

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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":<sup>8</sup>

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"<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup>

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" Geber<sup>11</sup> (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."<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

(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.'<sup>15</sup>

(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.<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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."<sup>19</sup> 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),<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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).<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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).<sup>25</sup>