to regain the reader's sympathy for the martyrs by re-establishing Maximus' point of view. But, while it is too late to recapture a lost poetic effect, we nevertheless see from the re-establishment of Maximus' point of view that the brothers' execution is also Maximus' own ritual death in baptism displaced past the actual event by poetic economy and intensity.

With the phase of the ritual death of the old self comes a corresponding spiritualization of the individual and his being fixed in God's will. This spiritualization is symbolized in the poem by the miracles: Valerian returns home to be given the celestial crown of roses by Cecile's angel. Tyburce, too, has an angel placed at his disposal:

And after this, Tiburce gat swich grace
Every day he saugh, in tyme and space,
The aungel of God; and every maner boone
That he God axed, it was sped ful soone.
(354-57)

That Tyburce is given all that he wants does not show God as an over-indulgent parent, but that Tyburce's will and God's are one. Maximus' spiritualization is also shown by miracles, confirmed when he is granted the vision of the martyrs' souls' ascent to heaven:

...[Maximus] hir soulis saugh to heven glyde
With aungels ful of cleernesse and of light.
(402-03)

So far we have seen the process by which the individual becomes personally perfected: having confronted Christianity in a way that causes an initial faith, the incarnation of Christ begins to take place within him. Raised by instruction in Christianity, learning that causes the stripping away of earthly loves, the individual dies to his old self and enters a phase of spiritualization by which he is raised above the level of nature to the level of Grace. Because, at this stage, his will is fixed to God's, miraculous events occur.

The Second Nun's Tale, which emphasizes the theme of "feith" and "werkes," and the "busynesse" of Saint Cecilia, does not stop with individual perfection; it is an integral part of the perfected Christian that salvation does not stop with himself, but, rather, that he lives his life in perfect charity. Spiritualized and fixed in God's will, he has the ability to lead others to God. The growth of Christianity, instigated by Cecile, is continued by her "allies." The greatest act of charity in the tale, however, is Cecile's. Initially reluctant to leave her chamber, by the end of the tale, although she is half dead, Cecile asks God to let her remain on earth for three days longer so that she can instruct men and perfect them in the love of God:

"I axed this of hevne kyng,
To han respit thre dayes and namo,
To recomende to yow, er that I go,
Thise soules, lo! and that I myghte do werche
Heere of myn hous perpetuelly a cherche."
(542-46)

While, as heaven, she quite understandably does not want to enter the world, by the end of the tale her charitable love for mankind is exhibited by her depriving herself of celestial bliss to endure earthly

torture.

The last stage of the process by which Christ is incarnated in the soul is the "preef," or testing of the soul, in life. This stage is almost anti-climactic in the poem because the martyrs and the converts cannot be tempted when they are offered the earth over heaven, the earthly life over the celestial life. That the earth cannot tempt one who has become perfected, fixed to God's will, is the whole point of the poem. Valerian, Tyburce, Maximus, the ministers--none of them renounce their faith when given the opportunity to prolong their earthly life, nor do they care for earthly treasure. Again, the best example of the "preef" is provided by Cecile, who, suffering at the hands of men, continues her charitable works:

Three days lyved she in this torment,
And never cessed hem the feith to teche
That she hadde fostred; hem she gan to preche...
(537-39)

Thus we have seen the stages of the perfection of mankind: how he is first stripped of his sinful earthly orientation and his initial faith is strengthened by learning to the point when, having died to the self, he is spiritualized through his love of God. Having renounced all earthly values, he wills as God wills and lives his life in charity.

The Materialization of Almachius

The process of spiritualization and perfection of the individual is parodied in Almachius. In him the reader sees how the kingdom of heaven that is within man, the love that Christ offers in Grace, is rejected in the soul through a process of materialization.

Like Cecile, Almachius is a "perfected" character and just as we see the process of spiritualization in Cecile through her "allies," so

we see the process of materialization in Almachius by those who form his symbolic character. But, whereas with Cecile we learn of perfection by seeing others perfected and becoming her allies, in Almachius we learn of the materialization process by his growing isolation through those whom he rejects and kills. Maximus and the ministers represent those qualities which, in rejecting, he rejects within himself. Basic to the process of materialization in Almachius is Cecile's charge that he knows the virtue of Christianity but that this knowledge leads him to the hatred and rejection of virtue because his nobility is perverted.

Not knowing the source of Christian power, Almachius' initial confrontation with Christianity is through rumour. This rumour causes within him an instant hatred for the religion evidenced by his attempt to stamp it out by making Christians reject their God.

Initial confrontation is followed by the stage of learning. But whereas this stage implied purification on the saints, it implies a further corruption in Almachius. In learning of Cecile Almachius discovers the source of Christian influence. Symbolically, by discovering the identity of Christianity in Cecile, he knows that Christians are persevering in humility and virtue and that, as Cecile tells him:

Ye make us gilty, and it is nat sooth.
For ye, that knowen wel oure innocence,
For as mucche as we doon a reverence
To Crist, and for we bere a Cristen name,
Ye putte on us a cryme, and eek a blame.

(451-55)

Almachius' knowledge of Christianity is perverted: he murders Maximus, who represents the natural inclination in man to do the good; he refuses to follow the "sentence" of his ministers. Instead of being stripped of vice through the rejection of earthly values, he has begun to kill any chance that he has of salvation by rejecting Christ within himself.

The next phase, the ritual death of the old self, is parodied when Almachius decides that it is he who has power over life and death:

To whom Almachius, "Unsely wrecche,
Ne woostow nat how fer my myght may strecche?

"Han nocht oure myghty princes to me yiven.
Ye, bothe power and auctoritee
To maken folk to dyen or to lyven?
(468-72)

Almachius attributes to his princes and to himself the powers of divinity. Parodying the virtuous soul's rejection of the self for God, Almachius, as is characteristic of sinful man, has mistaken himself for God: in deserting Grace, he is deserted by it.³⁸ The moment of his "death" has actually preceded the events of the tale but it is here symbolically portrayed in his attempt to make Cecile save her terrestrial life and lose her "bette lif" in heaven by practising idolatry:

Almache answerde, "Chees oon of thise two:
Do sacrifice, or Cristendom reneye,
That thou mowe now escapen by that weye."
(458-60)

It is Almachius himself who, at this point, has renounced Christianity and has chosen the earth.

Following ritual death the phase of spiritualization is parodied by one of materialization in Almachius. Whereas for Christians heaven is manifested by a more complete knowledge of the love of God and evidenced by the miracles that externalize the beauty of their souls, for Almachius hell is manifested by an interior knowledge of the powerlessness of his stone gods: as Cecile, who embodies the Christian truth and true wisdom that he rejects, tells him:

And thise ymages, wel thou mayst espye,
To thee ne to hemself mowen nocht profite,
For in effect they been nat worth a myte.
(509-11)

God's rejection of Almachius, caused by the prefect's hatred for virtue, is registered through Cecile's mocking tone. No miracles inform him of the truth of God's love; rather Almachius must defend his gods with the failing rationalizations of earthly understanding. His gods are real because he can see them; he is justified in his treatment of Cecile because his gods have been slandered.

The more Almachius becomes materialized, the more the "intractability" of matter fails him. This is reflected in his growing frustration and rage:

Lo, he dissymuleth heere in audience,
He stareth and woodeth in his advertence.
(466-67)

The inner fulfillment that the saints experience as a result of their perfecting, contrasts to Almachius' gnawing knowledge that he is a "nyce creature" (493), a "lewed officer and a veyn justice" (497) and that people "laughe at [his] folye" (506).

Materialized and fixed in material values, Almachius exhibits "envious charity"--the desire to do evil to someone--when he sentences Cecile to death for the personal insults that he has suffered:

"Do wey thy booldnesse," seyde Almachius tho,
"And sacrifice to oure goddes, er thou go!
I recche nat what wrong that thou me profre,
For I kan suffre it as a philosophre;

"But thilke wronges may I nat endure
That thou spekest of oure goddes heere," quod he.
(487-92)

This statement is an affirmation by denial: Almachius sentences Cecile not out of religious principle but because he knows inwardly that he has been revealed to be foolish. In a way, however, Almachius has killed Cecile for mocking his gods because he has made a god of his own will. The killing of virtue is the work that proceeds from Almachius' perfect

materialization.

The "preef," being tested in one's belief, shows what is left of Almachius once he has rejected God in the actions of the tormentor. This charcoaled soul, acting with "ful wikke entente" (524), the only remaining extension of Almachius' power, carries out Cecile's sentence acting out of earthly legality and fear:

For he Almachius, with ful wikke entente,
To sleen hire in the bath his sonde sente.
Thre strokes in the nekke he smoot hire tho,
The tormentour, but for no maner chaunce
He myght noght smyte al hir nekke atwo;
And for ther was that tyme an ordinaunce
That no man sholde doon man swich penaunce
The ferthe strook to smyten, softe or soore,
This tormentour ne dorste do namoore,
But half deed, with hir nekke ycorven there,
He lefte hir lye, and on his wey is went.

(524-34)

Cecile's death necessitates her consent, the consent of heaven. That the tormentor cannot kill her shows the ultimate powerlessness of earth; that he dares not make the fourth stroke, an act of mercy, shows the fear and cowardice that is the experience of the materialized soul.

The Narrator and the Incarnation of Christ

The tale told by the Second Nun shows perfecting of man only in the idealized states of its extremes because as a romance, it must necessarily portray its criterion value in ideal proportions. Most men, however, are neither saints nor devils and their experience with faith is not as pure as described by the Nun's Tale. The average man never fixes his will entirely to heaven or to earth, and, while the Christian strives to reject the values of earth for those of heaven, to live according to the teachings of his faith, it is always a battle for him to do so. The Second Nun's Tale, then, even to a Fourteenth century

reader, could run the risk of seeming simplistic and divorced from life as man knows it. For that reason in the Prologue Chaucer has sought to give immediacy and vitality to the romantic Lyf of Cecile, and in the creation of the narrator's character, he has employed his most usual and most effective technique for creating in his poetry a quality of emotional intensity. The Nun's tale of the perfection of man by his rejection of the world for heaven becomes more meaningful when it is framed by the experience of a character for whom its meaning is most important. And, to the narrator of the Prologue, whose will is not fixed to God's, this tale of the salvation of mankind and his victory over earthly loves, embodies the central truth of his aspirations and the promise of his own victory over the fiend. While the narrator strives to love God totally, he is unable to do so because he continually mistakes earthly for celestial loves. Although the narrator, in his humility is much better off than he thinks he is, he realizes that whereas the Virgin and Cecile, her maiden, achieved eternal life in heaven by their merit (33), he, whose faith is imperfect, will attain celestial bliss only through Grace. Grace will strengthen his faith and aid his in charitable works, namely the translation of the poem, written for the edification of mankind:

And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,
That cause is of so greet confusioun,
I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse
After the legende, in translacioun
Right of thy glorious lif and passioun,
Thou with thy gerland wroght with rose and lilie,--
Thee meene I, mayde and martyr, Seint Cecile.

(22-28)

At the beginning of the Prologue, we catch the narrator, contemplating the effects of spiritual idleness:

The ministre and the norice unto vices,
Which that men clepe in Englissh ydelnesse,
That porter of the gate is of delices,
To eschue, and by hire contrarie hir oppresse,
That is to seyn, by leueful bisynesse,
Wel oghten we to doon al oure entente,
Lest that the feend thurgh ydelnesse us hente.

(1-7)

First, in stanzas one and two, he considers idleness from the point of view of Christian faith: it leads to damnation, bondage by the fiend. Then, in the third stanza, he considers idleness from the point of view of reason: sloth holds men in a leash, a control by the bodily appetites of sleeping and eating. Even if men are not afraid of death and damnation, anyone using reason can see that nothing good comes from idleness:

And though men dradden nevere for to dye,
Yet seen men wel by resoun, doutelees,
That ydelnesse is roten slogardye,
Of which ther nevere comth no good n'encrees,

(15-18)

But it is from the point of view of the Christian faith--that idleness leads to damnation--that interests the narrator and it is this point of view that controls the Invocatio Ad Miriam.

To understand the Invocatio, I think, we must see that while the narrator is a man on earth bound by time, he depicts himself spiritually as one being overpowered by sin awaiting Grace. And because the narrator depicts himself spiritually, the setting of the Prologue, literally earth, merges without warning and without distinction with heaven and hell. The importance of this conception of the earth as the meeting-place of heaven and hell is that Chaucer is not using metaphor in the Invocatio when he describes earth in terms of spiritual absolutes out of time and space. Medieval, unlike modern men, seem to have lived in a universe only artificially divided into the three tiers of heaven, earth and hell. A better geography, I think, from the perspective of Medieval

man is Langland's "faire felde ful of folk" in which heaven and hell are immanent upon the earth:

As I bihelde in-to the est. an heigh to the sonne,
I seigh a toure on a toft . trielich ymaked;
A depe dale binethe . a dongeon ther-inne,
With depe dyches and derke . and dredful of sight.
A faire felde ful of folke . fonde I there bytwene,
Of alle maner of men . the mene and the riche,
Worchyng and wandryng . as the worlde asketh.³⁹

Because the temporal can be seen in the absolute terms of eternity, the connection between "delices"--earthly delights--and the "feend" is an association that is just as automatic as it is unmetaphorical for Chaucer. In time and space man is damned by his pursuit of earthly delights because it is a pursuit of spiritual idleness. What seems on earth to be "delight" is actually sin when it is seen in the true terms of heaven and hell. Similarly the gate of "delices" guarded by "ydelnesse" leads to a place called "vice"--the devil's trap. Two levels of meaning are implied here: first, "vice" is a quality of the individual soul on earth, a spiritual condition expressed spacially in language made deliberately metaphorical to suggest the second level of meaning in which the gate is hell-gate ultimately leading to the devil's trap, hell, where the damned are chained while they await the harrowing:

Wel oghten we to doon al oure entente,
Lest that the feend thurgh ydelnesse us hente.

For he that with his thousand cordes slye
Continuelly us waiteth to biclappe,
Whan he may man in ydelnesse espye,
He kan so lightly cache hym in his trappe...

(6-11)

The "thousand cordes" are at once, on the first level, the true aspect of earthly delight by which men on earth are unknowingly trapped into vice and, on the second level, the cords by which man is bound in

hell awaiting Grace. That hell is the spiritual setting of the Prologue is further suggested by such words as "prison" (71), "thennes that most derk is" (66), "this desert of galle" (58), and reinforced by the narrator's hope for light (71 and 52), and by his description of himself as a "flemmed wrecche" (58).

These images and expressions apart from their immediate contexts in the poem are traditionally used to describe hell before the harrowing at the same time that they also describe a state of sin among the living as is the case in the Old English Christ I, which, like the Second Nun's Prologue, delights in metaphysical paradoxes:

Eala þu reccend ond þu riht cyning,
se þe locan healdeð, lif ontyneð,
eadga[.] upwegas, oþrum forwyrneð
wlitigan wilsipes, gif his weorc ne deag.
Huru we for þearfe þas word sprecað,
ond m[...]giað þone þe mon gescop
þæt he ne [...]ete[...]ceose weorðan
cearfulra þing, þe we in carcerne
sittað sorgende, sunnan wenað,
hwonne us liffrea leoht ontyne,
weorðe ussum mode to mundboran,
ond þæt tydre gewitt tire bewinde,
gedo usic þæs wyrðe, þe he to wuldre forlet,
þa we heanlice hweorfan sceoldan
to þis enge lond, edle bescyrede.
Forþon secgan mæg, se ðe soð spriceð,
þæt he ahredde, þa forhwyrfed wæs,
frumcyn fira. Wæs seo fæmne geong,
mægð manes leas, þe he him to meder geceas;
þæt wæs geworden butan weres frigum,
þæt þurh bearnes gebyrd bryd eacen wearð.
Nænig efenlic þam, ær ne sibban,
in worlde gewearð wifes gearnung;
þæt degol wæs, dryhtnes geryne.
Eal giofu gæstlic grundsceat geondspreot;
þær wisna fela wearð inlihted
lare longsume þurh lifes fruman
þe ær under hoodman biholen lægon,
witgena woosong, þa se waldend cwom,
se þe reorda gehwæs ryne gemiclað
ðara þe geneahhe noman scyppendes
þurh horscne had hergan willað.

The hellish setting elicits its heavenly opposite and the narrator, in his state of sin, invokes Mary in her position of perfected humanity (70) who helps man spiritually from heaven:

[And thou,] Nat oonly helpest hem that preyen thee,
But often tyme, of thy benygnytee,
Ful frely, er that men thyn help biseche,
Thou goost biforn, and art hir lyves leche.
(53-56)

The narrator invokes Mary in the language of courtly love:

Assembled in thee is magnificence,
With mercy, goodnesse, and with swich pitee...
(49-50)

The narrator is Mary's suitor, she is his lady: while he is "unworthy" (62) he asks for her "pitee" so that he will be able to perform works to her honour. The same language of courtly love is used to express God's love for the Virgin:

Thow nobledest so ferforth oure nature,
That no desdeyn the Makere hadde of kynde
His Sone in blood and flessch to clothe and wynde.
(40-42)

"Desdeyn," the withdrawal of grace is the opposite of "pitee," the bestowing of grace upon the lover: as God had "pitee" upon mankind through Mary, so the narrator hopes that she will have "pitee" upon him. What makes the use of the language of courtly love effective in the Prologue is that it is not overstressed. It suggests the quality of the tenderness in the love of God for Mary and through her for man without heavy-handed explications.

While, through the language of courtly love, the narrator has expressed the reciprocal love of the divinity and man in the terms of human experience, generally, the Invocatio is expressed in language outside of space and time. The narrator, regarding himself spiritually

in terms of eternity, calls himself the "unworthy sone of Eve" (62)--he is damned and in hell with Eve because, like her, he is fallen through "erthely lust" and "fals affeccioun" (72).

To understand the impact of what Chaucer has done in the Invocation to Mary it is necessary to be familiar with Marian typology and the traditions surrounding the harrowing of hell, an incident that underlies the drama of this invocation to the Virgin.

According to Medieval tradition, and beginning with the apocryphal Gospel of Nichodemus,⁴¹ Eve, Adam and the prophets, are portrayed to be in consultation in hell just prior to Christ's harrowing, where there is an enormous activity in hell because, on earth, Christ is being crucified. Satan and other devils come to an awareness of Christ's true identity as the son of God. They make last minute plans to prevent Christ from dying knowing that hell will never withstand his virtue, symbolized by a blinding light. Fiends scurry around hoping to hide themselves and to bar the gates in an effort to keep Christ out of their sanctuary.

In the midst of this confusion are the patriarchs, the prophets, Adam, and Eve, who, aware of the activities on earth, express their faith that they will be rescued from the pit. When Christ does enter hell, he addresses the souls, tells them of his sacrifice for man's sake.

It is Eve, who, realizing her unworthiness, asks Christ for forgiveness through Mary. This idea, operative in the Second Nun's Tale, is found in the Old English Christ and Satan together with much of the imagery found in the Prologue:

Let þa up faran eadige sawle,
Adames cyn, ac ne moste Efe þa gyt
wlitan in wuldre are heo wordum cwaeð:

"Ic be æne abealh, ece drihten,
 þa wit Adam twa eaples þigdon
 þuth næddran nið, swa wit na ne sceoldon.
 Gelærde unc se altola, se ðe æfre nu
 beored on bendum. Þæt wit blæd ahton,
 haligne ham, heofon to gewalde.
 Þa wit ðæs awærgdan wordum gelyfdon,
 namon mid handum on bam halgan treo
 beorhte blæda; unc baes bitere forgeald
 þa wit in þis hate scræf hweorfan sceoldon,
 and wintra rim wunian seodðan,
 þusenda feolo, þearle onæ led.

Nu ic þe halsige, heofenrices weard,
 for þan hirede be ðu hider læddest,
 engla þreatas, þæt ic up heonon
 mæge and mote mid minre mægðe.

.....

Hæhte þa mid handum to heofencyninge,
 bæd meotod miltse þurh Marian had:

"Hwæt, þu fram minre dohtor, drihten, onwoce
 in middangeard mannum to helpe.
 Nu is gesene þæt ðu eart sylfa god
 and ece ordfruma ealra gesceafta."⁴²

In the harrowing of hell Eve is representative of sinful mankind:
 through her request others are led to their heavenly homeland. In
Christ and Satan Eve accepts for the damned souls the redemption offered
 them by Christ, who is revealed, in hell, to be "sylfa god." This shows
 her as acting as a type of Mary, "heo dohtor," who accepts Christ's
 passion and the redemption that he offers for mankind on earth.⁴³ In
 doing so, Eve, in Christ and Satan, and Mary, historically, become
 co-redemptresses.⁴⁴ Mary is the second Eve, Eve restored and exalted
 in heaven, where as "dohtor of her sone" (36), mankind reborn in Christ,
 she becomes the "sonne of excellence" (52), an epithet that has its
 source in the Apocalypse XII and associates her with the church:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed
 with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head
 a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried,
 travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

(Revelation 12, 1-2; King James)

According to Roman Catholic doctrine the woman clothed in sunlight is, in the first place, the Church but she also signifies the Virgin.⁴⁵

Patristic tradition accounts for the link between Eve and Mary as it is expressed in the Second Nun's Tale in which Mary acts as Eve's advocate. Eve, Irenaeus writes:

...was made both for herself and for the whole human race the cause of death, while Mary...became the cause of salvation both for herself and the whole human race.... Thus also was the knot of Eve's disobedience dissolved by Mary's obedience; for what the virgin Eve had tied up by unbelief, this the Virgin Mary loosened by faith. [Therefore] the Virgin Mary became the advocate of the Virgin Eve, and thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death through a virgin, so it is also rescued by a Virgin.⁴⁶

Returning to the Second Nun's Tale, we see that what Chaucer has done in depicting the narrator spiritually, out of time and space, is to place him in hell with Eve. With her, he awaits the harrowing and with her, he asks Christ through Mary to be his advocate so that he, too, may join the souls of the faithful in heaven:

And though that I, unworthy sone of Eve,
Be synful, yet accepte my bileve.

And, for that feith is deed withouten werkis,
So for to werken yif me wit and space,
That I be quit fro thennes that most derk is!
O thou, that art so fair and ful of grace,
Be myn advocat in that heighe place
Theras withouten ende is songe "Osanne,"
Thow Cristes mooder, doghter deere of Anne!
(62-70)

"Thennes that most derk is" is, of course, hell: but it is also, in immediate terms, sin itself, as is revealed in the next stanza:

And of thy light my soule in prison lighte,
That troubled is by the contagioun
Of my body, and also by the wighte
Of erthely lust and fals affeccioun;
O havene of refut, o salvacioun
Of hem that been in sorwe and in distresse,
Now help, for to my werk I wol me dresse.
(71-77)

Grennen would see in these lines the "pervasive sense of the evil nature of the material world;"⁴⁷ that the body imprisons the soul. Examination of these lines, however, suggests that there is nothing inherently evil about the body. It imprisons the soul only insofar as its demands have taken priority over the soul's. The narrator's spiritual prison is not his body, but, rather his love of earthly things that cause his body's contagion. Neither the body nor the earth is directly responsible for this contagion; rather it is his "lust" and his "fals affectioun" for them.

In these lines, then, time and space have been re-established and sin is depicted, not in its absolute terms in the activities of heaven and of hell but as in the initial lines of the Prologue, in the "actual" terms of man's experience on earth.

The Invocatio Ad Miriam, then, is both an invocation for Grace for the specific work of translation of a Saint's Legend and an appeal for Grace by which the narrator may perservere in his Christian works: the love of God and man so that he may be saved. As Eve is redeemed through the incarnation of Christ in Mary, so the narrator appeals to Mary for the spiritual incarnation of Christ within him through Mary, Mater Mediatrix.

FRAGMENT VIII OF THE CANTERBURY TALES

CHAPTER IV

The first line of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale makes it clear that Chaucer intended this poem to follow the "Lyf of Cecile," a work presently known to us as the Second Nun's Tale. The Legend of Good Women (F 426) shows that the Lyf of Cecile is a much earlier poem than the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, although the actual date of the Lyf is a matter of some discussion. More important than the date, however, is the problem of the poem's unity: Carleton Brown and Joseph Grennen have argued that at least part of the Second Nun's Prologue was written at a later date than the tale itself.¹ Whether or not the Prologue is a later addition would be unimportant for us here except that Grennen hypothesizes that Chaucer made changes in the Lyf of Cecile to make it the Second Nun's Tale. The possibility of such changes becomes important in discussing the relation of the Nun's Tale to the Canon's Yeoman's.

Grennen believes that there is a difference between the Lyf and the Tale and that the alterations in the Lyf were effected by Chaucer when he decided to link the poem with the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Most of these supposed changes, Grennen says, are in the Prologue: Chaucer's purpose was to adapt his earlier work so as to underline its contrast with the later one:

...the modifications by which the "Lyf" became the Second Nun's Tale (and these are probably to be found mainly in the Prologue) are contemporaneous with the Canon's Yeoman's. For the emphasis which the Nun's Prologue places on the legend makes the best sense when it is viewed as an anticipation of the Yeoman's wholesale condemnation of alchemy. In addition to the major themes of "leueful besynesse," "contraries," "good werkynge" and above all,

"religious sapience" as opposed to "scientific" folly, there are numerous resemblances in minor details...²

It makes little sense that if Chaucer had gone to the trouble of adding lines to the Second Nun's Prologue to emphasize the "bisyness" and the "werkes" of Saint Cecilia so that these and other saintly virtues would highlight the contrast between the Second Nun's and the Canon's Yeoman's Tales he should have overlooked such glaring inconsistencies as the epithet "unworthy sone of Eve" (62) and the lines that refer to the narrator's translating from sources and addressing a reader rather than an audience (ll. 78-83).

Aside from the fact that there is no version of the Lyf of Cecile other than that appearing in the Canterbury Tales, the name "Second Nun's Tale" is never used by Chaucer; the tale is known, not unreasonably, by this name on manuscript authority³ and it seems certain to me that the poem we know as the Second Nun's Tale is actually the unadapted Lyf of Cecile which has been appropriately assigned to the Second Nun.⁴

That the Lyf of Cecile, unadapted, has been brought into the Canterbury Tales does not, however, argue against the possibility of an underlying unity in the two poems of Fragment VIII. Rather, that it is unadapted and assigned to a character barely mentioned in the General Prologue and deliberately linked to a specific tale suggests that the Second Nun's Tale was included in the Canterbury Tales for a particular purpose. To find such an underlying unity is the purpose of this chapter.

At first there is very little that would suggest that the Second Nun's and the Canon's Yeoman's Tales should be companion pieces: the Second Nun's Tale is a Saints Legend of salvation telling man to reject

worldly for spiritual values while, superficially, the Canon's Yeoman's Tale warns people to avoid alchemy and alchemists by revealing alchemists to be swindlers and by making fun of alchemy's dupes for losing "al that evere they hadde" (876) in a "get rich quick" scheme. Tales about different subjects are bound to contrast, but contrast necessitates neither thematic nor editorial unity. On this basis, then, F. N. Robinson has concluded:

The first line of the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue indicates that it is to follow the Second Nun's Tale. Otherwise there is no connection between either Prologue or Tale and that which precedes.⁵

Opinions of the unity of the two tales have been given by critics in their discussions of the order and the structure of the Canterbury Tales.⁶ If the Second Nun's Tale is a tale of piety, then Chaucer needed to follow it with a comic one: if the Nun's Tale is simple in its style and symbolic in its action, then it is dramatically balanced by the technical complexity of alchemical terminology and the "journalistic" quality of the Canon's Yeoman's. The religious tale is followed by a secular one; the misty past of the first is contrasted by the current events of the controversial status of alchemy in the second.

Such contrasts and balances, of course, are not to be dismissed; they are valid observations of the dynamic quality of the organization of the Canterbury Tales. And yet, while these observations have shown several ways in which the tales contrast, as Grennen observes:

The aesthetic defense of their juxtaposition rarely goes beyond some more or less perfunctory statement about the contrast they provide--honesty, piety, and the odour of sanctity, being opposed to duplicity, avarice, and the sulphurous fumes of the alchemists' laboratories.

("Wedding," 466)

Similarly unhelpful suggestions regarding the unity of Fragment VIII have been made by critics who compare what may very well be coincidental resemblances between the two poems. Both works, for example, employ a theme of sight and insight: Cecile is "wanting in blindness" and, when they have accepted Christianity, Valerian and (presumably) Tyburce, can see the celestial flowers while Almachius, rejecting the religion, cannot see that his god is a stone although the lower sense of taste would inform him of the fact. In the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, the Yeoman, who understands nothing of alchemy, complains that his eyes are "blered" from the fire and implies that having been blinded by alchemy for seven years, he can clearly see that it is a fraud since he has left the alchemist. Bruce Rosenberg, who gives a much fuller analysis of this theme in the two poems, says that: "the paradoxical aspects of vision are vital to the tales of Group G," but then he admits that "Chaucer had exploited this polarity in at least one other tale" and proceeds to demonstrate that this theme is a Medieval commonplace.⁷ If there is a unity between the poems then this important theme is only a manifestation of its working and it is not to be confused for the relation itself.

There are other chance contrasts between the poems which both Grennen and Rosenberg take to show the unity of Fragment VIII. Rosenberg observes that Cecile, "'for whitenesse she hadde of honestee' overshadows the black-surpliced alchemist, who lurks in dark alleys and corners" (285) while Grennen remarks upon the presence of "Valerian" as an ingredient in the "Yeoman's outlandish catalogue" (481). Grennen, himself, calls a halt to this aimless kind of comparison, saying:

It is difficult, as Muscatine says "to know where to draw the line between art and algebra" in pointing to parallels

connecting Chaucer's Tales thematically, and one might go on endlessly listing echoes of phrase and imagery in the two poems without giving stress to the main issue.

(477)

According to Grennen the "main issue" is that:

There is a controlling design linking [the Canon's Yeoman's and Second Nun's Tales] artistically which can be apparent to the modern reader to the extent that he is aware of Chaucer's vision of alchemy as essentially a perversion of orthodox religious ideals such as zeal and perseverance, and as a profane parody of the divine work of Creation and an unwittingly sacrilegious distortion of the central mystery of the Christian faith.

(466-67)

The thrust of his article is that the relationship of faith and works and wisdom in the two tales forms the essential theme that unites them (477): faith in the Second Nun's Tale contrasts with credulity in the priest in the Canon's Yeoman's. Wisdom, expressed "...through the image of spiritual sight as in Cecile's ability to see the angel, which Valerian, as an infidel does not possess" contrasts to the "error and folly" of the alchemists expressed in the symbolism of blindness" (478) in the Yeoman's Tale. The contrast in works is established in the Nun's "werk"--her poem--which, if imperfect, still exists, while the alchemists "never manage to exchange rhetoric for performance"; there is an "inseparable breach between their 'entencioun' and 'speche'" (479). From Grennen's point of view, I think, the contrast of works in the tales is better demonstrated by his earlier contrast:

Of course, when the Yeoman, speaking of all "users" of alchemy complains:

O! Fy, for shame they that han been brent,
Allas! kan they nat flee the fires hete,

he is merely making explicit a theme which has all along been unfolding, namely that there is in alchemy an irreversible thrust toward the diabolical, just as in the works of St. Cecilia there is an upward thrust to heaven.

(476)

Rosenberg argues that "these tales are linked in a far more fundamental and philosophical way..." than the "verbal contraries" he mentions at the beginning of his article (285). Charity, embodied in Cecilia, "bisy evere in good werkyng," is shown in the Nun's Tale and contrasts to the "cupidity," "a turning away from God," "the love of creatures, things, or the self" (287). And, although he admits that "reason and revelation" are mentioned in neither of the tales, Rosenberg believes that "it is not difficult to read in them these double aspects of the double truth." Faith is essential to the Second Nun's Tale and because Chaucer (or, more precisely, the Yeoman) refers to the alchemist as a "philosophre," then in Chaucer's eyes alchemy must be a natural science, a way to the knowledge of God although perverted in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale (289).

One last, and far more important objection to the existing theories of the nature of the unity of Fragment VIII which arises from the critical insinuation that the Nun's Tale is alchemical. Beginning with Muscatine's implicit suggestion of an alchemical significance in Cecile's fire-bath:

there is perhaps something more than coincidence in the contrast between St. Cecilia unharmed in her bath of flames conquering fire through faith, and the blackened, sweating believers in earth, whose fire blows up in their faces,

the poems have been traditionally contrasted as showing the difference between God's and man's alchemy.⁸ What they have done, then, is to make alchemy a standard by which Christianity is judged. This is done unintentionally by Muscatine, who, as the passage quoted above shows, is really differentiating between the spiritual status of the characters of the two tales.

But Rosenberg argues, almost preposterously, that the Second Nun's

Tale becomes meaningful only when it is read in conjunction with the Canon's Yeoman's (278-79). Many of the contraries that he sees serve to link the Nun's Tale with alchemy:

In alchemy (which is the matter of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale) the base prima materia is, as the alchemists themselves termed it, "mortified" so that the spirit of perfection (in the case of metals, gold) may ascend: the flesh of Cecile is also mortified in her martyrdom so that her soul may ascend--to heaven... she will lose her bodily "dross" in the fire and be made pure spirit by it.

(280)

This quotation shows Rosenberg to have misunderstood both alchemy and Christianity. The end of alchemy is not to mortify metals so that the spirit of perfection may ascend. Alchemists mortify metals so that their souls will be spiritualized and then fixed in their bodies. The easy part of alchemy is to split the soul from the body; the difficult part is to get it back and fix it there so that the metal can be cured of its sickness and become in actuality what it has always been potentially. Rosenberg, then, in comparing Cecile's soul leaving her body to the soul of a metal leaving its body, has misunderstood the aim of the alchemists.

Similarly, Rosenberg heretically suggests that it is only Cecile's soul that goes to heaven where it becomes pure spirit. Christians believe in the resurrection of the body as well as the soul, and the two, in heaven after Judgement, are united and spiritualized. But, even in heaven, man never loses his human status: angels, not humans, are pure spirit.⁹

Rosenberg further forces alchemy onto the Second Nun's Tale by trying to fit alchemical colour symbolism into the tale. Cecile is an embodiment of perfection and is associated with red. Red is the colour

of alchemical perfection. The Yeoman is of a "leaden hue" although he used to be red: "hence the Yeoman's lack of redness--his fall from perfection--is heightened by Cecile's association with red" (281-82). While the colour of the Yeoman's face, as we have seen, is significant, Cecile's association with red is not important in the Second Nun's Tale: in fact, Cecile is not really associated with red at all. The use of "rede" to describe the flames of her fire-bath has nothing, so far as I can see, to do with colour symbolism: most flames are red. "Rede" in the expression "flames rede," does not so much contrast to the red of the celestial roses as it serves to give substance and emphasis to the torture to which Almachius would subject her.

Rosenberg's most futile attempt, however, to see an alchemical basis in the Nun's Tale is his association of Cecile's bath with the Canon's crucible, her being slain with a sword as being the alchemical mortification, and her enduring the flames for three days with the alchemical process of projection, which, he says, is the work of three days (280).

Cecile's tub reminds the reader of the Canon's "crosslet" only by a stretch of the imagination. The sword-slaying motif is a legitimate way of expressing the murder of King Sol by Mercury, but it is used by alchemists to describe (or to obscure) chemical procedures just as it may be used allegorically by anyone who expresses ideas through personification. If Cecile's martyrdom was part of an alchemical allegory, it would not illustrate projection, the application of the Stone to base metal. If anything, it would correspond to putrefaction, the death of materia prima through which the Stone is engendered. And the three day duration of projection, like all periods of time in alchemical writings,

is arbitrary.¹⁰ Cecile's three day torture is far more likely to be an analogue of Christ's descent into hell from which descent the souls of the previously damned did rise.

Grennen, as the title of his article: "The Chemical Wedding of Saint Cecilia," suggests, goes much farther than Muscatine or Rosenberg in interpreting the Second Nun's Tale alchemically; and, although it is established that the Second Nun's and the Canon's Yeoman's Tales were composed in very different periods of Chaucer's career, Grennen seems to suggest that he wrote the Lyf with the express purpose of setting it against a tale of alchemy:

There seems to me no question of the fact that the Second Nun's Tale is an adaptation of the legend of St. Cecilia created by Chaucer to stand against the "confusion" of alchemy brilliantly portrayed in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale.

(481)

Contrary to his stated thesis that alchemy is the perversion of religious ideals (466-67), Grennen, like Rosenberg, uses alchemy as a standard by which to judge the Second Nun's Tale. Thus, in his treatment of the blindness passages in the Nun's and the Yeoman's Tales, he concludes: "The meaning of both these passages, in the last analysis, is qualified by the fact that the "accusation of blindness" is another alchemical commonplace" (478). This is typical of the method by which Grennen finds an alchemical basis to similarities or contrasts in the two tales, even with the theme of vision and blindness, which as we have already seen, is by no means distinctly alchemical.

Many of the details of the legend of Saint Cecilia, Grennen finds, have corresponding alchemical topics: the "contraries," the "unity of the work," the "slaying of brothers," Tyberce's fear of the fire, and, especially, the chemical wedding.¹¹ He argues that the basic narrative

line of the Second Nun's Tale finally "comes down" to a fixing of a "substance so that it can endure the fires heat" (471). Now, the fire in the Nun's Tale symbolizes the worst torture that the earth can provide; on a figurative level, it represents a type of the cleansing fire of Judgement. Cecile, however, has not become and remained Christian so that she can endure the worst that the world can offer--although that she has the ability to do so is part of her perfected state. Neither is she Christian to endure Judgement Day. She is Christian, rather, because of her love of God and her desire for the "bette lyf in oother place." While the fires of Judgement will come, Cecile, in her purity, will be no more affected by them than she is by this earthly fire: her sweatless state indicates that she has already been purged of any "dross."

Grennen's most important analogue to alchemy lies in the similarity of the marriage of Cecile and Valerian to the Chemical Wedding of Sol and Luna. He has found an alchemical poem (470) in which the alchemical ingredients are allegorized as a man, his wife, and his brother, who "marvellously fears the fire" (l. 5):

There are a number of odd resemblances between this curious poem and the Legend of St. Cecilia: the marriage between a noble, brave, and illustrious knight and his wife, clothed in a garment of white, glowing threads: the knight's brother who has an extraordinary fear of the fire; death, followed by resurrection in more glorious circumstances; the "winning of crowns" (the knight and wife become king and queen): finally, of course, the fire under the crucible which makes it all possible.

(471)

Grennen would like to see the marriage, death, and resurrection of Sol and Luna as being parallel to those of Cecile and Valerian, and, at first, this seems sensible: Cecile and Valerian are married, and while they do not engage in the sexual activity necessary for Sol and Luna,

their marriage is a productive one because it produces the "seed" of chastity (193). Valerian is "transmuted" by his acceptance of Christianity and the couple receive celestial crowns symbolizing their alliance with heaven, which they attain after their respective deaths. In alchemy the Chemical Marriage of Sol and Luna results in their rebirth and perfection in the Philosophers' Stone. While the product of their union is often symbolized by a crowned hermaphrodite,¹² in the alchemical poem quoted by Grennen, it is symbolized by the soldier's transformation into a king and his wife's into a queen: "Tunc surgit rex de milite, et coniunx in reginam" (1. 15). But in the Second Nun's Tale it is Valerian alone who has been transformed through Cecile's influence. Unlike the mercury in the alchemical experiment, Cecile has been perfected before her marriage to Valerian, not through it. Instead of being symbolic of mercury, Cecile better corresponds to the Philosophers' Stone because she is the instrument by which Valerian is perfected, a subject to which I will refer below.

In his comparison of the two poems of Fragment VIII, Grennen, then, has tried to establish that the Second Nun's Tale was adapted by Chaucer to stand against alchemy in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Seeing topics and motifs in the Nun's Tale that are related to alchemy, he has attempted to interpret the tale alchemically. But such topics and motifs as Grennen has found can be better accounted for by other interpretations and, whereas the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is informed by a knowledge of alchemy and sustains a unified alchemical reading throughout, the topics and motifs that Grennen has isolated remain isolated as a series of possible alchemical anomalies. Together they fail to provide a consistent, unified alchemical framework that informs or enriches the meaning

of the poem.

Now, undeniably the Second Nun's Tale does remind the reader of alchemy especially if he is familiar with the subject, and, we can assume, I think, that Chaucer, no less than any modern reader, must have been aware of such suggestions. But if the Second Nun's Tale did suggest alchemy to Chaucer and if such aspects of the Tale as Grennen and Rosenberg suggest reminded him of it, then he thought of them when he composed the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, not when he composed the Lyf of Cecile. I think, however, that what caused Chaucer to join the Second Nun's Tale to the Yeoman's was not so much the felicitous similarities of alchemical and Christian topics as it was that he saw the Nun's Tale as expressing the true spiritual alchemy that is perverted by the Canon and his Yeoman.

While the Second Nun's Tale neither needs nor is enriched by alchemy, Chaucer's meaning in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, that alchemy perverted leads man to damnation through the materialization of his soul, is entirely dependent upon a Christian understanding of salvation and damnation and the meaning of this tale is enriched through its association with the Nun's Tale. Chaucer joined the two tales together so that the Nun's becomes a standard by which the Yeoman's is to be interpreted. Through its association with the Second Nun's Tale we see that what is wrong with the alchemists of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is that they, like Almachius, have "materialized" themselves, perfected themselves in matter. Like Almachius, they are damned. The spiritual significance of alchemy in the Yeoman's Tale, as practised by the Canon, is revealed by the Second Nun's Tale, which shows it to be a contemporary and sophisticated form of mammon-worship.

But if because of its positioning, the reader learns to see the Canon's Yeoman's Tale in terms of the Second Nun's, then he also sees the Nun's Tale in terms of the Canon's Yeoman's. The Nun's Tale, when it is linked to the Yeoman's, takes on an alchemical colouring which was not originally intended when the poem was simply the Lyf of Cecile, but becomes valid because of the editorial unity linking the two poems of Fragment VIII. By linking them Chaucer invites them to be interpreted together as a single unit.

It could seem that I am now adopting a position that I refuted with some attention a few pages above, where I maintained that the Second Nun's Tale is not alchemical. Whether one chooses to call the poem the Lyf of Cecile or the Second Nun's Tale, it is not deliberately alchemical as Muscatine, Rosenberg, and Gremmen have suggested. For this reason it is not profitable to search for alchemical topics within the Nun's Tale. The basis of the unity of the poems lies in alchemy's being spiritual, not in Christianity's being alchemical. Knowing that the perfection of metals and the perfection of man is the aim of alchemy, by which the operator becomes spiritualized through its inner work upon his soul, Chaucer saw that the Lyf of Cecile expressed in the Christians the objectives and goals of alchemy's inner work as performed by true alchemists. The Nun's Tale, with its emphasis on redemption and the creation of men into "spiritual fixed bodies," becomes on being linked with the Canon's Yeoman's, an expression of alchemy as it ought to have been but failed to be when practised by the Canon and his Yeoman.

Because the Second Nun's Tale is a romance, a symbolic tale, all elements of which are subordinated to its theme, its story is capable of having several themes. As we have seen in Chapter III, when Chaucer

wrote the Lyf of Cecile he chose the theme of the perfection of man over "bisynesse," "chastity," and "martyrdom," themes also associated with the Life of Saint Cecilia. Chapter III considered the poem independent of its relationship to the Canon's Yeoman's Tale; in this chapter it is considered in its position in the eighth fragment of the Canterbury Tales where Chaucer used the Lyf of Cecile as a spiritual standard by which the perversity of the activities of the sophisticated imposter is to be judged. As a part of the eighth fragment, the Second Nun's Tale imposes Christian standards upon the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and in turn is affected by its association with alchemy so that it comes to express the proper inner workings of that art. The nature of the unity of Fragment VIII, then, is essentially editorial because while each poem was composed independently of the other, together they take on a new meaning when each work is seen in the perspective of its companion piece.

Although the Second Nun's Tale is not deliberately alchemical, Chaucer sees it as expressing the spiritual goals and experience of true alchemy. Strengthening this association is the similarity of the process by which the Philosopher's Stone is created and projected to the process in the Second Nun's Tale by which Christians are individually perfected and "projected" upon others through charitable acts. In both processes there is an initial step of purification. The Catechumen and the matter upon which the alchemists work to obtain materia prima are first stripped of their impurities. In the Nun's Tale the Christians must renounce the idolatry that symbolizes their earthly orientation; in alchemy the matter used to obtain materia prima is stripped of the qualities that fixed it in its imperfection. In both the Second Nun's Tale and in alchemy this first stage is followed by death: the ritual death of the Christians,

the death of the old self in baptism, the Nigredo in alchemy by which the soul of the metal is released from the dross of its body. In both processes this death is the cause of rebirth. Christians are reborn in Christ through baptism; the Stone is engendered in alchemy when the spiritualized soul returns to the body.

At this point the stages of the processes are slightly different. In the Second Nun's Tale the Christians following baptism are spiritualized and fixed to God's will whereas in alchemy there are several steps whereby the Stone is further refined, spiritualized and "subtiliated" before it is finally fixed to its body.

Both the Nun's Tale and the alchemical opus, however, show that part of the perfection of the "spiritual fixed bodies" is that they have the ability to perfect others: in Christianity, of course, this is charity; in alchemy it is the Stone's ability at the stage of multiplication to transmute more than its own weight of base metal into gold.

Following multiplication, for both Christians and alchemists, is the stage of projection in which the Christians in the Second Nun's Tale charitably lead others, through Cecile, to their becoming perfected; in alchemy the Philosophers' Stone, applied to base metal, transmutes it into gold. The alchemical process to which I have compared Christianity has dealt with the outer work of alchemy and it is complemented by parallel stages of the inner work as described in Chapter I.

The alchemical process, then, is similar to that of the spiritualization of man in the Second Nun's Tale and because of this similarity, the Nun's Tale accurately expresses the stages of alchemy's inner work. As we saw in Chapter II, however, the alchemical process is inverted in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale so that the alchemists are "materialized"

rather than spiritualized. Whereas Chaucer expresses this materialization process alchemically in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale (as is usual in alchemical writing), he shows the same process of materialization as being a perversion of Christianity in the Second Nun's Tale. Thus, the materialization of the alchemists in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale and the materialization of Almachius in the Second Nun's are both parodies of the spiritual standard established by the Christianity of Cecile and her allies.

The Second Nun's Tale is a story of transmutation--an inner, spiritual, transmutation. If, as Muscatine suggests, "God's alchemy," redemption, is its subject, then it shows that mankind is the material upon which God, through Grace, works. Cecile, a perfected human being, has become the "spiritual fixed body" that alchemists wish to create of themselves through their inner work. Projected upon her own "kind"--men, who, while pagan, are essentially virtuous--she strips them of their "earthiness," their earthly orientation, and transmutes them into spiritual gold. Her converts, in turn, changed "al in another kynde" (252), are able to lead others to God. The actual conversion, however, is always accomplished in the presence of Cecile, who functions like the Philosophers' Stone.

. By linking the Nun's Tale to the Canon's Yeoman's, which has as its apparent subject the attempted transmutation of metals and the transmutation of man as its symbolic subject, the idea of an inner, spiritual, alchemy is established for the Yeoman's Tale and realized in the philosophers.

The Second Nun's Tale also shows that "God's alchemy," the operation of Grace upon mankind, can work backwards causing a reverse

transmutation much the same way as the Eucharist feast has the opposite effects on one who partakes of it in a state of sin. In the Chester Cycle, the resurrected Christ says:

I am very bread of lyfe,
from heauen I light and am send
who eateth this Bread, man or wyfe,
shall lyue with me, without ende.

And that Bread that I you geue,
your wicked lyfe to amend,
becomes my flesh through your beleife,
and doth release your sinfull Band.

And who so ever eateth that Bread
in synne or wicked lyfe,
he receiveth his owne death,
I warne both man and wyfe.

The which bread shall be seene insteade,
ther ioy is aye full ryfe,
when he is dead through fooles redd,
then is he brought to payne and stryf.¹³

As with the effects of the Eucharist, what causes the direction of man's transmutation in both tales of Fragment VIII is not the fickleness of Grace but man's attitude towards it: Grace, unlike Fortune, stays constant. Valerian, Tyburce, Maximus, the ministers, and, from a literal point of view, Cecile herself, are perfected by Grace through a process of spiritualization that begins with their allowing Grace to function within them. Almachius, however, in his confrontation with Cecile, rejects Grace within himself. Choosing the mutable earth over heaven, he is damned.

Having shown that reverse spiritual transmutation is possible, the Second Nun's Tale establishes this concept for the Canon's Yeoman's Tale where it is inverted. Not only has the outer work of alchemy ended with the opposite rewards of mangled metal, the further diseasing of bodies, and poverty instead of wealth; its inner work, too, has reversed

itself in the transmutation of the Yeoman and the priest into spiritual lead, an alchemical way of expressing that they are damned.

The Canon, associated with the "feend," in contrast to Cecile's association with God through Mary, functions, like Cecile, as the Stone. But whereas she functions as the true Stone, the Canon represents its opposite, the Envious Stone. Projected upon others of his own "kind," he, like Cecile, transmutes them by making them his "allies" (11.1370-78). The Canon's Yeoman's Tale, however, suggests, so far as the inner work is concerned, that with repeated "circulations," what is spiritual lead can be further "subtillated" into the Stone: the priest at the end of the Canon's projection is spiritual lead; but, as he makes his "introduccioun/To brynge folk to hir destruccioun" (1386-87), it is suggested that he will eventually become the Envious Stone itself.

Thus, the Second Nun's Tale acts as a spiritual standard by which the activities of the alchemists in the Yeoman's Tale are to be judged and the tale is to be interpreted by showing redemption, the proper inner work of alchemy.

As Muscatine, Grennan, and Rosenberg, have all suggested, the two tales of Fragment VIII do contrast to each other, but the relationship between them is not simply a matter of showing that the Nun's Tale shows salvation and contrasts to the Yeoman's that shows damnation; that the martyrs' faith in God leads man to heaven whereas faith in alchemy, ultimately a worship of earth, leads man to hell. Each of the poems, independently of the other, supplies its own structural contrast of the saved and the damned. In the Second Nun's Tale Almachius embodies qualities opposite those of Cecile: if she has perfect faith in God and is perfected by it, then he has perfect faith in earth and is damned by it.

In the Canon's Yeoman's Tale the materialistic, perverted, and unsuccessful alchemy practised by self-deluded charlatans is contrasted to true alchemy as it is successfully practised in accordance with God's will by the philosophers.

Whereas Almachius plays a large role in the Second Nun's Tale and his debate with Cecile is the central incident to which all other events in the poem hasten, true alchemy, represented by the philosophers, plays a small but important role in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. It is not Chaucer's purpose in this tale to portray true alchemy and the philosophers are present only long enough to show the reader that not all alchemy is unsuccessful, that the "mysty speche" of the treatises can be understood by some men, and that there is a spiritual dimension to alchemy against which the Yeoman's materialism has worked.

Both poems, then, have a "debate" structure; but whereas the Second Nun's Tale has an actual debate between Cecile and Almachius, heaven and earth, this same debate in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is an implicit judgement made upon the Yeoman by the authorities he respectfully quotes to prove his point. Had he wanted to, Chaucer might have brought out this "debate" characteristic in the Yeoman's Tale by creating another character, a philosopher, who could have shown the Yeoman for the fraud that he is. But, for dramatic reasons, Chaucer has chosen to make the Yeoman unknowingly pass judgement upon himself by quoting the philosophers realizing neither the significance of the material that he quotes nor the significance of the conclusion that he makes from that material.

Just as each of these poems is a debate in itself, so together they form a debate. Had the Canon and his Yeoman been true alchemists,

then the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, the inversion both of alchemy and of Christianity, would have read like the story of Nicholas Flamelle who, perfected through alchemy's inner work, used his alchemical gold to build churches and hospitals and in the performance of other charitable works. The Canon's Yeoman's and the Second Nun's Tales, then, would have been complementary.

Thematically the Second Nun's and the Canon's Yeoman's Tales are opposite sides of the same conclusion: that there is an end that shapes man's divinity. Having chosen a goal, man inevitably progresses towards it. If he has chosen God, then he is spiritualized and redeemed; if he has chosen mammon, then he is materialized and damned. According to both tales man succeeds to the extent that he functions properly. As he was made to go to heaven, to function properly he must reject the earth for God, seek heaven as his goal. The Christians in the Second Nun's Tale and the philosophers in the Canon's Yeoman's have sought to perform God's will and are perfected as a result. By contrast, Almachius and the alchemists have rejected God in seeking to perform their own wills and are therefore damned.

Although the poems have the same conclusion, they approach it from different directions. In the Second Nun's Tale Chaucer approaches the perfection of man directly from the point of view of the saint, and highlights perfection by contrasting it to Almachius, whose misery is caused by his rejection of Christianity for lesser loves. In the Canon's Yeoman's Tale Chaucer approaches the theme of man's perfection indirectly by its opposite. Recreating Almachius in the alchemists, he re-affirms man's need to seek what is perfect by showing the results of having sought materialistic ends.

Both poems are symbolic, but whereas the Second Nun's Tale is symbolic from the outset as can be seen from the etymologies of Cecile's name, the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, as Muscatine observes, initially seems to be anything but symbolic. It appears to be the "journalistic" treatment of a topical subject telling the reader in practical terms, that the true alchemist never discloses his secret and that the alchemist who is willing to do so is really a fraud selling recipes to misery and poverty. We have seen, however, that this initially realistic tale is finally revealed to be the symbolic study of damnation: the nature, function and progress of sin within man.

While the two poems of Fragment VIII are unified editorially, they are also contrasting approaches to the same debate between heaven and earth. Chaucer's stance has changed between the two poems. Just as the Second Nun's Tale embodies perfection, and the experience of true alchemy, so the Canon's Yeoman's Tale offers its reader a contemporary form of mammon-worship. It is as if, between the two works, the poet has conceded: "We're all Christians now, no one worships stones anymore--or do they?"

Because both the Second Nun's Tale and the Canon's Yeoman's Tale depict man's journey towards his chosen goal, they describe and contrast the qualities--the faith, wisdom, work and experience--of the goals of spiritualized and materialized men. Cecile's faith, which is the standard of Christian faith in the Nun's Tale and ultimately for the entire fragment, demonstrates a perfect love of God as is suggested by her thoughts at her wedding in which she says her vows to "God allone" (135). She loves God first and his creation and creatures through her love of God. By contrast, Almachius and the alchemists have placed their faith

in earth: they love themselves and the material world first and finally.

Almachius' love of earth is expressed in his stone gods; and although the alchemists are nominally Christian, instead of worshipping the transcendent God of Christianity they have placed their faith in themselves. While the symbol of their faith is the "stoon," their self-love is expressed by their striving for the "effects of [their] desire" (1261).

Christian knowledge is an important aspect of the religion in the Second Nun's Tale: before they are baptised the Christians are instructed in their religion until, as in Tyburce's case, their learning is "parfit." The knowledge that the Christians have in the Nun's Tale is a knowledge of "trouthe" which simplifies learning into wisdom so that Cecile is not even momentarily swayed by Almachius' arguments and threats.

Contrasting to the simplifying knowledge of Christian "trouthe" is the incomprehensible sophistry of the alchemists which the Yeoman characterizes as "elvysshe nyce loore" (842). In spite of the amount of factual information that they have of alchemy, they understand nothing because in seeking wisdom apart from "trouthe" they have been prevented from learning the secret which would turn their sophistry to the science held by the philosophers.

The most distinguishing feature of knowledge in the two tales is how it is used: Christians learn of Christianity so that they may enjoy God.¹⁴ Cecile's superior knowledge, displayed in her trial, testifies to God's, not her own glory. The alchemists learn so that they can enjoy the earth. In Christianity man learns so that he may glorify God, an attitude also held by the philosophers. Having knowledge of "trouthe," they are granted a more perfect learning as is also the case with the

martyrs.

The alchemists of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale, however, treat learning as a means of self-glorification. They expect by it to become and to be treated as sages. While the Yeoman knows that his lord cannot pave the road with silver or gold, he still believes that his "lord and soveraigne" can work "wel and craftily" (603). In admitting that he does not know all that the Canon knows, he has vicariously shared the alchemist's glory. Similarly Almachius, who prides himself in being a "philosophre," has cut himself off from "trouthe" in rejecting spiritual for worldly values; like the sophisticated imposters, he knows nothing.¹⁵

The contrast of works in the Second Nun's and the Canon's Yeoman's Tales has been discussed both by Grennen and Rosenberg, who observe the association between the "bisynesse" of St. Cecilia with the diabolical "werke"--the alchemical opus--performed by the Canon. Grennen and Rosenberg also see Cecile's Christian work culminating in her martyrdom --a "truly Christian opus."¹⁶ This work contrasts to the unsuccessful work of the alchemists.

I am more inclined, however, to see that the works that Christians perform in the Second Nun's Tale as being their charitable acts, the converting of others to Christianity. These are works that proceed naturally from their love of God and are made possible by the Grace abiding in them. The works that Christians perform are characterized by their contrast to what one would normally call work: they are acts performed out of their love of God and man without effort or labour.

In contrast to the Christian works, work in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is the difficult, dangerous, and unpleasant labour of the alchemical experiment which always ends unsuccessfully and smell of sulphur rather

than the roses of the Nun's Tale. The experiments are the works that proceed naturally from the alchemists' faith in riches motivated by greed and striving, the love of self, not of God. Proceeding just as naturally from this materialistic work is the alchemist's "envious charity," the deliberate deluding of others, in their efforts to support their own delusions that they will multiply gold. Here lies one of the greatest ironies in the two poems: Christianity demands that man give up everything he has to enter the kingdom of heaven. In renouncing their earthly goods, however, the Christians in the Nun's Tale have received infinite reward on earth and in heaven. The alchemists, too, have given up everything they own for their faith, but, instead of gaining anything through their alchemical works, they have continued to lose through it. No one could work harder for their faith than the alchemists do and yet, because they labour for a transient good, their labours are useless.

Finally, there is in the work of the Christians something godly: "It were ful hard...for to seyn/How manye wondres Jhesus for hem wroghte" (358-59), says the Nun, just as in the work of true alchemists, as performed by the philosophers, there is the performance of a work "lief and deere to Crist" (1467). The labours of the alchemists, however, have a diabolical quality. The Yeoman comments: "I trowe he be with us, that ilke shrewe" (917).

Being damned and knowing it, but compulsively choosing it, is the experience of both Almachius and the alchemists. What drives Almachius to the desperate murder of Cecile is that he inwardly knows the truth of what she tells him:

Ye make us gilty, and it is nat sooth.
For ye, that knowen wel oure innocence,

For as much as we doon a reverence
To Crist, and for we bere a Cristen name,
Ye putte on us a crime and eek a blame.
(451-55)

Confronted with Grace, Almachius rejects it, and, in doing so, causes his own torment.

Similarly, the Yeoman's rantings reveal a simultaneous love and hatred for alchemy: he knows that the experiments will never work, but victim of "that good hope," he vows:

...for al my smert and al my grief,
Al my sorwe, labour, and meschief,
I koude nevere leve it in no wise.
(712-14)

The simultaneous misery and hope of the alchemists' compulsive experience is summed up in the Yeoman's description of their "bitter-sweet" pursuit of the Stone:

For al oure craft, whan we han al ydo,
And al oure sleighte, he wol nat come us to.
He hath ymaad us spenden muchel good,
For sorwe of which we almoost wexen wood,
But that good hope crepeth in oure herte,
Supposing evere, though we sore smerte,
To be releved by hym afterward.
Swich supposynge and hope is sharp and hard;
I warne yow wel, it is to seken evere.
That futer temps that hath maad men to dissevere
In trust therof, from al that evere they hadde.
Yet of that art they cannot wexen sadde,
For unto hem it is a bitre-swete--
So semeth it--for nadde they but a sheete,
Which that they myghte wrappe hem inne a-nyght,
And a brat to walken inne by daylight,
They wolde hem selle and spenden on this craft.
They kan nat stint til no thyng be laft.
(866-83)

In the final analysis, the Yeoman can tell the reader nothing of alchemy but he describes passionately and even sympathetically the experience of damnation.

In contrast to this compulsive seeking after something that is

bound to fail is the Christian experience of God's love symbolized in the Second Nun's Tale by the celestial crowns and Cecile's angelic lover. The experience of the Christians in the Nun's Tale is described in the Prologue as the healing of the soul for which the Narrator longs as he invokes Mary, the "synful soules cure" for grace. In contrast, the activities of the alchemists of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale are described in the terms of disease. The Yeoman tells the Pilgrims: "For unto shrewes joye it is and ese/To have hir felawes in peyne and disease," (746-47), and the Second Canon, he claims, has the ability to "infecte al a town" (973). The physical manifestations of this disease are the Yeoman's "leden hewe" (728) and his "blered eyen" (730) but these are only the outer manifestations of his spiritual disease. The association of alchemy with infection is the inversion of the alchemical conception of the Philosophers' Stone as the Elixir (863), the universal remedy for illness. Curing has turned to infection in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale because the alchemy that the Canon practises is the inversion of true alchemy.

Of the unity of Fragment VIII Grennen has said that on the "simplest and most abstract level the two poems play out the theme of 'unity vs. multiplicity'" (473). In his analysis of the Second Nun's Tale he has emphasized the integrity, wholeness, and unity of Cecile and has contrasted her integrity with the multiplying of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Whereas Christianity brings unity, alchemy, its perversion, brings multiplicity:

The mystical one-ness of the alchemical opus did not prevent Chaucer from seeing that the alchemists were (in their own terms) "multipliers"--but multipliers of words, treatises, recipes, ingredients, anything, in short, but the gold, health, or virtue which they imagined themselves to be seeking.

But the two tales of Fragment VIII, I think, are tales of both unity and multiplicity. Whereas the Second Nun's Tale shows the integration of the individual personality to a spiritual wholeness so that the tale, as Grennen observes, is a tale of unity, it is also a tale that portrays the development of the Church in a pagan world and is also a tale of multiplication. The Canon's Yeoman's Tale is also a tale of the unification of man, but, in the Yeoman's Tale, man is "integrated" into materialism. Through alchemy's inner work the priest is led from a dual loyalty to God and to mammon to being fixed in the pursuit of profane alchemy from which he will never escape.

While this fixity of purpose is a unification, the effect of it is the disintegration of the personality as we saw in Chapter III in Almachius' character. Similarly, the alchemists also experience fragmentation of the personality as is demonstrated by the Yeoman's ambivalent feelings towards his lord, whom he simultaneously loves and hates, and to alchemy itself, which he alternately attacks and praises. There is no doubt of the singleness of the alchemists' purpose and devotion to the finding of the Stone but integration into evil is itself a fragmentation, a multiplication of causes and effects. This fragmentation within Almachius and the Yeoman, characterizing their materialization, contrasts to the Christian standard established in Cecile, whose "herte" sings to God alone.

As we have seen in Chapter II, these alchemists succeed in the multiplication of their inner Envious Stone which they project onto others of their own greedy "kind." Contrasting to the Second Nun's Tale which shows the growth of virtue in a pagan society, the Canon's Yeoman's Tale shows the growth of mammon-worship in a Christian society, and is, therefore, a tale of multiplication.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

¹E. J. Holmyard, Alchemy (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1958), p.26.

²Edgar H. Duncan, "The Literature of Alchemy and Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman's Tale: Framework, Theme, and Characters," Speculum, XLIII (1968):665.

³That alchemy's spiritual work compliments its practical work is recognized by virtually all authorities in one form or another. Chiara Crisciani's discussion of the "interior" and "exterior magisteria" in her "The Conception of Alchemy as Expressed in the Pretiosa Margarita Novella [the New Pearl of Great Price] of Petrus Bonus of Ferrara," Ambix, XX (1973):172, comes the closest to what I refer to as the "inner and the outer works" of alchemy.

⁴F. Sherwood Taylor, The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry, (New York: Collier Books, 1949, rpt. 1962), p.99; Holmyard, p.126.

⁵C. G. Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, vol. 12, tr. from the German by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), p.227.

⁶C. G. Jung, Alchemical Studies, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, vol. 13, tr. from the German by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.299.

⁷C. A. Burland discusses Jung's ideas concerning the alchemist's suppression of his sexuality in The Arts of the Alchemists (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p.79.

⁸Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, Alchemy: The Secret Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p.7.

⁹Taylor, The Alchemists, p.116.

¹⁰F. Sherwood Taylor, "The Origins of Alchemy," Ambix, I (1937):31.

¹¹Geber, Of the Investigation or Search of Perfection, in The Works of Geber: The Most Famous Arabian Prince and Philosopher, "Englished" by R[ichard] R[ussell] (London: 1678; reprint edition, re-edited by E. J. Holmyard; London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1928), p.4.

¹²Titus Burckhardt discusses Morienus' dealings with Khalid in Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p.24; Dorn's remark is found in C. G. Jung's Aion, The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, vol. 9, pt. II, tr. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p.170; Democritus' treatise is cited in Taylor, "Origins," 30.

¹³Jack Lindsay, The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p.152.

¹⁴Petrus Bonus of Ferrara, The New Pearl of Great Price: A Treatise Concerning The Treasure and Most Precious Stone of the Philosophers, ed. by Janus Lacinius the Calabrian, tr. by A. E. Waite (London: Vincent Stuart Publishers Ltd., 1963).

¹⁵Janus Lacinius, the Calabrian, Nuncupatory Discourse, preceding the New Pearl of Great Price, tr. by A. E. Waite (London: Vincent Stuart Publishers Ltd., 1963).

¹⁶A. C. Hopkins, Alchemy: Child of Greek Philosophy (New York: AMS Press Inc., 1933, rpt. 1967), p.43.

¹⁷Lindsay, p.218.

¹⁸Hopkins, p.48; see also Lindsay, p.213.

¹⁹Hopkins, pp.46-47.

²⁰Taylor, "Origins," 23.

²¹The Pseudo-Democritus is called "Bolos-Democritus" by Lindsay and Holmyard.

²²Taylor, "Origins," 23.

²³Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, vol. I: Greece and Rome, revised edition, (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1962), pt. II, p.126.

²⁴H. J. Sheppard, "The Redemption Theme and Hellenistic Alchemy," Ambix, VIII (1959):43.

²⁵Mircea Eliade, The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy, tr. from the French by Stephen Corrin (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p.149.

²⁶Sheppard, "Redemption," 44.

²⁷Ibid., 43.

²⁸Sheppard, "Gnosticism and Alchemy," Ambix VI (1957):93.

²⁹M. P. Crosland, ed., The Science of Matter: A Historical Survey, History of Science Readings, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), pp.33-36.

³⁰Copleston, vol. I, pt. II, pp.49-50.

³¹Ibid., p.50.

³²Aristotle, De Generatione et Corruptione, in Crosland, p.48.

³³Lindsay, p.33.

³⁴Figure 1, from Charles Singer, A Short History of Scientific Ideas to 1900, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.31.

³⁵Lindsay, p.16.

³⁶Holmyard, p.23.

³⁷Crosland, p.46.

³⁸Ibid., pp.46-47.

³⁹Aristotle, Meteorologica, in Crosland, pp.141-42.

⁴⁰Crosland, pp.33-34.

⁴¹From the Works of Theophrastus and Hippolytus, in Crosland, pp.38-39.

⁴²Sheppard, "Gnosticism," 90.

⁴³Lindsay, pp.185-86.

⁴⁴Holmyard, p.192ff.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp.75, 94.

⁴⁶Eliade, pp.46-48.

⁴⁷Turba Philosophorum [The Assembly of the Sages], tr. by A. E. Waite (New York: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1896, rpt. 1973).

⁴⁸Figure 2, from Serge Hutin, L'Alchimie, "Que Sais-Je," Le Point des Connaissances Actuelles, No. 506 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), p.72.

⁴⁹The Emerald Table, tr. by Jack Lindsay, Origins, p.186.

⁵⁰Hutin, pp.70-71.

⁵¹Janus Lacinius, the Calabrian, An Excellent Introduction to the Art of Alchemy, tr. by A. E. Waite, together with the New Pearl of Great Price (London: Vincent Stuart Publishers Ltd., 1963), pp.248-49.

⁵²Holmyard, pp.46 and 277.

⁵³Lindsay, p.249.

⁵⁴See Holmyard's discussion of the distillation process, pp.48ff; concerning the Vase of Hermes, its names, and its relation to Maria's Kerotakis, see Lindsay, p.186.

⁵⁵Thomas Norton, The Ordinall of Alchimy, in Elias Ashmole's Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum: Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of our Famous English Philosophers, who have written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language (London 1652; reprint edition, re-edited by Allen G. Debus, The Sources of Science, No. 39, New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1967).

⁵⁶Geber, Book of the Furnaces, in The Works of Geber, pp.227-61.

⁵⁷Thomas Charnock, The Breviary of Naturall Philosophy, in Ashmole, p.289. There are two pages 289; this one follows p.292.

⁵⁸Taylor, The Alchemists, p.114.

⁵⁹Burland, p.72; Taylor, ibid., p.99.

⁶⁰George Ripley, The Compound of Alchymie: A Most excellent, learned, and worthy written by Sir George Ripley, Chanon of Bridlington in Yorkshire, conteining twelve Gates, in Ashmole, pp.127-28.

⁶¹Ripley, "Of Projection," ch. 12 of the Compound, st. 4, 11.1-4, p.185.

⁶²Taylor, The Alchemists, pp.115-16; Richard Cavendish, The Black Arts (London: Pan Books, 1972), pp.180-90.

⁶³Taylor, The Alchemists, p.88.

⁶⁴John Read, Prelude to Chemistry, (U.S.A.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1936; rpt. 1966), p.135.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., quoting Gloria Mundi (1526), p.130.

⁶⁷If the red stage appears too soon the work is endangered. See George Starkey's description in his The Stone of the Philosophers (1664), quoted by Burland, p.177.

⁶⁸Lindsay, p.111.

⁶⁹Ibid., p.116.

⁷⁰Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, p.219.

⁷¹See Starkey's account in Burland, p.178.

⁷²Read, p.142.

⁷³Taylor, The Alchemists, ch. 14, "The Hermetic Philosophy," pp.167-81.

⁷⁴Figure 3, from Lindsay, figure 71, p.388.

⁷⁵Jung, Psychology and Alchemy, pp.332-41.

⁷⁶The comparison of the birth of the Stone to the conception and birth of Christ is discussed by Bonus, pp.126-27:

Our substance conceives by itself, and is impregnated by itself, and brings forth itself--and this, the conception of a virgin, is possible only by Divine grace. Moreover, the birth leaves our substance still a virgin, which again, is a miraculous event. Hence we cannot but call the conception, birth, and nutrition of our Stone supernatural and divine.... These ancient Sages also knew that God must become man, because on the last day of our Magistery that which generates, and that which is generated, become absolutely one; then the old man and the child, and the father and the son, are indistinguishably united. Hence they concluded that the Creator must also become one with the creature...

⁷⁷See Sheppard's discussion in "Gnosticism," 87.

⁷⁸Burckhardt, p.26.

⁷⁹Zosimos, On Virtue, "The Visions of Zosimos," tr. by F. Sherwood Taylor, Ambix, I (1937), 89.

⁸⁰Sheppard, "Redemption," 45.

⁸¹Lindsay, p.103.

⁸²See pp.32-35; 142 in the Turba Philosophorum and p.64 below.

⁸³F. Sherwood Taylor, "The Alchemical Works of Stephanos of Alexandria: Translation and Commentary," Ambix, I (1937):123.

⁸⁴Lynn Thorndike, A History of Magic and Experimental Science, vol. III: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, History of Science Publications, New Series IV (New York: Columbia University Press, p.75.

⁸⁵Jung writes in Psychology and Alchemy, p.34:

It is true that alchemy always stood on the verge of heresy and that certain decrees leave no doubt as to the Church's attitudes towards it, but on the other hand it was effectively protected by the

obscurity of its symbolism, which could always be explained as a harmless allegory.

⁸⁶Richard Russell, "Translator to the Reader," The Works of Geber p.xxxviii.

⁸⁷The Stone is said here to be a remedy for every form of suffering. While I do not have the Latin original for this expression, it bears a similarity to the Yeoman's final conclusion "God sende every trewe man boote of his bale" (italics mine) (1481) in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. Of this line Joseph E. Grennen has remarked:

...The closing ejaculation...epitomizes the meaning of the entire poem. "Boote of his bale" is an idiomatic phrase which rings with echoes of man's prayerful dependence upon God, but it has such a peculiarly apt relevance to a science which is trying to make gold out of base matter, something out of nothing...that it gives a significant emphasis to the only true alchemy, the divine "cosmic alchemy" which transmutes mortal clay into life eternal. Of course, even here one must be careful to over-read and over-particularize. The phrase can mean simply "something for his pains," but the point is that the poem has provided the context within which "boote of his bale" can represent the entire spectrum of possible rewards for the man who "works" truly rather than falsely,

"The Canon's Yeoman's Alchemical 'Mass,'" Studies in Philology, LXII (1965):560. While Grennen is correct in seeing a greater significance than an alchemical one in the expression, it has a stronger alchemical significance than he apparently realized. Grennen, who does not believe in alchemy, would have the Yeoman reject the art for salvation in this line; it seems to me, however, that the Yeoman, who has found the Philosophers instead of God, may well be asking God to give him the Stone, in his belief that he is the "trewe" man. My reasons for this interpretation will be considered in the next chapter.

⁸⁸Sheppard, "Redemption," 45.

⁸⁹Roger Bacon, quoted in Richard C. Dales The Scientific Advancement of The Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973), p.168.

⁹⁰"But if ye arrive at the Conclusion of this regimen, and so obtain your purpose, ye shall be princes among the people of your time," Turba Philosophorum, p.104.

⁹¹Zosimos, quoted by A. E. Waite in a note to p.128 of the Turba Philosophorum.

⁹²Bonus, p.136; Charnock, p.300; Cremer, in Holmyard, p.127; Norton, p.33.

⁹³See Taylor's account in The Alchemists, pp.126-36.

⁹⁴Ibid., p.136; Holmyard's Plate 29 reproduces the picture.

⁹⁵Flamelle, translated by Eireanaeus Orandus from the French; in Taylor, The Alchemists, p.135.

⁹⁶Lacinius, Nuncupatory Discourse, p.12.

⁹⁷Bonus, p.188.

⁹⁸Grennen, "Mass," 550.

⁹⁹Marie-Louise Von Franz, ed., Aurora Consurgens: A Document Attributed To Thomas Aquinas on the Problem of Opposites in Alchemy, tr. by R. F. C. Hull and A. S. B. Glover, Bollingen Series LXXVII (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), pp.129-31).

¹⁰⁰It is no accident that Norton's warning is so strongly reminiscent of the Yeoman's conclusion in the Canon's Yeoman's Tale (ll.1409-10): "Ye that it use, I rede ye it leete,/Lest ye lose al; for bet than nevere is late." He mentions the Tale specifically on p.42 of his Ordinall in a discussion of magnetia and many passages have probably been influenced by the poem; e.g., his section on what kind of servants to avoid, p.34, which is followed by a story about an alchemist who is betrayed by a squire and a Clerke who is compared to Judas (pp.35-38); and his description of the "fals man [who] walketh from Towne to Towne,/For the most parte in a threed bare Gowne" deceiving people (p.17). Ripley, too, seems to have been influenced by the Canon's Yeoman's Tale. In "Of Putrefaction" in the Compound, vv. 21-23, p.153, he writes of the "folys [that] shold never know our Stone":

 Their Clothes be bawdy and woryn threde-bare,
Men may them smell for Multyplyers where they go;
To fyle theyr fyngers with Corrosyves they do not spare
Theyr Eyes be blered, & theyr Chekys both lene and bloe:
And thus for (had I wyst) they suffer losse and wo;
 Such when they have lost that was in theyr purse,
 Then do they chyd and Phylosophers sore accurse.

 For all the whyle that they have Phylosophers ben,
Yet cowde they never know our Stone.
Som sought in Soote, Dung, Uryne, som in Wyne:
Som in Ster slyme, for thyng yt ys but one;
In Blood, Eggs; Som tyll theyr thryft was gone:
 Devydyng Elements, and brekyng many a pott,
 Multyplyng the sherds, but yet they hyt yt not.

The later English alchemists regarded the Canon's Yeoman's Tale as being a treatise. Elias Ashmole's comments (pp.467-72) are representative:

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.

For in this Tale Chaucer sets forth the deceipts in Alchimy to the life, and notably declaimes against all such villanous Pretenders, who being wholly ignorant of Art, have notwithstanding learnt the Cunning, to abuse the World; And this paines he tooke (as himselfe professeth) meerly

To the intent that men maie beware therby,
And for no other cause truly.

Herein following the President of all sincere and conscientious Philosophers, then whom, the Injur'd world cannot more condemne the abuses of these Impostors that disgrace the Art, in that they are continually advising to shun them as spreading Infection; and setting out Lights and Directions, that may serve as so many Land marks (if we take notice of them) to make us avoyd the Rocks of their Fraud and Deceipt, which will otherise split us, (pp.467-68).

¹⁰¹Geber, Sum of Perfection, p.196; see also Turba Philosophorum, pp.24-25.

¹⁰²Both the Aurora Consurgens and Solomon Trismosin's Splendor Solis: Alchemical Treatises of Solomon Trismosin, Adept and Teacher of Paracelsus, ed. by J. K. (London: Kegan Paul and Trench, _____), use allegorical parables to describe the operation of the alchemical opus following initial sections dealing with alchemical theory.

¹⁰³Robert P. Muthlaf, The Origins of Chemistry, Oldbourne History of Science Library (London: Oldbourne Book Co., 1966), p.194.

¹⁰⁴Thorndike, III, p.58.

¹⁰⁵Hopkins, p.192ff; Bonus, pp.119-120.

¹⁰⁶Duncan, "Alchemy," 638.

¹⁰⁷Throndike, III, p.58.

¹⁰⁸Crisciani, 178.

¹⁰⁹The Inquisitor Eymeric, who wrote against alchemy at the end of the Fourteenth century. Cited by Thorndike, III, p.32.

¹¹⁰Holmyard, p.149.

¹¹¹Duncan, "Alchemy," 637.

¹¹²Crisciani, note #58, 179.

¹¹³Thorndike, III, p.150.

¹¹⁴Taylor, The Alchemists, p.102; W. Ganzenmüller, L'Alchimie Au Moyen Age, tr. from the German by G. Petit-Dutaillais, Editions Montaigne (Paris: Aubier, 1938), p.95.

- 115 Taylor, The Alchemists, p.106.
- 116 Holmyard, p.128.
- 117 Cremer's version is followed by Holmyard, p.127; Taylor records some portions from the same MS, The Alchemists, p.106.
- 118 Holmyard, p.127.
- 119 Taylor, p.107.
- 120 Ganzenmüller, p.95.
- 121 Ibid., my translation.
- 122 Duncan, "Alchemy," 634.
- 123 J. M. Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer: Lectures delivered at the Lowell Institute (London: H. Hold and Co., 1926), p.244ff.
- 124 The Statutes of the Realm, ed. by A. Luders, et. al. (1816), cited by Taylor, The Alchemists, p.103.
- 125 Ibid.
- 126 Dante Aligheri, The Comedy of Dante Aligheri The Florentine, Cantica I: Hell, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1949, rpt. 1971), see the chart on p.138 and Canto XXIX, pp.252-56.
- 127 William Langland, The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman: In Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redless, ed. by W. W. Skeat, two vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1886, with additional bibliography, 1969).
- 128 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, The Romance of the Rose, tr. into English verse by Harry W. Robbins, edited with introduction by Charles W. Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1962), 78:1-115; John Gower, "Concerning The Philosophers' Stone," from his Confessio Amantis, in Ashmole, pp.368-73; John Lydgate, Secreta Secretorum, in Ashmole, pp.397-403.
- 129 Holmyard, pp.110-122.
- 130 Roger Bacon, Opus Tertium, in Holmyard, p.120.
- 131 St. Thomas Aquinas, in Taylor, The Alchemists, p.85.
- 132 Duncan, "Alchemy," 636.

CHAPTER II

¹All quotations of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale are from F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

²C. A. Burland, The Arts of the Alchemists (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p.30.

³J. M. Manly, Some New Light on Chaucer: Lectures Delivered at the Lowell Institute (London: H. Hold and Co., 1926), pp.246-52.

⁴Pauline Aiken in "Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Knowledge of Alchemy," Studies in Philology, XLI (1944), 371, is the only critic who does not think Chaucer knew a considerable amount about alchemy. The terms he uses could have been borrowed, she thinks, from his reading the works of Vincent of Beauvais.

⁵"Philosophical postscript" is a term used by Charles Muscatine in Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p.215.

⁶Because the view of the true alchemist informs and finally judges the popular conception of the art in the Yeoman's Tale, this necessarily implies neither that Chaucer was himself an adept nor that the tale is an alchemical treatise as has been suggested by S. Foster Damon in "Chaucer and Alchemy," PMLA, XXXIX (1924), 782-88. Damon himself was only echoing what Elias Ashmole had written in the Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum (see note #100 to the first chapter, above). Whether or not the Canon's Yeoman's Tale is an actual treatise conveying alchemy's secret to the adept is impossible for anyone except an adept to say. But we should acknowledge, at least, that the poem did have a considerable literary influence upon the treatises written by English alchemists during the Renaissance.

⁷See p.66, Chapter I.

⁸R. G. Baldwin, "The Yeoman's Canon: A Conjecture," JEPG, LXI (1962), 241.

⁹See p.53, Chapter I.

¹⁰Maurice Hussey, ed., The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale: From the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), note to line 808, p.70.

¹¹According to Saint Augustine's conception of love, Etienne Gilson writes in The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine, tr. from the French by L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), p.8:

...The loved object reacts in some way on the loving subject so as to transform it into its own image and thereby assimilate it. To

love material and perishable things is to be materialized and doomed to perish; to love the eternal is to become eternal: to love God is to become God.

¹²Discussing Fortune in the Book of the Duchess the Black Knight says:

She is th' envious charity
That is ay fals and seemeth well.
(643-44)

Envious charity is what the Canon exhibits--the opposite of Christian charity--the desire to do someone ill. Thus to distinguish between the inner Stone of true alchemist which perfects man in charity and what these alchemists have become, I call the Stone that is "perfected" in them the Envious Stone.

¹³See Chapter I, pp.28-37 and 45-48, especially pp.35 and 46.

¹⁴See p.88 this chapter, ll.676-79.

¹⁵See Chapter I as above, especially pp.30 and 36.

¹⁶That the harder one works, the greater he values the results, is, of course, a truism having nothing specifically alchemical about it. Nevertheless alchemical treatises do consider this subject. See Bonus of Ferrera, The New Pearl of Great Price, ed. by Janus Lacinius, tr. by A. E. Waite (London: Vincent Stuart Publishers Ltd., 1963), p.131.

¹⁷Turba Philosophorum, tr. by A. E. Waite (New York: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1973), p.134.

¹⁸Cf. ll.671-79.

¹⁹Cf. ll.724-30.

²⁰Both Grennen and Rosenberg have remarked upon the significance of the Yeoman's "leden hewe." For Rosenberg in "The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman," Chaucer Review, 2(1968), 278-91, the Yeoman's wasted complexion signifies the loss of his initial Adamic innocence:

The Yeoman's cheeks turn red now only when he blushes in shame for the Canon, but consistent redness has he none. He began with the colour of perfection, but, like Adam falling into sin and losing his beauty, he ends with the hue of the basest metal... The Yeoman's lack of redness is his fall from perfection (279).

To argue that the Yeoman was ever an innocent disregards his present materialistic purposes in his pursuit of alchemy, a materialism, which, from the priest's experience, can be presumed to have motivated the Yeoman from the beginning.

Grennen, on the other hand, argues that the Canon and the Yeoman symbolize the "materials and apparatus" of the alchemical experiment. While there is no such thing as alchemy, "cosmic alchemy" works upon them:

The alchemists themselves, ironically, are the very materials of a "cosmic alchemy" (the only really effective alchemy) which is transmuting them physically and spiritually....

The alchemists in this poem are presented in a double focus; they are human beings with a more than ample allowance of stupidity, and at the same time the physical apparatus -- materials and instruments -- of a cosmic alchemy carrying out its inscrutable and inevitable alterations on them. Unlike all man's attempts to transmute metals it has been eminantly successful. ("Chaucer's Characterization of the Canon and his Yeoman," Journal of the History of Ideas, XXV, (1964), 240.

What Grennen means by "cosmic alchemy" is, indeed, inscrutable. The closest he comes to defining it is in his article "The Canon's Yeoman's Cosmic Furnace," Criticism, IV (1962):

The alchemists are shown with an almost too exhaustive precision to have accomplished the exact opposite of the objectives set forth in treatise after treatise on alchemy (and this is the point of the irony) to have been brought to this condition sublimely ignorant that they are themselves the stuff of an alchemy transcendent the one they consciously practise (24).

Probably what Grennen means is that the alchemists in the Yeoman's Tale are damning themselves, although he insists that Chaucer's purpose in the tale is ironic, not moral. I believe he has missed the point of his alchemical reading of the poem by not identifying the alchemists as "sophistical imposters," the inversion of true alchemists, who enter upon their work for the wrong reasons.

²¹K. Michael Olmert, "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale: An Interpretation," Annuaire Mediaevale, VIII(1967), 82.

²²Joseph E. Grennen, "The Canon's Yeoman's Alchemical 'Mass,'" Studies in Philology, LXII (1965), 546-60.

²³Grennen, "Mass," 560; Baldwin, 242; Kitteridge, 89-92; Ryan, 307.

²⁴Kemp Malone, cited by Baldwin, 235.

²⁵Judith Scherer Herz, "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale," Modern Philology, LVIII(1961), 237.

²⁶Olmert, 93-94.

²⁷David V. Harrington, "The Narrator of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale," Annuaire Mediaevale, IX(1968), 86-87.

²⁸Olmert, 90.

²⁹Grennen, "Mass," 559-60.

³⁰Edgar H. Duncan in "The Literature of Alchemy and Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman's Tale: Framework, Theme and Characters," Speculum XLIII(1968), 645.

³¹Baldwin, 239-41; Manly, p.237.

³²The Yeoman usually describes a scene in reference to himself. See 11.588-92, 620-23, 750-53, 1094-1100.

³³Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Poetria Nova, tr. from the Latin by Margaret F. Nimms (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), p.90.

³⁴Muscatine, p.214ff.; Herz, 231; Baldwin, 237.

³⁵Grennen, "Mass," 550-51.

³⁶See Grennen, "Mass," 558-59; Muscatine, p.215; Herz 236.

³⁷Herz, 237.

³⁸Baldwin, 242.

³⁹Hussey, note to line 927, p.73.

⁴⁰Herz, 234.

CHAPTER III

¹Carleton Brown, "Chaucer and the Hours of the Virgin," MLN, XXX(1915), 231-32; "The Prologue of Chaucer's Lyf of Seynt Cecile," Modern Philology, IX(1911), 1-16; Roberta D. Cornelius, "The 'Corones Two' in the Second Nun's Tale," PMLA, XLII(1927), 1055-57; J. M. Campbell, "Patristic Studies and the Literature of Medieval England," Speculum, VIII(1933), 469; Mary Giffin, Studies in Chaucer and his Audience (Hull, Quebec: Editions "L'Eclair," 1956), pp.29-43. All quotations of the Second Nun's Tale are from F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957).

²Both Bruce Rosenberg in "The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman," Chaucer Review, II(1968), 277, and Joseph Grennen in "Saint Cecilia's 'Chemical Wedding': The Unity of the Canterbury Tales," Fragment VIII, J E P G, LXV(1966), 473, remark upon the lack of full scale interpretations of the Second Nun's Tale.

³Robert S. Hoyt, Europe in the Middle Ages, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966), pp.91-92.

⁴See Walter A. Kaufmann, Neitzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp.325-26:

To be kindly when one is merely too weak and timid to act otherwise...that is a slave's morality, making a virtue of necessity. And such "morality" may well go together with impotent hatred and immeasurable envy, with ressentiment which would like nothing better than revenge--a chance to outdo the master's insults and "better the instruction."

⁵The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International work of reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, and Discipline of the Catholic Church, ed. by Charles G. Hebermann, et. al. S.v. "Saint Cecilia," vol. 3, p.472.

⁶Hoyt, p.91.

⁷Ibid., p.92.

⁸Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, tr. from the German by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp.136-42.

⁹The classification of romance by its "matters" was originally suggested in the Thirteenth century by Jehan Bodel in his Chanson des Saisnes but it is still used by modern critics. See Donald B. Sands, Introduction to Middle English Verse Romances (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966), pp.2-6.

¹⁰Pamela Gradon, Form and Style in Early English Literature (London: Methuen and Company, 1971), ch. 4: "The Romance Mode," pp.212-72.

¹¹Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (New York: Atheneum Press, 1968), pp.186ff. While Frye is correct in saying that romance is close to myth, he limits romance too severely in his insistence that it must have the plot form of the quest. Frye's ideas are used by Alvin Lee in his discussion of Old English Saint's Lives; see p.144 below.

¹²Mary Giffin, p.44.

¹³For reasons I will discuss in the next chapter I believe that the Second Nun's Tale is actually the unadapted Lyf of Seynt Cecile and that its narrator in that original version of the poem is male, not female. While I am very willing to accept that Chaucer did assign the Lyf to the Second Nun, and am content to refer to the Prologue's narrator as being a woman on most occasions, I think that the use of the language of courtly love, in which the narrator addresses the Virgin makes better sense if the narrator, an "unworthy sone of Eve" (62), is thought to be male. While ultimately this language is to be seen as that of the human soul, in which the distinction between male and female is meaningless, to refer to the narrator as being male seems less offensive on a purely literal level than if this intimate love language were used by a woman. For these reasons, then, I refer to the narrator in the masculine gender.

¹⁴Grennen, "Wedding," 475.

¹⁵Ibid., 474.

¹⁶L. J. Suenens, Mary the Mother of God, tr. by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey, The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism, vol. 44 (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959), p.100.

¹⁷A term used by T. S. Eliot in Murder in the Cathedral (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), p.56.

¹⁸Suenens, p.56.

¹⁹See Robinson's note to line 271, pp.758-59.

²⁰Jacobus de Voragine, The Golden Legend, tr. and adapted from the Latin by Granger Ryan and Helmut Rippenger (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp.689-95. The Legend is the presumed source for lines 85-349; see Robinson's notes to those lines.

²¹Alvin A. Lee, The Guest-hall of Eden: Four Essays of the Design of Old English Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p.87.

²²Andreas is found in the Vercelli Book, ed. by George Philip Krapp, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. II, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp.3-51.

²³The line "Yowre princes erren, as your nobleye dooth," (459) may be interpreted as meaning both a quality that Almachius possesses (or ought to) and a class of citizens under the princes.

²⁴In the Mystery plays of Christ's Passion and Crucifixion his speeches are largely limited by scriptural authority. The character of Christ is little more than a presence and those around him carry the action. See Christ's Passion from the Chester Plays (XVI) printed in R. G. Thomas, ed., Ten Miracle Plays, York Medieval Texts (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), pp.114-29.

²⁵Dante's letter to Can Grande della Scalla discusses the interpretation of the Divine Comedy and indicates his deliberate use of allegorical techniques. See John MacQueen, Allegory, The Critical Idiom, vol. 14, gen. ed. John D. Jump (London: Methuen, 1970), pp.54-58, and Dorothy L. Sayers, Introduction to Hell, The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, vol. 1, tr. by Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1949, rpt. 1971), pp.9-65, especially p.14.

²⁶Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, tr. by V. E. Watts (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), p.79: "For the desire for true good is planted by nature in the minds of men, only error leads them astray towards false good."

²⁷Frye writes in the Anatomy of Criticism, p.119:

In the anagogic phase, literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not at the centre of reality.... When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes, not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence, apocalyptic. By apocalypse I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate. "The desire of man being infinite," said Blake, "the possession is infinite and himself infinite."

²⁸The integrated personality we have already seen in Andreas, where it is integrated through spiritual brotherhood. Generally in romance, however, the integration of parts of the personality is shown through marriage as is seen in King Horn in which Horn can only marry Rymenhild (who symbolizes that integration) when his adventures, which teach him to distinguish between Athulf and Fikenhild, are over, and Godhild rescued from the Sarazins. The Guide who leads Gawain to the Green Chapel in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight can be seen as an example of the personality (cowardice) that Gawain rejects within himself. Similarly Fikenhild in King Horn, who is killed when his treachery is recognized.

²⁹The five external senses, according to Aristotle, are ranked: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967, S.v. "Senses," Vol.XIII, pp.90-92.

³⁰Most of this passage is based on reading I have done in Saint Augustine's City of God, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. by Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956).

³¹R. W. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, rpt. 1969), p.235.

³²Jean Daniélou, From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers, tr. from the French by Dom Wulstan Hibberd (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), pp.11-12.

³³See Irenaeus, p.185, below.

³⁴Daniélou, p.19.

³⁵Hilda C. Graef, The Devotion to Our Lady, The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism, vol. 45 (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), p.9.

³⁶Daniélou, p.80.

³⁷See I Peter 3:18-21. Daniélou comments, pp.83-84:

...The essential teaching of I Peter 3:18-21 is to show to the Christians who renounce Satan at their baptism their pattern in the descent of Christ into Hell: he is the true Noah who has experienced the swelling of the waters of death, and has been delivered by God to be the beginning of a new world; it represents also Baptism wherein the Christian is buried with Christ in the waters of death through the symbol of the baptismal waters, figuratively undergoing the punishment due to sin and being freed with Christ and henceforth belonging to the new creation, to that eighth day which is the life of the world to come, already present in mystery. Lastly it represents the eschatological judgement by which a sinful world will be totally destroyed by the fire of judgement, from which those only will escape who, belonging to this sacred ogdoad, will be saved in the ark of the Church and so arrive on the banks of eternity.

³⁸Saint Augustine, the City of God, Book XIII, ch.15, p.251: "THAT ADAM IN HIS SIN FORSOOK GOD ERE GOD FORSOOK HIM, AND THAT HIS FALLING AWAY FROM GOD WAS THE FIRST DEATH OF THE SOUL."

³⁹William Langland, The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman: In Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redless, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1886, rpt. with addition of bibliography, 1969), "B" Text, 11.13-19.

⁴⁰George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Dobbie, eds., Christ I, in the Exeter Book, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), pp.3-4. I translate 11.18-49 as follows:

Hail thou ruler and true king who keep the locks, open life, the exalted ways. From another you deny the bright desired journey if his work is of no value. In great need we speak these words and...he who created man that he not...things full of care, for which we sit sorrowing in prison and hope for the sun, when the lord of life may open light to us, may become a protector to our spirits and adorn (*bewinde*) our weak minds with glory, may make us worthy, whom he abandoned to glory when we miserably had to turn to this narrow land, deprived of a homeland. Wherefore the man may say, he who speaks the truth, that he delivered the race of men when it was perverted. The woman was young, a virgin without sin, whom he chose to himself as a mother; it was accomplished without the embraces of men that through the birth of a child the bride became great. Nothing equal to that merit of the wife before or since ever happened in the world. That was a great secret, the mystery of the lord. All spiritual gifts spread around the earth, where many shoots were brought to light with a lasting learning, through the giver of life, which before lay concealed beneath the earth, the songs of the prophets when the ruler came who glorifies the mystery of each voice of those who fully in a wise way wish to praise the name of the creator.

⁴¹W. H. Hulme, ed., The Harrowing of Hell and the Gospel of Nichodemus, Extra Series, 100 (London: Early English Text Society, 1907).

⁴²Christ and Satan is found in the Junius Manuscript, ed. by George Philip Krapp, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp.135-58. I translate ll.405-23 and 435-40 as follows:

Then [God himself] allowed the blessed souls, the kin of Adam to journey up. But Eve could not yet gaze upon glory until she spoke [these] words:

"Once I offended you, Eternal Lord, when Adam and I ate two apples, through the serpent's spite, as we should not have done. The ugly one taught us, he, who now ever burns in bonds, that we had dignity, a holy home, heaven as a possession.

"Then we believed the words of that cursed one, took with [our] hands from the holy tree the shining fruit. Bitter was our reward for that when we had to turn to the hot pit and dwell a number--many thousands--of winters, harshly burned.

"Now I entreat you, keeper of the heaven-kingdom, by the guardians that you led here, the host of angels, that I have power and permission [to rise] up from here with my kinsmen."

.....

[Eve] then reached with her hands to the heaven-king, asked mercy through the office of Mary:

"Lo! From my daughter you awoke in the middleyard as a help to men. Now is it evident that you are God himself and the eternal first-prince of all creation.

⁴³Suenens, pp.62-66.

⁴⁴Ibid., 65.

⁴⁵Graef, p.16.

⁴⁶Irenaeus, cited by Graef, p.18.

⁴⁷Grennen, "Wedding," 471.

CHAPTER IV

¹See F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), pp.755 and 759 for the dates of the poems. For a discussion of the date of the Second Nun's Tale see Mary Giffin, Studies In Chaucer and His Audience (Hull, Quebec: Editions "L'Eclair," 1956), pp.29-40. Carleton Brown, in The Prologue of Chaucer's Lyf of Seynt Cecile, "Modern Philology," IX(1911), 1-16, and Joseph E. Grennen, in "Saint Cecilia's 'Chemical Wedding': The Unity of the Canterbury Tales Fragment VIII," JEPG, LXV (1966), 480-81, believe that the Invocatio ad Mariam is a late addition.

²Grennen, "Wedding," 480. Further references to this article are included in the body of the text.

³Robinson, p.755.

⁴This is the opinion held by Robinson, p.755:

The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale are held generally, and with the highest probability, to be earlier works of Chaucer, which he took over, but never really adapted to the Canterbury Tales.... Yet there seems to be no good reason for doubting that Chaucer meant to assign the tale to the Nun who attended the Prioress as her chapeleyne (Gen[eral] Pro[logue], 1,163f.). For an alternate opinion, see Paul M. Clogan, "The Figural Style and Meaning of The Second Nun's Prologue and Tale," Medievalia et Humanistica, New Series, III(1972), 213-15, who believes that the Tale is composed for the Second Nun.

⁵Robinson, p.759.

⁶Grennen, "Wedding," 466; K. Michael Olmert, "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale: An Interpretation," Annuaire Mediavale, VII(1967), 71-72.

⁷Bruce A. Rosenberg, "The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman," Chaucer Review, II(1968), 282-85. Further references to this article are included in the body of the text.

⁸Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p.216. For Muscatine as for Olmert and Grennen, all alchemy practised by men (even adepts) is false alchemy; true alchemy is God's salvation.

⁹Saint Augustine, The City of God, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Of the Christian Church, ed., by Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), Book XIII, ch. 12: THAT THE BODIES OF THE SAINTS SHALL AFTER THE RESURRECTION BE SPIRITUAL, AND YET FLESH SHALL NOT BE CHANGED INTO SPIRIT, pp.256-57.

¹⁰ According to Bonus (see Chapter I, p.176) Projection takes place instantly once the Stone is put in combination with base metal. Nicholas Flamelle projected and assayed his silver within the same day, see F. Sherwood Taylor, The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry (New York: Collier Books, 1949, rpt. 1962), p.133.

¹¹ It seems unlikely to me that Chaucer is alluding to the alchemical "contraries topic" (defined by Grennen as "sometimes [referring] to the necessity of beginning with contrary substances such as sulphur and mercury, sometimes to the Aristotelian theory of elements and qualities") in either ll.1476-79 of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale or ll.1-7 of the Second Nun's. See "Wedding," 479-80. The "unity of the work," "slaying of brothers," and Tyburce's fear of the fire seem similarly forced.

¹² See the series of illustrations, Plates III to VII in Taylor's The Alchemists.

¹³ The Chester Plays, "The Resurrection," (XVIII), re-edited from MSS by J. Matthews, Early English Text Society, Extra Series, 115 (Bungay, Suffolk: E.E.T.S., 1916, rpt. 1959), pp.337-38, ll.170-85.

¹⁴ Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. by Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), Book I, ch. 22: GOD ALONE TO BE ENJOYED, p.527:

Among all these things, then, those only are the true objects of enjoyment which we have spoken of as eternal and unchangeable. The rest are for use.... Neither ought any one to have joy in himself, if you look at the matter clearly, because no one ought to love even himself for his own sake but for the sake of Him who is the true object of enjoyment.

¹⁵ This kind of knowledge, knowledge in the City of Men, has been characterized by Saint Augustine. Contrasting the knowledge of the City of Men to its spiritual standard in the City of God, he writes:

The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers: the other says to God, "I will love thee, O Lord, my strength." And therefore the wise men of one city, living according to man, have sought for profit to their own bodies or souls or both, and those who have known God "glorifies Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened: professing themselves to be wise"--that is, glorifying in their own wisdom, and being possessed by pride,--"they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, to birds, and the four-footed beasts, and creeping things." For they were either leaders or followers of the people in adoring images, "and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever." But in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship

to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, of holy angels as well as holy men, "that God may be all in all,"

The City of God, Book XIV, ch. 28, pp.282-83.

¹⁶Grennen, "Wedding," 476; Rosenberg, "Contrary Tales," 290-91.

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